

Chapter 3

PRE-REHEARSAL AND NON-VOCAL REHEARSAL PROCEDURES

3.1 Preparing for Rehearsal

Rehearsal time is precious and the available time needs to be structured in the most efficient and productive way, making sure that sequential learning takes place. One needs to have clear and specific goals and attainable objectives. Furthermore, one must ensure that healthy vocal technique is employed and that the singers think, feel and sing musically. The conductor that fails to plan for significant, efficient and educational rehearsals, plans to fail. Successful, exciting and meaningful rehearsals do not happen by chance. One has to take cognisance of what the children know, and structure the learning process so that the choristers make musical progress. The choral educator that plans the rehearsal meticulously will have choristers that work harder, have a more positive attitude, and give a better performance.

Remember also that luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity and that luck has a peculiar habit of favouring those who don't depend on it! (Bartle 1988: 148).

Another way of expressing this idea, is that “the harder the teacher works at preparing for the choral rehearsal, the luckier (s)he becomes”.

3.2 Score Study

The single most important thing one can do for the choir is to be exceptionally well prepared by studying the score thoroughly. According to Margaret Hillis, “all music starts from score study” (Shrock 1991: 12). Through preparatory score study, troublesome or difficult spots (like intricate rhythms or unusual intervals) in the music can be anticipated and minimised, thereby saving time and avoiding frustration. This is absolutely crucial and will help tremendously in ensuring the success of a productive rehearsal. Thorough score study has the

added advantage of giving one the opportunity to internalise and memorise the score more easily.

It is a great help if one can listen to several **recordings** of the work that one intends to study. This is a tremendous aid in studying various types of interpretation and it broadens one's musical horizons.

Read through the word **text** of the selection to determine what the ideas are and to find out if there is a message contained within it. Will the children understand it or does it require some explanation? It is important to read the text aloud to help determine the correct breathing places for the choir. Decide if extra or alternative breathing places are necessary for the young voices, to avoid them running out of breath. It is very important to mark in advance both the breathing places and releases for the choir. Also mark the exact placement of final consonants. (Refer to **Part II**, 5.8 "Attacks and Releases".)

Reading the text aloud will also help to clarify the expressive content and atmosphere of the text. We need to identify:

- interpretative nuances;
- natural text accents;
- phrasing (tensions, climaxes and resolutions); and
- places where the music and text reinforce one another to achieve a dynamic climax.

It is important to **number all the bars** at the beginning of each system. This has to be done in the scores of the conductor, the accompanist and the choristers. Stopping the choir in rehearsal and having to pick up at a certain musical location is greatly facilitated if all concerned can quickly find the place by referring to the bar numbers.

One has to study the musical score and identify the compositional structure of the selection. Analyse **the form** of the music. Are there repeated sections? Should there be phrases or sections that are alike, but not exactly the same, these should be analysed so that the differences can be high-lighted. Take special note of the phrase structure. Where does each phrase begin, peak and end? Both the text and the melody should guide us to correct and logical phrasing. (Refer to **Part II**, 4.4.3 "The Musical Phrase".)

It is important to establish correct **rhythms, pitches, and pronunciation**. Make sure that you can sing all the vocal parts correctly. Anticipate problematic passages and devise solutions. One's aural preparation will be greatly assisted by singing one part, while at the same time playing one or more other parts on the piano or keyboard. This will help to hear the interval relationships between the parts. Decide in advance where vowel modification needs to be employed. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.8 "Italian Basic Pure Vowels, Uniform Vowel Colours and Vowel Modification".)

One has to decide if the **tempo indication** is suitable; does it convey the mood of the music? Who decided on the tempo suggestion, the composer or the music editor? Some songs may lend themselves to interpretative license. Would *rubato* be suitable and where should it be applied?

