



## **The Importance of Variety in a Choral Rehearsals**

Presented by Mark O'Leary  
18<sup>th</sup> August 2020

### **Why is variety important?**

• We need to keep singers engaged – thinking in different ways and doing different things. Singers often come to rehearsals tired or distracted and we need to grab and hold their attention. This is much easier if we come to rehearsals prepared with a variety of activities to keep our singers thinking and challenged.

### **EXAMPLE 1: Bele Mama (Cameroon Song)**

Teaching to different levels:

Teach by ear – but echo in solfa (or words)

With VOCES 8 video for the ensemble experience

### **Rehearsal Components: What should be in a good rehearsal?**

- Vocal development exercises/warmups to teach vocal skills
- Solfa exercises to teach aural and music reading skills
- Short songs for aural, vocal, reading and part singing development (such as canons and short part-songs)
- Some individual singing for building confidence and accountability (in exercises, games, note learning or performance practice)
- Teaching repertoire in a variety of styles
- Teaching the notes of songs, and getting them ready for performance
- Singing games for having fun and teaching musical skills
- Activities to improve music reading skills
- Activities to improve aural skills
- Listening to recordings of good choirs
- Performance practice, focussing on posture, expression, musicality and watching the conductor.
- Activities to build trust and social cohesiveness

## **You need many skills to be an effective choral conductor!**

To be an effective conductor you need to have excellent musical skills, and also be able to teach vocal skills, aural skills, music reading skills and performance skills. You also need good social skills and social awareness of whether your singers are happy and motivated.

## **Why do we need to include all these things – can't we just learn the notes and sing the songs??**

It depends on how good you want your choir to be.

Good choirs are full of good singers who are also good musicians, and it is the conductor's job to create good singers by giving them excellent teaching and introducing them to excellent repertoire. Who will teach them the skills they need if you don't?

Some choirs have other priorities, not necessarily musical, and that is fine too!

## **REHEARSAL COMPONENTS**

### **Vocal development exercises/warmups to teach vocal skills**

- plan your warmups so that you don't do exactly the same thing each rehearsal.
- warmups are not just for the voice – the body, brain, ear and spirit need warming up too
- Find others to lead warmups
  - choir members
  - guest leaders
  - video guests

EXAMPLE 2: Dance Monkey body percussion activity (just a bit)

### **Solfa exercises to teach aural and music reading skills**

- rote solfa drills to lay the basis for aural development and music reading
  - everything from simple exercises to the exploration of different types of scales, modes, intervals and chords

EXAMPLE 3: from simple drmf – m – d, to more complex

D, drd, drmr, or

D r d m d f d s d l etc

Apply to different scales and modes

### **Short songs for aural, vocal, reading and part singing development (such as canons and short part-songs)**

- short rounds are good for aural development if taught by ear, and music reading development when taught from notation
- short multi part songs are also very useful
- echo songs are great for getting young singers singing

EXAMPLE 4: Yonder Come Day, from *Victoria Sings Short Stuff* (Fay White)  
(With video of all parts)

### **Individual singing for building confidence and accountability (in exercises, games, note learning or performance practice)**

Individual singing can be included in rehearsals in many ways. Eg

- singing the roll
- singing games with individual singing (Who's That? Categories, Green Green, Telephone Song etc)
- who can sing this passage
  - with the right notes
  - with the right dynamics
  - with great expression
  - in solfa, note names etc
- rounds and part songs, one per part

### **Teaching the repertoire**

Make sure that you are singing music in different styles, and in different languages, hence broadening the musical perspective and understanding of your singers.

There is much scope for teaching songs in different ways to keep singers focussed and engaged, and there are different phases to teaching the songs you will perform.

