

GREAT SOUND FROM AVERAGE SINGERS

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WHY STRIVE FOR “GREAT SOUND?”

*Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous. . .
Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.
Psalm 33:1, 3*

*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”
1 Corinthians 10:31*

*“. . .Praising the Lord through song, [and] of glorifying God in the most
artistic way possible in congregational worship.” (CW Manual, 256)*

WHAT IS “GREAT SOUND?”

Descriptions of “great” choral sound vary according to cultural viewpoints, individual musical experiences, and stylistic elements within musical genres and periods. Many elements go into shaping Great Sound, including (but not limited to):

Accelerando/ritard	Consonants	*Phrasing
Accompanist	Crescendo/diminuendo	Placement
Acoustics	Cueing	Posture
Articulation	Enunciaion	Pronunciation
Attacks	Expression	Pulse
Balance	Facial Expression	Rests
*Breathing	Harmonic movement	*Resonance
Choir Attitude	Healthy vocal technique	Style
Conducting style	Intonation	Tempo
Correct pitches	*Internal rhythmic unity	Unity in concept
Correct rhythms	Instrumental accompaniment	*Vowel shape

(List adapted from *Choral Sound: The Inspiration Within*, World Choral Symposium, 2002)

Today we will focus on five of these elements. Below, I include brief technical descriptions of each element. If these concepts are new to you, private lessons would increase your technical knowledge of how the voice works!

1) Breathing

“The foundation of all vocal study lies in the control of the breath.” (Lamperti)

Breath is the fuel that powers our singing. A choir’s sound is beautified when choir members breathe properly for singing (still upper body, rib cage and lower abdominal expansion) and use that breath efficiently and evenly when they sing.

2) Resonance

A choir’s sound is beautified when singers maximize the space in their mouths by lifting the soft palates, dropping their jaws, and eliminating tensions.

3) Vowel Unification

A choir’s sound is beautified when all choir members sing each vowel shape in the same way.

4) Rhythm

A choir’s sound is beautified when all singers feel the inner pulse (beat) of the music and sing in perfect synch with that beat.

5) Phrasing/Expression

A choir’s sound is beautified when singers create changes in dynamics that are driven by text inflection and musical structure.

TODAY’S SESSION

Today’s session is structured like a choir rehearsal. I will model (and you will experience!) many rehearsal strategies designed to improve a choir’s overall “sound” by targeting the five musical elements described above. Our efforts during rehearsal will be guided by three overarching principles, which I believe are the cornerstones to building great sound in a choir:

- I. The Warm-Up process must be used to teach Great Sound.**
- II. Great Sound must be taught from the very beginning of the rehearsal process.**
- III. Non-verbal instruction is more effective than verbal instruction.**

I am excited to answer any questions you may have and engage in further discussion in our follow-up session, “Great Sound: Further Conversations.”

PRINCIPLE #1:

THE WARM-UP PROCESS MUST BE USED TO BUILD GREAT SOUND.

A. Purpose of warm-ups:

- To prepare body and mind for singing
- To teach healthy, beautiful vocalism (Great Sound!)
- To build musical skills in the ensemble
- To address musical concepts specific to repertoire
- To focus individuals toward corporate artistry
- To set the pace of rehearsal

B. Sequence of Warm-Ups

1. Physical/Mental
2. Breath
3. Tone (resonance and vowels)
4. Range extension/agility
5. Other (intonation, diction, phrase shaping, etc.)

C. Suggestions for Warm-Ups:

- Build a safe environment where singers feel comfortable to experiment and make new sounds.
- Provide constructive feedback on the sound you hear
- Use modeling, kinesthetic teaching techniques, metaphor, and visualization to improve the sound
- Teach new warm-ups through call and response (don't explain it - DO it!)
- Be confident when presenting new activities - your singers will reflect your own inhibitions!

NOTES:

PRINCIPLE #2:

GREAT SOUND MUST BE TAUGHT FROM THE VERY BEGINNING OF THE REHEARSAL PROCESS.

First impressions are important in our social interactions. The same is true in our musical interactions. Why do we so often start rehearsing a new piece by plunking through notes and rhythms? Use the power of the “first impression” when introducing a new piece of music - start by teaching GREAT SOUND, shaping MUSICAL PHRASES, or leading singers to the unique STYLE/SPIRIT of the piece.