Sometimes it may be useful to high-light existing features in the score that one is inclined to miss. It is also important to determine whether it is necessary to add any **other interpretative markings** to the existing ones already in the score. The dynamics have to be studied. Determine whether you agree with those that are given. Should you decide on alternative or extra dynamic markings, these need to be justifiable, and need to be marked. Implementing major changes is not advisable as this may not be fair to the work or the composer.

When studying the score, we examine it thoroughly in order to determine the intentions of the composer and then adhere to it strictly. Sometimes, however, the musical arrangement needs a few **minor modifications** to make it work better for one's particular environment or circumstances. In making these minor alterations, one has to be very careful not to jeopardise the integrity and general character of the music. (Refer to **Part II**, 2.5 "Selecting Appropriate Repertoire", and 7.8 "Compiling a Programme".)

In studying the score, one also has to determine any **potential vocal problems** which may arise. Decide in advance which vocalise(s) would be most appropriate for that particular musical requirement. Vocalises are most effective if they directly relate to a particular problem spot within a selection being studied. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.11 "Use of Vocalises".) Should there be any distinctive rhythmic or melodic motives that one could use to devise exercises for the warm-ups, this will facilitate the tone production and expedite the learning of the new selection in rehearsal.

One has to make a considerable effort to conceptualise one's own mental aural ideal of a particular work. This aural ideal is also referred to as an “**aural understanding**”, “soundscape”, or “aural template”. This involves forming a detailed aural image of what the work should sound like in performance. Planning the way one is going to conduct in order to obtain that particular sound from the choir, is also essential.

To create a successful, productive and musical choral programme, the choral educator should not neglect meticulous score study. All teachers have extremely busy schedules, but score study is not an option, it is an absolute necessity.

3.3 Attendance Record and Award System

An attendance policy needs to be in place. If a merit or award system is to be used, it has to be simple to control. Choose a record keeping system that suits your own situation and keep accurate records. Points may be awarded for attendance at rehearsals and performances, and for conduct and diligence. All the choristers should receive a certificate in recognition of their participation. Once a certain number of points is attained, the chorister qualifies for a special award like a pin or a badge. This may provide additional incentive to the choristers. It is imperative to keep a meticulous record of attendance and to administer the conduct and diligence point system in a fair and objective way.

The choristers need to be informed at the outset about the award system and how it operates. A minimum requirement needs to be stated for choir attendance; this refers to both rehearsals and performances. The attendance requirement should be non-negotiable as it becomes extremely intricate and subjective to determine which “excuses” are legitimate.

A reward is not necessarily only for individuals but could involve the whole group. A group-photograph of the choir, taken at the end of the year, which is framed or block mounted, and hung in the rehearsal room is a lovely memento. Choristers in the primary school, especially, are interested in photographs that include themselves and their peers. Recording the years' work on CD is another memento that is not only appreciated by the choristers, but by parents,

grandparents and the school community at large. This is also a tremendous incentive to work towards and can be used to raise funds.

The awards could be presented at a special choir assembly where the choir sings a short programme to the school and the choristers are then presented with their certificates and special awards. Alternatively, one could arrange a special party at the end of the year and invite parents and the school principal to a short performance and the prize giving. Thank the parents, principal, accompanist and anybody else publicly for their assistance and support, because without them the choir could not be successful. Even if they are not as supportive as you would like them to be, this may serve to change their attitude in future.

3.4 Creating an Environment Conducive to Music Making

It is of paramount importance that choral educators create a friendly, pleasant, musically rewarding, and productive rehearsal environment. An atmosphere that allows for lots of encouragement, co-operation, constructive criticism, and positive reinforcement is vital for the development of each individual child's positive self-esteem. Choristers should feel safe to take creative risks. The children's communication with the choral teacher should be greatly encouraged. A teacher who intimidates, is highly impatient, and is excessively tyrannical or condescending, destroys a congenial atmosphere of mutual respect. We need to nurture the children and make them feel proud and competent.

