

DrW's Choral Singing Tips

Breath

- Inhale well in advance; finding a balance point of suspension leads to a poised onset of tone.
- Inhale low; good inhalation feels low in the torso, rather than high in the chest.
- Release air; upon exhalation (singing) there is a generous release of air.

Posture

- Expand the rib-cage; this is the key to good posture, seated or standing. Lift the rib-cage up and off the hips.
- Unlock the knees when standing; the knees are slightly bent so that hips are directly beneath spine. Standing posture should feel athletic and poised for action.
- Align the head; bring the chin down and the head back so that ears are over the spine.

Pitch

- Hear the pitch before singing. Initial pitches must be mentally prepared. Mental preparation results in a natural coordination of the breath, resonators, and vocal cords.
- Air, space, and vowel. Pitches are perfect when there is ample air flow, ample space in the mouth and throat, and mental focus on the vowel.
- In order to move from note to note accurately, a singer must understand intervals.
- In order for a chord to be in tune, each singer must know how his/her part relates to the other parts. (i.e. I sing the root of the chord, the 3rd of the chord, the 5th of the chord)

Resonance

- Make space; the quality of resonance depends on the size of the space in the mouth and throat (pharynx); a raised palate (like the beginning of a yawn) creates a large space in the throat. Adequate space in the throat often feels like too much space. Make more space than seems necessary.
- A well-placed tone feels high-behind the eyes, never in the mouth.

Rhythm

- Rhythmic pulse must be internalized.
- Pick-up notes must not disturb the rhythmic pulse that proceeds.
- The pick-up note is the note of energy (departure); the downbeat is the note of poise (arrival).
- Dotted notes normally have a shape [$\langle \rangle$]; be mindful so that the note that follows the dotted note is not late.
- Tempos that are unexpectedly slow tend to drag. Tempos that are unexpectedly fast tend to rush.

Phrasing

- A musical phrase is initiated by a gentle release of air.
- A musical phrase is dynamic and elastic, rather than static or stiff. A musical phrase unfolds both rhythmically and dynamically toward the peak of the phrase, which is often 3/4 of the way through.
- Notes tied across a bar generally crescendo in Romantic-period music.
- The final notes of a phrase must be tapered and poised; the final note is never louder than the previous note.

Expression

- Singing is an athletic endeavor. Engage the whole body in music-making in the same way that an athlete engages in performing a task.
- Allow the face to reflect the meaning and mood of the music and text.
- Never sing a note that is careless or lacks full commitment and expressive intent.

Dynamics

- Dynamics markings are better understood as a color, mood, or *Affekt*, rather than simply as a level of volume.
- *For*te is an Italian word that means ‘strong,’ rather than ‘loud.’ Even soft singing is strong and intense; there is no weak singing.
- Soft singing seems to require more breath energy than loud singing.
- Even the loudest sounds must be beautiful; never sing over the ‘beauty thresh-hold’.

Vowels

- Purify diphthongs—
The sound of the word ‘high’ is represented phonetically by [AI]
Pure [A] as in ‘hot’ for 90% of the length of the note; then [I] as in ‘hit’

The sound of the word ‘now’ is represented phonetically by [AU]
Pure [A] as in ‘not’ for 90% of the length of the note; then [U] as “nook”
- Problem sounds for English-speakers
[e] as in ‘made’ is a single sound that does not change to [i] ‘ee’ at the end.
[E] as in ‘bread’ is difficult to keep high placement. Lean toward [e] as in ‘break.’
[I] as in ‘bid’ is difficult to keep high placement. Lean toward [i] as in ‘bead.’
- Two more tips
Omit final [r]. Our Father who art in heaven.
Infuse ‘uh’ sounds with ‘ah’ [a]. above, among, the love.

Consonants

- Consonants come ahead of the beat, vowels come on the beat
- Tone is sustained on vowels; delay consonants; final consonants are attached to the word that follows:
“I wa.....ntfo~~r~~ nothing.” “swee...tlo...vedo.....thno...winvite.”
- These consonants have exact pitch (voiced): BDGJKLPRTZ. They are joined with a neutral vowel (‘schwa’). The nearest English sound is ‘uh.’ Example: If ye love me keep (uh) my command (uh) ments (uh)
- The nasal, or hummed, consonants [m] and [n] also have exact pitch. They are therapeutic for the voice and clarify diction
- Consonants [r] and [l] can stiffen the tongue and hinder easy production of tone; minimize and delay these consonants; use a flipped [r] and a European [l] that is made with the tip of the tongue.

Starting Rehearsals

- Rehearsals begin with vocalization. This time is for much more than ‘warmups.’ Singers must take this time as seriously as an athlete before competition. We must engage our bodies and imaginations in the joint task of creating efficient, healthy and beautiful tones.
- Rehearsals continue with music reading or pitch recognition drills. This is the time that we learn about intervals and harmony—knowledge that will lead to excellent ensemble singing.

Choral Score

- It is essential that every singer mark in his/her score every instruction from the conductor. It is not realistic to imagine that you can remember what was said.
- There must be a balance between looking at the music and looking at the conductor. Look at the music to assimilate the next phrase, and then look at the conductor so that you are part of the ensemble. At the end of a phrase, look at the music again, etc.
- Articulation markings must be realized in some way. They are most often a mere suggestion of what the composer intended. It is not always clear what we are to do—we just know we must do something. It is the job of the conductor to make clear how we will realize the markings.

Teamwork

- Rehearsals always start on time. Every singer should be seated and prepared to begin on time. On occasions when a singer must be late, advance notice to the conductor is appreciated.
- Rehearsals are not a time for note-learning. It is a time when we bring together the fruits of our musical labor at home with your rehearsal CD or on-line source.
- It is not appropriate to talk during rehearsal. It causes inefficiency and wastes valuable rehearsal time. Even discussions about the music are confusing to others and make it hard to hear the instructions of the conductor.
- It is essential that every singer know where we are at all times, and be prepared to begin immediately.
- It is not appropriate to correct a fellow chorister. It will lead to hurt feelings. It is the job of the conductor to address musical concerns.
- Questions. Rehearsals move on a continuum established by the conductor. Try not to interrupt the flow. Before asking a question, make sure your question is on that continuum. I.e. If the conductor is teaching rhythm- wait until later to ask about pronunciation. If the conductor is teaching chord harmony- wait until later to ask about dynamics. Even when on topic, wait for a moment to ask a question- the answer may already be on its way from the conductor.
- Concerns. If you have a musical concern (we are not singing the dynamics, or articulation, etc), it is best to assume that the conductor knows and has chosen to address a different aspect of the music. See the conductor at the break.

Sing Well - DrW