Example applications:

- Introduce a new piece in triple meter by inviting your singers sway back and forth to the rhythm while you sing the melody or play the piano introduction.
- If a text has a recurring word, such as “God” or “Alleluia”, start by teaching beautiful vowels on that word, then put the words in musical context.
- Introduce a new piece by listening to a recording of the piece and leading a discussion of important musical elements.

PRINCIPLE #3:

NON-VERBAL INSTRUCTION IS MORE EFFECTIVE THAN VERBAL INSTRUCTION.

A. Assign KINESTHETIC MOTIONS to musical ideas

“What one experiences through movement can never be expressed in words.”
- Rudolf von Laban

Singers better understand and retain musical concepts when they actively experience them. Instead of *talking* about qualities of great sound, lead your singers to physical motions that help them *experience* the music in new ways.

Example Applications:

- “Use your hands in front of your body to show me the type of breath you are taking before singing this phrase.”
- “Put your pointer finger in front of your lips like saying ‘shh.’ Sing the vowel with that same height in your mouth.”
- “Swing an imaginary tennis racket with your arm as you sing the first pitch of a phrase (your backswing is your breath).”

B. Demonstrate using your SINGING VOICE

Modeling with the human voice is one of the most powerful and efficient ways to communicate musical ideas. Rather than talking about what you want to hear, try singing it for your choir and having them echo you.

Example Applications:

- Model “Bad vs. Good” resonating space and ask the choir to echo
- Sing a crescendo or decrescendo and ask the choir to echo
- Sing a pure vowel shape and ask the choir to echo

C. Demonstrate using your CHANT VOICE

If you are not confident using your singing voice in rehearsal, chant voice is a wonderful alternative! The chant voice is best explained as the “Julia Child” or “Mrs. Doubtfire,” head-voice dominant way of speaking. Speaking in this upper register (falsetto for men) replicates many of the sensations of singing, and enables singers to experience new vocal techniques in a healthy way. Even experienced singers should use chant voice regularly, to work toward:

- Balanced weight in the voice
- Unified vowel color
- Musical phrasing
- Connection of sound to breath
- Elimination of vocal tension

D. Demonstrate using your CONDUCTING GESTURE

Your conducting isn’t only useful in a performance! Try using your gesture in rehearsal to communicate musical concepts for visual learners in your choir.

Example Applications:

- In silence, show a crescendo or decrescendo with your gesture, then ask the choir to “sing what you saw.”
- Remind a choir to take a proper breath by expanding your hands in front of your abdomen before they sing.
- If the choir sings too loudly, explain, “This is what I heard” (show large conducting gesture). “This is what we are working toward” (show small gesture). (This also works to distinguish between contrasting articulations).

E. Incorporate IMAGERY and METAPHOR

Example Application:

- “Sing this phrase like purple velvet.”
- “Feel as though you are opening an umbrella toward the back of your mouth.”

WHAT DO I DO NEXT?

- **Work to get out of your COMFORT ZONE and try new things**

Implementing even one or two new strategies rehearsal can have a significant impact on your choir's sound, and trying new things will reenergize your choir's routines! Your singers will likely be shy and uncertain about new things at first, so present new ideas CONFIDENTLY and have FUN!

- **Take VOICE LESSONS**

Voice lessons are fun and helpful at ANY age! Lessons will build our confidence and skill so that we can better model and teach healthy, beautiful singing.

- **SELECT MUSIC carefully**

When we select music that is above the ability level of our choir, we will often get stuck teaching notes and rhythms with “no time” to work on Great Sound. Think about balancing your programming with some “simple” music that you can use to teach Great Sound. (There is nothing more stunning than a beautifully sung unison!)

- **Spend more time in SCORE STUDY and REHEARSAL PREPARATIONS**

When we study the music, form concrete ideas about the music, and plan for rehearsal we are better equipped to *actively* shape the choir's sound (instead of *reacting* and fixing notes and rhythms). Additional information on this topic will be provided in the “Further Conversations” follow-up session.

- **Seek MODELS of Great Sound for ourselves and our choirs**

Attend concerts, attend workshops, purchase CD's, play recordings for our choirs, invite guest conductors to work with our choirs, participate in joint-choir festivals (Reformation, etc.), schedule a choir field trip to a local university concert.....

- **Engage in regular SELF-REFLECTION**

A conductor bears a great deal of responsibility for the sound of the ensemble she/he leads. Rather than blaming poor results on “average singers,” we need to be brave enough to engage in regular, meaningful self-reflection about our musical leadership. Consider video-taping your rehearsal. Even the most experienced conductors benefit from staying students at heart, always striving to grow and learn.