The general pride and esprit de corps of the choir will also thrive in a kind, warm and harmonious atmosphere. Each choir member should be made to feel that his or her contributions are valued and respected. We must respond to the needs and actions of our choir members, individually and collectively. A nod of approval, a smile or winking an eye to commend or encourage a wavering or insecure chorister, does wonders to boost his/her morale. Children require a constant sense of well-being and accomplishment.

The chairs or choir risers and all other equipment need to be in place when the children arrive. This will save time at the beginning of the rehearsal. To create an initially pleasant atmosphere, the rehearsal room should be inviting, purposeful, attractive and visually pleasing;

commanding attention. The room should stimulate musical learning through its visual appeal. Pictures with music themes can greatly enhance the appearance of the rehearsal room. The children will be more inclined to participate and learn more readily. Should the rehearsal venue not have sufficient light and ventilation, this will not be conducive to maximum effort from both the conductor and the choristers.

3.5 Humour in the Rehearsal

Cultivate a sense of humour; it is a wonderful stress reliever and makes learning fun for the group. Humour, when properly used, can help in the solution of many behavioural problems. The successful choral educator understands and appreciates the children's humour. Utilise humorous situations which develop in rehearsal, especially if these have bearing on the teacher (most definitely not at the expense of one of the choristers). In other words, lighten up and don't take yourself too seriously; be prepared to poke fun at yourself.

3.6 Pace of Rehearsal

The choral educator needs to set a stimulating, rapid and challenging pace in the rehearsal. This will not only prevent discipline problems but will ensure an interesting and stimulating rehearsal. The rehearsal should be conducted with ingenuity and inventiveness so that, although the pupils understand the established routines, they are kept guessing. The lesson should **never be totally predictable** – the element of surprise, awe and fascination should occur frequently. This will motivate the choristers and create a desire to learn.

Do not **start the rehearsal** with tedious work. We need to “welcome” the pupils to the rehearsal. It would be far better to start the rehearsal with a faster paced activity such as singing through a fairly familiar, enjoyable song that needs review or polish. The middle portion of the rehearsal should be devoted to the slower-paced, detailed, analytical learning of new repertoire. An enthusiastic, efficient and knowledgeable conductor can be successful in maintaining the choir members' attention even during the treadmill task of “note bashing” of a difficult song. We need to **frequently change the pace** of the rehearsal by alternating familiar

music with new music and easy with difficult works, i.e. alternate plodding work with more enjoyable tasks. The choristers will become bored if they have to work on the same selection for too long a period.

Instructions should be given in a **clear, brief and enthusiastic** manner. A teacher who talks excessively causes a decrease in the choristers' attentiveness. Long-winded tirades are boring; it is better to let the *music* do the talking.

When giving an instruction, it is essential to make sure that *all* the choristers are listening, to avoid having to repeat it. Wait for absolute **silence before you start talking**. Should the group be noisy, doing a few quick echo-clapping exercises will instantly focus their attention. If something has to be repeated because the children do not understand, then it has to be explained in a different way.

The children are going to learn more by “doing”, i.e. **active learning**. Every time the choir is stopped or a passage is repeated, give reasons for the interruption and why a passage has to be repeated. It is of no use whatsoever if passages are repeated in exactly the same way again.

As previously stated, careful and meticulous planning is absolutely essential for a successful rehearsal. (Refer to **Part II**, 3.1 “Preparing for Rehearsal”.) The choral teacher, however, also needs the ability to think on his/her feet; to keep a clear head and to rely on “gut-feel” when a problem surfaces that needs to be solved instantly and there is no time for laborious, rational analysis. One has to be flexible and be prepared to **alter a rehearsal plan** if the choir's needs call for a new direction to be followed.

