



Aging Singers and Young Singers

Challenge 7: Beautiful, healthy singing at any age

*This issue is especially valuable
for church choir directors.
Please share it.*

How is directing a children's choir different from directing an adult choir? How can directors help aging choir members continue to make beautiful sounds and feel comfortable singing? This issue addresses the vocal changes that we go through as we age and offers tips for encouraging beautiful, healthy singing by two important age groups.

Working with Aging Singers

By Kathryn Wurster

Directing a choir with multiple age groups can be challenging. Sometimes the older voices get a bad rap for bringing down the quality of the sound. While this may be true sometimes, it does not have to be true. More often than not, these members are the heart and soul of the choir. Why can't they be the voice of the choir as well? It is possible and, more importantly, necessary for every member to feel he or she can contribute something valuable. First, we need to understand what is happening to the voice as we age. Once we are empowered with that knowledge, we can address how to improve the sound through physical and vocal exercises—as many as I can fit in this article!

Physiological changes to the voice

As we age there are a number of changes that alter the sound of our voice. This article addresses three. First, there is a loss of muscle. This is true of the entire body, including the muscles required for singing. Second, a loss of elasticity in the lungs can decrease lung capacity. Finally, the cartilages of the larynx ossify (turn to bone) and the vocal folds atrophy (the cells deteriorate). These three changes can create a vibrato that is too slow (wobble), loss of projection, loss of resonance, loss of pitch accuracy, and a breathy sound. While this may seem discouraging, we can slow the aging process by exercising, eating right, drinking enough fluids, and getting enough sleep. I know we've heard it a thousand times, but it's true! Exercising the voice and the muscles involved in singing will improve the function and ease with which your choir will sing. The following exercises are helpful for all ages, but are specifically

designed for the unique challenges of the aging singer. I will offer exercises to help slow each of the three physiological changes mentioned above.

Exercises to improve loss of muscle

Singing is a whole-body activity! As such, keeping the muscles of our entire body in shape will keep the voice in shape. Encourage your choir to walk, swim, and run if they can. Exercising on your own can be tough. If you have mostly retired singers in your choir, have them meet a couple of mornings a week or schedule a weekly walk right before choir.

Alignment: One of the biggest things muscle loss affects is alignment. First, you must establish what good alignment should look like. I typically tell my students to imagine a steel rod going up the middle of their foot (at the arch), up the leg, through the middle of their pelvis, up the middle of the torso, right along the spine (because the spine is in the middle of the body), in between the ears (which should be in line with the shoulders, not in front or behind), and out the top of their heads. Once this visual is established, you can remind them that their weight should be centered on that steel rod. Things to look for: collapsing of the

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chest while singing, sitting on the hips (shoulders are not lined up with hips), backside sticking out (pelvis rocked back, instead of tucked under), and chin jutting forward (ears not lined up with shoulders). This will not come naturally to most members and they will need frequent reminders, as often as every 10-15 minutes. This friendly reminder could be the difference between your choir going flat over the course of a three-verse hymn or staying perfectly in tune.

Vibrato: The wobbly or wide vibrato is a common problem among older singers. It is caused by the loss of muscle tone, poor alignment, and slack vocal muscles. The solution is to encourage not only physical exercise, but vocal exercise as well. Singers should sing ten to fifteen minutes a day, several times a day. This can be done while cleaning, driving, taking a shower, doing yard work, whenever the mood strikes. It is nearly impossible to stay in shape by singing only twice a week. Another cause of a wobbly vibrato is a lack of balanced breath support.

Ten minutes of warm-ups for nine months will substantially improve the vocal quality of your choir.

Exercises to improve decreased lung capacity

Farinelli Exercise: Breathe in for 5 counts, suspend for 5 counts, and breathe out for 5 counts. Repeat, adding more counts each time. I find it helpful to use a metronome or a clock's second hand so I don't speed up. It is important during this exercise to breathe in and out for the full duration of the count. The suspend portion of this exercise means that you are neither breathing in nor out, nor are you holding your breath. It is important that the vocal folds remain open during the suspend phase.

Why it works: You are exercising the external intercostal muscles, which lift the rib cage preventing it from collapsing on the lungs. You are also engaging the abdominal muscles to prevent the breath from being released all at once. This process of keeping the ribs lifted all the time and engaging the abs during exhalation is the essential breath management system for singing.

Lip Buzz: Bring your lips firmly together and then blow air through them, making them vibrate together quickly. (Children make this sound when imitating a horse.) Once that is achieved you can hum at the same time, thereby adding pitch and the use of the vocal cords. This exercise is helpful as a warm up or as a way to learn a new song.