- **Stay POSITIVE and JOYFUL!**

It takes years to develop the sound of a choir...keep at it! While striving for musical excellence, take moments to revel in the joy of music-making with fellow believers! We are blessed to have the chance to offer God our praise through this amazing artform!

RESOURCES:

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- Albrecht, S. The Choral Warm-Up Collection. Alfred Publishing, 2003.
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- Rao, Doreen. Circle of Sound. Boosey and Hawkes, 2001.
- Seelig, Tim. The Perfect Blend. Shawnee Press, 2005. (Book and DVD).
- Smith, Brenda and Sataloff, Robert. Choral Pedagogy: Second Edition. Plural Publishing, Inc., 2006.
- Ware, Clifton. Basics of Vocal Pedagogy. McGraw-Hill, 1998.

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Please feel free to contact me with any
follow-up questions or feed-back!

The Conductor's GRAB-BAG of NON-VERBAL Teaching Strategies!

(I have begged, borrowed, and stolen most of these strategies from conductors I respect. Keep building your grab-bag by watching other conductors and by inventing new ideas yourself!)

BREATH

- Ask the choir to sing the musical phrase on a “lip buzz,” then sing on text with the same energized feeling.
- “Use your hands in front of your body to show me the type of breath you are taking before singing this phrase.”
- Ask the choir to perform the musical phrase on the consonant sound “shhh.” (Stay consistent - Be careful not to lag intensity on long notes or ends of phrases!) Then, sing the phrase again, with that same breath connection.
- Ask the choir to swing arms side to side or front to back (like pushing a swing) while singing a phrase. Add a “push-off” (release the motion) for a note which needs increased breath support.
- Ask the choir to rearticulate a neutral syllable (such as “doo”) on every eighth note of a long, sustained tone; then, sing the pitch normally, transferring that same underlying pulse of energy through the long note.
- Expand your hands in front of your abdomen before the choir sings to remind them to take a low, relaxed breath.
- Ask the choir to point their fingers in front of them toward the front of the room, as they sing. “Imagine your sound is an intense laser-beam.”
- Assign a rhythmic value to each breath that is taken before singing a phrase, “One and two and three and (SING)...” Choir should breathe evenly and deeply through all of the counts.
- “Put your hands on the sides of your abdomen and imagine wearing a swimming inner-tube; feel expansion against the innertube around you as you breathe.”
- Model a musical phrase in chant voice, with even tone supported by breath; have the choir echo; then ask the choir to sing the phrase, replicating that feeling.
- If the choir sings flat on a descending melodic line, ask them to point their pointer finger up in front of them as they sing.
- If the choir sings flat on a descending melodic line, ask them to pretend that a helium balloon is under their hand. “Allow the balloon to lift your hand higher with every pitch you sing. The last note will be the highest and lightest.”
- “Imagine each note is a dot; connect the dots in the air with your finger as you sing.” (legato)
- “Pretend you are using your hand to put frosting on a large cake in front of you as you sing; make the frosting as smooth and even as possible.” (legato)
- “Swing an imaginary tennis racket with your arm as you sing the first pitch of a phrase (your backswing is your breath).”

RESONANCE

- “Start to yawn; replicate this feeling in the back of your mouth as your sing.” (lifted soft palate)
- Model an open resonating space with chant voice, and have choir echo; then sing with same open feeling.
- Ask the choir to insert two fingers between their teeth horizontally and try to sing (this is the BAD way); to contrast, have them place the two fingers between their teeth vertically (the GOOD way). “This is the space you need when singing.”
- Cup your hand on your jaw/cheek and release your jaw into your hand; maintain this open, relaxed jaw feeling while singing.
- Ask the choir to visualize a marble sitting on the back of their tongue and sing a phrase; then visualize a ping-pong ball, and sing; finally, visualize an egg sitting on their tongue. Provide feedback on the changes in sound and allow the choir to discuss the experience. Replicate that open feeling when singing.
- Put your pointer finger in front of your lips like saying “shh.” Sing the vowel with that same height in your mouth.
- “Your sound is bright yellow right now. Can you sing purple velvet?”
- Ask the choir to sing a phrase like they are in middle school; like they are in HS; like they are college musicians; finally, like they are professional opera singers. They will automatically increase resonating space with each visualization – provide feedback and discuss which sound was the best and why.
- Expand your hands in front of you to show the choir the height you want to hear in their tone.
- “Feel as though you are opening an umbrella toward the back of your mouth.”