The rehearsal plan serves to plot the main route and this is necessary for smooth and efficient operation. The “instant-decisions” are the minor detours that are called for. Both the mood or emotional tone of the group and the demands of the music being learned, may call for this necessary “detour”. One has to be sensitive to the choir's attitude and be prepared to alter the course of the rehearsal if this is not proving to be successful. Similarly, one has to learn to rely on one's musical intuition and to change an interpretative idea within the music, should this be called for.

Make use of **focussing techniques** to enliven the rehearsal. Examples of these are:

- use of a dramatic pause for emphasis in your speech;
- sudden change in tone, volume or speed in the speech, e.g. whispering or shouting;
- clapping hands to create more energy in the singing or to gain the choristers' attention; and
- snapping the fingers to provide a beat, keep the tempo or to make a point (do not employ finger snapping to the beat throughout the rehearsal).

Visual aids should be **prepared in advance** to prevent pacing lags in the rehearsal; e.g. writing out an example on the board. These interruptions, more often than not, lead to discipline problems. Have all equipment, music and materials readily at hand. Music should be distributed in an efficient way.

The choir teacher sets the example in terms of work habit. If the work at hand is approached with a sense of urgency and the time is used efficiently, the choristers will realise that what they are doing really matters and that quality is important. It is important to **start and finish rehearsals on time**. The choir members will sense that you are a disciplined and committed person who respects their time and they will have a more positive attitude.

Conclude the rehearsal on a “high” by singing, once more, a favourite, well-known song, or one that the choir rehearsed earlier and should now be able to sing with greater confidence. It is important that the rehearsal ends on a positive note with the children being highly motivated and leaving with a sense of accomplishment, no matter how small. This lends positive closure to the choral activity and leaves the pupils with a desire to return to the next rehearsal.

3.7 Movement

Using physical movement, gesture or pantomime in a choral performance to visually enhance the text or mood is referred to as “choralography”. Choralography is often employed by traditional African choral ensembles. The difference between **choralography** and **choreography** is that in choreography a further step is taken in that it uses larger movements like dancing, for instance. The visual aspect of choreography is as important as the aural

aspect. In choreography the use of staging, props and costumes are typical. The following discussion relates to choralography as opposed to choreography in performance.

Choralography needs to be done with great discretion. It needs to be **appropriate and complement** rather than detract from the choral work. One should only employ movement in the performance of a choral selection that has already attained a high performance standard and only to enhance or illuminate an idea. The movement should be an integral part of the music. Many African traditional songs demand authentic traditional movements and form a component part of the performance. These movements are often very specific and vary from region to region.

Under no circumstances should we employ movement in the performance of a choral selection in an attempt to conceal inferior singing. The following are a few possible choralography gestures that may be used in performance:

- Foot tapping, hand clapping, finger snapping, etc. may occasionally be used to inject rhythmic vitality to a choral work or section thereof;
- A distinctive facial expression to high-light nuance in the music or text; or
- Body stance (attitude) or gesture, like shrugging of shoulders, head nodding, or arms reaching upward and outward.

In *rehearsal* the use of movement can often prove to be most beneficial. Asking choristers to implement certain physical **movements or gestures in the rehearsal** as a means of demonstrating a required musical expression can be of great value and can help, amongst other things to:

- gain a higher perception of musical events and better comprehension of music concepts;
- renew interest, enthusiasm and alertness;
- release tension; and
- inject rhythmic vitality.

The choral teacher should carefully consider the physical gesture which the choristers are required to employ in order to elicit the desired musical response and to **illustrate expressive**

musical ideas. Examples of gestures that may be used by choristers in rehearsal to enhance musical expression are:

- Tracing an arc in the air to visually demonstrate a musical phrase;
- Walking around or walking on the spot to the steady beat. The manner of walking will be dictated by the music, e.g. light and bouncy or heavy and ponderous;
- Snapping fingers, tapping the fingers of one hand lightly on the palm of the other, or tapping feet to the beat of the music, facilitates the internalising of the underlying musical pulse of a composition. Both the speed and the quality of the pulse should be specified, i.e. should the tapping be heavy with a strong downward emphasis or light with an emphasis on the rebound;
- Problematic rhythmic patterns can often be corrected by echo clapping;
- Choristers may indicate dynamic contrast by standing for loud passages and sitting for soft passages; and
- The voice part that sings the main melody stands, while those that have the harmonising (supporting) function, sit down.