Why it works: The rate (how fast or slow) of air changes for each pitch and dynamic. A simple test to confirm this would be to sing a low note on lip buzz followed by a much higher note. Right away you notice the lip buzz moved faster on the higher pitch. Likewise, lip buzz softly, then loudly. By singing a song or exercise on lip buzz you are automatically using the correct rate of air for each pitch or each phrase. As director, listen for the spot where the lip buzz weakens or disappears. Those are the sections where singers are

not using the correct rate of air. Repeat the phrase until they can achieve a consistent lip buzz. Remind them to check their alignment and keep their rib cage up and out while engaging the abdominal muscles (everything they learned in the *Farinelli exercise!*).

Extra sips: Have your choir members take in a large breath and hold it. Without releasing that breath, have them take an extra sip of air in and hold. Repeat once more and hold for a few seconds then release the breath. This exercise can all be done through the nose.

Why it works: As speakers, we only use one third of our lung capacity. This exercise makes the singer aware of how much lung capacity they actually have. During the exercise remind your singers to keep the throat and shoulders as relaxed as possible.

Exercises to increase range and resonance: to counteract ossification and atrophy

Vocal Warm ups

1. **Sirens:** Start in the low range on an [ee] vowel and slide up using a siren sound into mid-range, then back down. Start again, this time going higher in pitch, switching to [oh] or [ah]. Then repeat again starting high and descending down into the lower register. Make sure the mouth and jaw are relaxed. Repeat two to three times, always increasing the range.

Why it works: Sirens are a great way to find resonance without much effort. They encompass a wide vocal range, stretching the vocal cords and uniting multiple registers (high, middle and low).

2. **Messa di Voce** [mehssah dee vohchay]: The Italian technique is singing a pitch or series of pitches with a < > dynamic. Start with a five-note scale, crescendo on the ascent, decrescendo on the descent. Then proceed to singing a five-note scale, hold note five and < > on that pitch, then go back down the scale. Increase to an eight- or nine-note scale. As your choir gains confidence, challenge them by singing the scales at much higher and lower pitches. This exercise is also helpful in managing the wobbly vibrato. The benefits of this exercise are greatest when used regularly over a long period of time.

This exercise should be used only for adults. Children have not developed the muscles necessary to succeed with this exercise; it could damage their voices.

Physical Warm-Ups

1. **Reach for the Stars:** Inhale, stretch arms up above your head (notice the high position of the rib cage in this position), exhale, and drop arms at side. This is an excellent opportunity to remind your singers to keep their rib cages lifted as they bring their arms down to their side. Take the opportunity to show them both right and wrong. Sometimes a visual picture is the best teacher.

2. **Chest Expander:** Stretch arms behind your back, clasping hands if possible. In this position, inhale and exhale while continuing to squeeze hands together and bringing shoulder blades together. Notice the expansion of the chest, how open it feels.

All of these exercises are most beneficial when completed on a regular basis. Ten minutes of warm-ups for nine months will substantially improve the flexibility, resonance, range, and vocal quality of your choir. Be patient and consistent and enjoy the small improvements along the way!



Working with young singers

By Joshua Pedde

How do you work with young singers *with their unique capabilities*? Some directors look at such work either as something that is easy and not musically challenging or something scary for which they haven't been trained. Let's explore three topics: tone production, rehearsal basics, and repertoire for young singers. Practical tips will help alleviate many of the issues that you may be having with your children's choir—or inspire you to create one!

Tone production

When most people work with young singers, they tend to let them sing in their "chest voice" or lower register. This creates a heavy sound that is often impossible to tune and can cause vocal damage for the young singer. For example, this is how many people sing "Happy Birthday." Work with young singers to get them to sing in their head voice or upper register. To accomplish this, have them begin singing on pitches that are out of the chest voice range. At the Indianapolis Children's Choir, we begin all of our rehearsals on 'c1' above middle 'c.' This makes the singer engage the head voice. If singers are having issues finding this voice, use sirens (described above) and sighing to help them find this upper register. The head voice is a lighter sounding voice and is not heavy or loud. It is in the *bel canto* style of singing and is the healthiest way for young singers to produce good tone.

Once they are in their head voice, begin to work on their tone. When working with tone, I break it down into five basic parts:

1. **Breath** – The foundation of singing. It is the fuel that powers our instruments. We must use efficient and even breaths.

2. **Soft Palette** – We must maximize the space in our mouths by creating lift.
3. **Tongue** – We must relax this muscle to eliminate tension.
4. **Placement** – Forward placement will help keep the tone pure and maximize resonance.
5. **Lips** – Lips create vowel unification. A choir sounds its best when each singer's vowel shape is the same.

Zero in on specific issues and work on alleviating them by breaking tone down into these five parts. Contrary to what many believe, this is not too advanced for young singers! As I write this I am waiting for my PREP Choir class to arrive, beginning singers in grades 1 through 3. In every rehearsal we talk about all five components. "Good technique is good technique." Don't dumb it down because they are younger. Speak to them as singers because they want to learn.

Sometimes it is difficult for conductors to know how young singers should sound in their head voice. So look for examples. YouTube is a wonderful resource. Various children's choirs from around the world are posted and can provide examples of different sounds to imitate. A conductor must master that sound and be the vocal model. If young singers hear a heavy model, they will sing heavily. If they hear a light model, they will sing lightly, and so on. If a singer takes lessons and has a good sound, he or she could model for the rest of the choir.

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no matter what.*

Rehearsal basics

How does a rehearsal of young singers run? Just like an adult choir, but at a faster pace. First, begin by *always* doing warm-ups, no matter what. Even if it is only for four minutes, it helps younger singers find focus and the "inner singer." It helps everyone, including the conductor, prepare body, mind, and instrument for singing. This is where healthy vocal technique is taught and music begins to be prepared. It builds skills as an ensemble and it sets the tone of the rehearsal. There is not a universal order to warm-ups, but here's a suggestion:

What to do when . . .

- **Physical / Mental:** Play a quick focus game or work on a fun rhythm using a rhyme.
- **Breath:** Exhale long, sustained breath on an "s" or "sh." Also use pulsating "s" or "sh."
- **Tone / Vowels:** Sing a five note descending scale in F Major and sing each vowel down the five note scale: "oo," "ee," "ay," "oh," "ah."

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- Range / Flexibility: This can be anything from a scale to your favorite warm-up.
- Tuning: Build chords using solfege and then try neutral syllables.
- Others: Diction, phrasing, etc. "Diction is done with the tip of the tongue."

Warm-ups also build a safe environment for the singers and give the conductor time to offer lots of vocal feedback. Warm-ups are a very important part of any rehearsal for the young singer. Once warm-ups are through, conductors can dive into the music. What follows are some teaching elements that can be helpful in rehearsals.

Kinesthetic Movement

Singers understand and retain musical concepts better when they actively experience them. Instead of talking about a musical concept, try doing a motion and experiencing the music in a new way!

Examples of movements:

- Circles with fingers going forward = forward placement
- Large circles around chest = support
- Tapping fingers on palm of hand = short
- Throwing a Frisbee = support and energy
- A flick = short and bright
- Pointing index fingers and moving forward = forward placement and phrasing

Singing Voice

Vocal modeling is one of the most powerful and efficient ways to communicate a musical idea. Rather than talking about it, sing it! Try modeling Bad vs. Good or A vs. B. This really helps develop the singers' ears and helps them understand what sound the conductor is listening for. Try Call and Response; sing a phrase and the singers repeat it. Challenge them to make it exactly like they heard it, both good and bad.

Imagery/Metaphors

Choirs benefit from the use of weight and color. Ask them to sing a phrase *lightly* and then have them sing it *heavily*. Ask them to sing a song in a *bright color* (yellow) and then try a *dark color* (crimson).

Next, use a combination of these elements by adding them into a picture: "Sing that phrase a bright yellow." "Sing the opening as if you were carrying two heavy bags of groceries." "Sing this as if it were a light white cloud." You may also ask them to imagine a choral sound that they have heard: "Sing like you are 23!" "Sound like the best youth choir in the state!"

Repertoire for young singers

Some conductors feel good about their tone and rehearsals, but struggle to pick music that fits the young singer. When working with singers in the lower elementary, focus on unison singing and a range between middle 'c' to 'd1' or 'e1.' The melody should have stepwise motion with leaps that are not greater than a fifth. The goal with a young choir is to solidify the sound. Use unison pieces to begin to transfer ideas from warm-ups into the rehearsal.

After the choir has mastered its sound, begin to work on part singing. Typically, these are students in grades 3 through 6. Part singing needs to be developed in ways that are successful for young and old singers alike. Here is a sequence used by the Indianapolis Children's Choir: Rounds/Descants/Partner Songs/Traditional Choral Harmony (3rds and 4ths).

Once the choir has mastered adding harmony, work on dissonance. Choose pieces where the dissonance comes from stepwise motion out of the melody. Don't begin with pieces that leap to dissonances.

Working with young singers can be a true joy, and helping mold their voices is a gift in itself. I hope that the tips in this article will help you as you inspire young singers to proclaim the gospel in song!