VOWEL UNIFICATION

- Assign hand gestures to each vowel sound and ask singers to use these motions to purify vowels during rehearsal, when necessary. Examples include:
 - “Pull a silver thread out of your lips as you sing ‘Oo.’”
 - “Pull a thread out of your forehead as you sing ‘Ee.’”
 - “Draw a circle around your lips as you sing ‘Oh.’”
 - “Pinch in the corners of your mouth as you sing ‘Eh.’”
 - “Lift your cupped hand by the side of your face as you sing ‘Ah.’”
- Begin teaching a piece on a neutral syllable (oo, oh, and ah vowels work best; consider syllables like “noo, loo, noh, mah, pah”) and refine that vowel before adding text. (Return to singing on a neutral syllable whenever necessary in the rehearsal process.)
- Ask the choir members to imagine they are holding a rubberband (or pass out real rubberbands for a great effect!) Stretch it parallel to the floor, in front of your mouth, and sing an “eee” vowel in that horizontal direction – this should feel like a tight “smile” (BAD way). Then, turn the rubberband to a vertical position,

- perpendicular to the floor, and sing the “eee” vowel in this vertical direction, feeling height inside the mouth and relaxed lips (GOOD way).
- This same activity can be done with Oreo cookies for kids (or big kids at heart!) Place the cookie on its side and place between the teeth to model the “bad” way, and then turn the cookie up to expand between the teeth for the “good” way.)
 - “Show me, with your mouth, the shape of the first vowel you are about to sing... Keep the shape of that vowel as you breathe.”
 - When singing an “oo” vowel, imagine your lips wrapped around a straw (Or picture your lips protruding a little, like “fish lips.”)
 - When singing an “oo” vowel, imagine an “oo” on your lips and an “oh” inside your mouth.
 - When singing “ee” or “eh” vowels, maintain the exact same “oo” lip position (the tongue and space inside the mouth will change, but the lips should not.)
 - Speak a text with your chant voice, exaggerating the beauty and openness of the vowel sounds; have choir echo and then sing the phrase.
 - Ask the choir to freeze on a word with a problematic vowel and continue to sustain that pitch; invite the choir to close their eyes, listen around them, and match the specific vowel sound they hear.
 - “Sing half as loud, listen twice as much.”
 - Stop on an “oo” vowel in a piece of music; have the choir continue singing the vowel, breathing when they have to; ask the choir to take an imaginary ping pong ball in their hand, and place it in the back of their mouth as they sing the vowel.
 - Invite the choir to stand in four circles, one for each voice part; stop the music on a particular vowel sound, and ask the choir to look around their circle and try to match the mouth shapes they see in other choir members. (This will also work with one big circle of all choir members).
 - Invite the choir to gently roll their heads, massage their shoulders, massage their jaws, and swallow during rehearsal, to make sure these tensions are released.

RHYTHM

- Invite the choir to sway side to side to the beat as they sing.
- “Tap the beat somewhere on your body as you sing.”
- “Tap the beat on the shoulder of the person next to you as you sing.” (This creates a “train” of tapping and unifies rhythm throughout the choir.)
- Ask the choir to use a neutral syllable (doo, noo) to rearticulate every eighth note subdivision as they sing; then return to singing the written rhythms, recalling that “inner pulse” feeling.
- Assign ending consonant sounds specific rhythmic values.
- Invite the choir to perform a “karate chop” motion with their hands on a cut-off (or invent your own kinesthetic prompts!)
- Assign a specific rhythmic value to breaths between musical phrases and count out loud as the choir breathes.

- Invite the choir to “count sing” (sing the pitches in the music with rhythmic syllables instead of words: “One and Two and...”)
- Invite the choir to walk around the room freely as they sing, responding to changes in rhythms by changing their body movement.
- Invite the choir to snap the eighth note pulse as they sing, alternating each hand on each snap. Invite half the choir to snap and half to sing, and vice versa.
- Invite the choir to snap on the “off-beat” or “back-beat” while singing.
- Invite choir members to form an impromptu percussion ensemble and improvise on percussion instruments as you rehearse a piece.