Other physical movement activities in the rehearsal would involve something like **alternating between standing and sitting**. Allow the choristers to frequently alternate between standing and sitting. Inform them that you require them to stand, not because you want to punish them, but because they sing/sound so much better. Do not, however, keep primary school children standing for too long; ten minutes is, more or less, the maximum. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.3 “Correct Singing Posture”.)

Varying the physical placement of the choristers may also help to keep them more alert and responsive. Try rehearsing the choir in a circle occasionally if they normally rehearse in block formation. Alterations in the seating and standing arrangement of the group may increase the attentiveness of the choristers because it enables them to experience the relationship between the voice parts in the music in a new way. The choral teacher is also able to hear the music in a new way.

The **conductor** also needs to occasionally **move away from the usual central place in front of the choir** to shift the chorister’s attention, both aurally and visually. For instance, one could

move over to the alto section to assist in a problem they may experience. Another opportunity is to move away from the stand to talk to the choristers, then move back in front of the stand to conduct. The conductor, not standing in the same place all the time, will help prevent monotony. Move around the room and among the choristers to listen to various sections or to individuals. This should not be done in a threatening way. Remember that smiling conveys the message that the children are liked and that singing is fun.

3.8 Motivating the Choristers

It is of the utmost importance that choral educators create a nurturing and caring environment in the choral rehearsal. **Positive reinforcement of every accomplishment** is the key to success. We need to make more positive (approval) comments than negative (disapproval) comments. That, however, does not mean that one must accept mediocre work, but rather praise the choristers every time they achieve a significant accomplishment. We need to communicate to the choristers our appreciation of their efforts and encourage them to continue to work to their full potential and to improve.

Choral educators are sometimes so busy correcting errors that they are inclined to forget to recognise improvement and to praise the children. The choral teacher must be demanding, but patient and sensitive to the choristers' rate of progress. The choristers have to be motivated to work, to learn, and to excel.

Aside from the choral educator's praise and recognition of success in motivating the group, **praise from outsiders**, however, can often mean even more. It is a good idea to sometimes invite the school principal to come and listen to a beautiful rendition of a song in rehearsal. The school administration needs to be involved in the progress of the choir. Sincere praise from parents, the community and especially the choristers' non-choir peers is a powerful motivator.

We need to **recognise all choir members' personal contributions and their individual significance** within the choir. They must never feel anonymous within the context of the larger group. There are often many children in the choir that are trying hard, singing well and

listening carefully but because of the size of the group do not get sufficient recognition. Making eye contact during rehearsal and just smiling or winking can make them feel valued and appreciated. (Refer to **Part II**, 3.4 “Creating an Environment Conducive to Music Making”.) One needs to constantly make the children aware of the fact that *every* member of the choir is important and that one values their contribution. A choir is like a sports team where everyone’s effort is important to the success of the entire group.

It is important to always correct the choristers in a **respectful and positive way**. Under no circumstances should we humiliate the group when we demonstrate what we do *not* want them to do. Mimicking a fault the choir made in a grossly exaggerated fashion with the intent of ridiculing them, will only lead to a negative response. If the imitation of a fault, however, is done in a convivial and companionable spirit, the choristers are far more likely to co-operate. A better way of correcting the choir would be to sing the problem phrase incorrectly and then correctly. Ask the choristers to choose the better and more musical of the two and then have them imitate the desired response.

The choral **conductor’s physical appearance** needs to be neat and professional because it suggests a seriousness of purpose and commands respect. A sloppy appearance seems to convey the message that the conductor does not regard the task at hand seriously. The golden rule here appears to be that, should we want our choir to *sound* professional, we need to *look* professional.