- Teaching Notes
  - Play the notes on other instruments (not just piano)
  - Use a recording to teach the notes
  - Have the choir hum, sing to loo, or sing in solfa before starting on text
  - Perhaps speak the text
  - Focus on the rhythm, and speak the text in time
  - Sight read the notes, or a section/passage of a song
  - Have sectional rehearsals
- Getting to know the music
  - Get individuals to sing parts of the songs
  - Start memorising early
  - Break down the words to make sure the choir is singing vowels and consonants properly
  - Teach dynamics, phrasing and expression from early on
  - Help the singers to be aware of all the parts, not just their own
  - Help the singers to be aware of the accompaniment and how it relates to the vocal parts

EXAMPLE 5: Donna Donna, S. Secunda arr. C. B Agnestig and performance by the Tapiola Choir (video and rolling score)

Hum, sing to loo, words,

## **Singing games for having fun and teaching musical skills**

There are many types of singing games which are excellent for using in choral rehearsals

- Clapping games
- Action songs
- Circle games
- Individual singing games
- Line games
- Acting out games
- Aural recognition games

Why games?

- Games get inexperienced voices going in a relaxed environment
- Games make people smile, and are fun
- Playing games helps your choir bond as a group
- Singing games can provide a repertoire of sounds which can be the basis of later aural and reading development.

EXAMPLE 6: Green Green, from *Catch a Song* (Hoermann and Bridges)

## **Activities to improve music reading skills**

- Sequential sight singing programs like Sight Singing School
- focussing on selected passages from your repertoire to sing in solfa and sight read
- rhythm reading activities – eg flashcards, rhythm clocks etc
- whiteboard activities for reading pitch and rhythm

EXAMPLE 7: Sight Singing School ([www.sightsingingschool.com](http://www.sightsingingschool.com))

## **Activities to improve aural skills**

- focus on listening to intonation (in melodies, intervals and chords)
- focus on listening to each other for vowel purity
- focus on listening to each other for rhythmic precision

## **Listening to recordings of good choirs**

Listening to other choirs can help your singers to

- learn the notes
- develop an understanding of choral tone colours and sound
- appreciate different interpretations of repertoire

This is an essential component in online sessions – to hear our parts in the context of choral sound.

## **Performance practice, focussing on posture, expression, musicality and watching the conductor.**

Performance practice should be a part of every rehearsal and might include

- focus on memory
- focus on expression and musicality

- focus on posture and focus
- exploring different performance positions and spacings

### **Activities to build trust and social cohesiveness**

- ask for singers' input in decisions about the music to show they are trusted and respected as musicians
- have singers involved in aspects of running rehearsals and performances
- interview singers so everyone gets to know each other
- find things to laugh at together – parody videos etc
- celebrate birthdays, personal news and milestones
- ask choir members to perform solos for the group
- allow for some social time – it is very important

### **If time:**

#### **The online choral experience**

Note on Zoom/remote rehearsals

- need to include more social activity to make up for what the singers miss when they meet
  - soloist of the week
  - interviews with singers
  - show and tell – life events, successes, celebrations
  - quizzes
  - breakout room discussions/sectionals

- consider having shorter rehearsal times
- videos can be used for:
  - help from experts – vocal, language
  - cultural background
  - different interpretations
  - teaching notes (eg note learning youtube videos)
  - interactive songs eg VOCES 8
  - Great for teaching sight singing skills (SSS example)

#### **Planning Rehearsals**

There are many things that need to be included in rehearsals to careful planning is essential if we are to fit as much as possible into the time we have available.

When planning a rehearsal consider:

- Always have a written rehearsal plan.
- Younger singers require more variety and a faster pace than older singers.
- Consider the transitions between activities, especially with younger choirs who can lose focus in between activity changes.
- Plan for a variety of sitting and standing positions in the rehearsal.

- It is fine to spend only 5 minutes on an activity
- It is not necessary to always sing all of a song in a rehearsal. You can focus on just one section or verse.
- Always include some vocal development exercises.
- Always include some aural/solfa exercises. These can be used as vocal development exercises.
- For primary school age choirs, planning rehearsals in 5 minute segments works well.
- For secondary and adult choirs, 10 minute segments are better, with the occasional shorter or longer segment for variety.
- The amount of repertoire covered will be determined by the number of pieces you need to prepare for forthcoming performances.
- Think carefully about how you start and finish your rehearsals, so that singers feel welcome and engaged from the start, and leave with a happy buzz.
- People will concentrate better at some times in the rehearsal than others, so plan accordingly.
- Make sure there are lots of things to do – singing, memorizing, moving, writing, playing games, performing, standing in different positions, learning new things etc
- Use different ways to present material
- Consider maintaining a fixed seating plan, and experiment with changes as necessary.