PHRASING/EXPRESSION

- “Show me where the peak of the phrase is with your hand as you sing.”
- Label the dynamic spectrum on a scale from 1-10, 1 being softest; invite the choir to assign numbers to the dynamic changes in the music (this helps, especially, in pacing long crescendos or decrescendos).
- Ask the choir to imagine stretching an exercise band apart in front of them as they sing; pull your arms apart and feel the tension build as you sing the phrase, and release the exercise band at the peak of the phrase.
- “Where should this decrescendo start? Sing me the answer – you can’t be wrong.”
- Swing an imaginary tennis racket with your arm at the arrival point of the phrase (this motion will also help to connect breath energy to the sound!)
- Imagine the musical line to be the silhouette of a mountain in the distance. With your hand on the air, trace the contour up to the peak of the mountain and back down again, following the shape of the musical line (you can also draw these mountain-top shapes in your music as a reminder).
- In silence, use your conducting gesture to show a musical shape; invite the choir to sing the shape that they saw.
- Have the choir break into partners. Have the partners hold hands. As they listen to you play or sing a musical selection to them, invite them to pull away from each other at the points of tension in the music, and relax toward each other at points of release in the music. (This is a way for choir members to experiment with how the music feels for them; give them many opportunities to try different things and remind them, “there are no “wrong answers!”)
- Pretend to bounce a ball in front of you as you sing; as the musical phrase builds or releases, increase or decrease the size and weight of the ball you are bouncing (beach ball, volleyball, basketball, bowling ball, etc.)
- Stand with one foot slightly in front of the other, and lean forward into the crescendo and backward out of the crescendo.
- Pretend you have a pin in your hand and poke the balloons to pop them on the staccato notes



A Catalogue of WARM-UPS for Building GREAT SOUND!

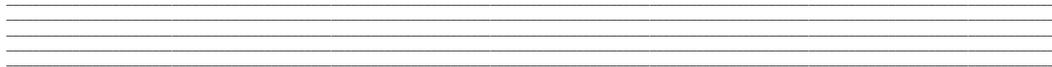
PHYSICAL/MENTAL

Physical:

- Stretching (neck, shoulders, arms, torso, sternum, etc.)
- Backrubs
- Lift arms over head to lift ribs, lower arms slowly to sides without dropping rib cage.
- Drop forward at the waist and hang limp, like a marionette; then, lift up slowly, one vertebrae at a time, until tall, aligned posture is achieved.
- Pull imaginary string at the top of your head to heighten posture.
- Sit with a “crystal glass” in your mid-section.

Mental:

- “You are my mirror.”
- Pulse random patterns of consonant sounds invite choir to echo you, as they hold one hand on their abdomen to feel for diaphragmatic action



Sh sh kk kk pp pp ff (choir echo: Sh sh kk kk pp pp ff)

(continue to improvise new patterns without pause and challenge choir to echo more and more complex patterns – this is also a BREATH warm-up!)

- Invite choir pulse a “sh” consonant to your beat as you conduct a four-pattern, feeling for diaphragmatic action in their abdomen. To create variety, ask the choir to switch to other consonant sounds, such as kk, pp, ff, mm, or dd. For an additional challenge, change your conducting, speeding up, slowing down, or changing to a 3 or 2 pattern.

BREATH

There are, “important distinctions between breathing and conscious breathing, movement and intentional movement, and vocalization and informed vocalization.”

(Doreen Rao, Circle of Sound)

- Invite the choir to close their eyes and breathe in and out slowly, following your prompt. Use a calming voice to direct their breathing (in and out) and ask them to become increasingly aware of any bodily tension they feel as they breathe. Calm, still breathing will relax muscle tension.
- Breathe IN over four counts, and EXHALE on “SH” over 4 counts, inviting the choir to expand their hands in front of their bodies as they breathe. Repeat, exhaling for 6, then 8, then 12 counts.

“Breathe IN – 2—3—4 and OUT – 2—3—4...”

- Pant like a dog, and feel the abdominal action.
- Place hands on mid-section and side; take a low breath, feeling for middle expansion; “hiss” out with continuous, laser-like stream of air.
- “Ooo” sips
- Partner assessments – Invite the choir members to partner up and face one another. Singers should place their hands on their partners’ shoulders and assess one another as they breathe (shoulders shouldn’t move!)
- Lip buzzes
- Pulsed consonant sounds (see “Mental” category, above)

**GREAT SOUNDS FROM AVERAGE SINGERS:
REHEARSAL EXAMPLES**

- 1) *Silent Night* (CW #60)

**Silent Night! Holy Night! All is calm, all is bright,
Round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace.**

- 2) *Hallelujah Chorus*, G.F. Handel (attached)
- 3) *Grant Us Thy Peace*, Mendelssohn
(Please return your copy at the end of the session)

NOTES: