

Successful Choirs of Novice Singers
Arkansas ACDA July 18, 2016

SINGING EXPRESSIVELY

I. Prerequisites for Successful Choirs:

Pitch Matching
Tone Building
Independent Part Singing
Sight Reading (pitch and rhythm)
Vocabulary Awareness (literacy)
Concept Understanding
Choral/Individual Vocal Technique
Expressive Performing
Historical Connections
ETC!

The challenge for succeeding with choirs primarily comprised of novice singers is that a great deal of foundational music knowledge and skill is required before excellence is reached. Thus, two choices are immediately apparent: (1) accept that results will be slow if teaching all important concept areas in great detail, or (2) teach differently

II. Develop Tone/Teach Vowels: HEAD TONE (without head tone production, dynamic contrast is not possible)

Ehmann, Wilhelm and Frauke Haasemann, *Voice Building for Choirs*, Hinshaw
Barham, Terry. *Strategies for Teaching Junior High & Middle School Male Singers*,
Santa Barbara Music
Jordan, James. *Evoking Sound: The Choral Warm Up*. GIA Publications
McKinney, James C. *Diagnosis and Correction of Vocal Faults*, Genevox Music Group
Stultz, Marie, *Innocent Sounds: Building Choral Tone*, Morningstar Music.

III. RULES FOR EXPRESSIVE SINGING

Use of Bloom's taxonomy provides a wonderful means of structuring independence in singing expressively: start with basic knowledge and successively ask students to perform/evaluate more sophisticated tasks with the music. One method that works very well with middle school choirs is the use of rules to structure transfer of knowledge (we do not have to start over with expressive singing on every piece, as the students will know things they learned from the previous piece). Following are some ideas that can be used to help students look at music and have some ideas about what they might do to perform well. Granted, these are baby steps on a long journey, but the foundations for musical independence can quickly be established in a positive, nurturing way.

Rules for Transfer

- **The Rule of the Steady Beat.** When singing any note value longer than the steady beat value, singers should crescendo. Establishing a general principle saves rehearsal time and limits frustration by preventing errors with a rule that is applicable for much of the piece. The teacher/conductor must address only those instances when a crescendo is not desired or when the rule was implemented incorrectly.

- **The Rule of Consonant Releases.** Though this rule can be implemented throughout the rehearsal or applied differently to each song, it serves as a guideline for most of the final consonant releases. The rule might structure using the last full beat, or the last half of the beat, or whatever is appropriate for the song and counting ability of the ensemble. Students assume some responsibility for releases by using the rule, which permits the conductor to address only those unique releases not suitable for rule application.

- **The Rule of Diphthongs.** Beginning singers who do not yet self-monitor their vowel sounds can quickly apply this rule. Identifying diphthongs and prescribing a method for performance (e.g., sing the first sound throughout most of the value and then quickly add the second sound) serves to educate and prevent most errors. When the teacher/conductor stops to address incorrect singing, this rule serves to foster student analysis of the problem (listen, identify, analyze, evaluate).

- **The Rule of Punctuation.** This rule contributes greatly to phrase awareness of beginning singers. The rule requires a lift or break for every punctuation mark throughout the piece. The reverse is also true: do not break if no punctuation exists. (This rule is extremely effective for correcting phrasing with beginners.) While there is certainly punctuation in text that is ignored for musical reasons, having this rule makes singers aware that a decision must be made and allows the teacher/conductor to teach only the exceptions to the rule.

- **The Rule of the Slur (and other articulations).** Although most students can explain a slur, a surprising number of singers cannot sing one correctly. This rule requires a *tenuto* over the first note under the slur, followed by all other notes in the pattern sung without a *tenuto* marking.

- **The Rule of Word Stress.** Informing students about *singing* words as we might *speak* words addresses the issue of word stress. Singing louder or with slight emphasis on important words or syllables is a simple idea, but not something that automatically occurs with all novice singers. Implementing this one rule can immediately improve musical line and the overall artistry of the performance.

Each example serves to demonstrate a general concept, but every composition programmed also may have specific performance needs that could become a rule for only that selection. Other rules a teacher might opt to use include:

- the Rule of Dissonance (crescendo and resolve);
- the Rule of Dynamic Contrast (for some music, this is the key variable for expressive performance);
- the Rule of Voicing (bring out important motifs from the choral texture); and
- the Rule of Repetition (dynamic scheme for a text or music sequence).

Young singers may not know every important aspect about the music they are performing, but given information by the teacher, it is very possible for them to make decisions, be held accountable (assessment), and sing beautifully.