Another very important motivational tool, is the **selection of repertoire** that is significant and interesting to the children. (Refer to **Part II**, 2.5 “Selecting Appropriate Repertoire”.) The children will become bored if the repertoire is mediocre and expectations are low. We need to set high goals but at the same time plan carefully for their successful achievement. The songs should challenge the choristers’ musical ability, but not be so difficult as to frustrate them and jeopardise a successful performance. If the children like the music, they are naturally motivated to make improvements and to develop their musicianship. They will also be more animated, energetic and enthusiastic in the rehearsal and the performance.

The choral educator’s role is also that of a facilitator; providing the necessary leadership to enable the children to inquire and discover for themselves. Try to make a habit of asking the

choristers' opinions before issuing directives or offering advice about interpretation. When the choristers understand why they are being asked to do something, they are far more likely to co-operate. The choristers need to feel a part of the learning process and share responsibility as co-creators in the musical process. This is more likely to ensure “ownership” of the particular work by the choir members and results in greater pride and responsibility. They are then more likely to co-operate because they are not mere passive recipients of the teacher’s knowledge.

It is imperative that we start rehearsals with a **definite sense of purpose**. Make eye contact with the choir and insist on having everyone’s attention before starting. A casual approach does not succeed in conveying the sense of urgency – the foundation for concentration is not laid down. The conductor’s energy and enthusiasm right from the beginning of the rehearsal will inspire the choristers to put personal problems and distractions aside and to focus their attention on the work which has to be covered.

All the choir members should be fully aware of the conduct expected from them and the few rules that have to be adhered to. It is more beneficial to have a **few rules** that are consistently enforced, than to have an extremely intricate system. Try to ignore minor infractions and concentrate on the music-making process.

The choral teacher’s enthusiasm for music and the art of choral singing is one of the most essential characteristics necessary to stimulate motivation, and to excite the choristers. The teacher’s enthusiasm will ensure more positive chorister attitudes, greater chorister effort and determination and increased levels of achievement.

3.9 Seating/Standing Arrangement and Placement of Voices

The height of choristers needs to be considered so that each chorister has an unobstructed view of the conductor; and vice versa, the conductor should be able to see each chorister’s face clearly. Visual appeal also needs to be considered. The appearance of a choir is important in creating a positive effect before they start singing. Some choral directors insist on tapering the choir’s height in a strictly uniform manner, no matter what, by having:

- the tallest choristers in the middle and the shorter ones on the sides, resulting in a < > formation; or vice versa,
- the shortest choristers in the middle and the taller ones on the sides, resulting in a > < formation.

One could organise the choristers *initially* by height, but then start mixing them for certain musical considerations. Visual appeal takes second place to considerations like balance, blend and intonation that may influence the tonal quality. It is important to, well ahead of the performance, seat/stand choristers in rehearsal in the same places they will occupy when they are performing.

The possibility of **discipline problems** also needs to be taken into account when seating the choristers in rehearsal. Over-talkative choristers or those who are apt to be more mischievous, should be separated from their “buddies”. One also needs to separate two choristers that clash and are inclined to disagree and squabble.

The front row should be some distance away from the conductor, the minimum distance being ± 3 metres. This distance, obviously, will differ, depending on the size of the choir; the bigger the size of the choir, the further away the conductor has to stand. If the conductor is **standing too close** to the front row, the children will have to raise their chins to look at the conductor. (Refer to Figure II - 6-8, “Undesirable tension in the throat area, with the chin jutting out and up”.) Another disadvantage of standing too close to the choir, is that the conductor cannot see the choristers at either end of the line.

Carefully **placing individual voices** within each section could have an impressive effect on the overall sound of the choir. The strongest and best singers can be placed towards the rear and the middle of the section. This will ensure that they are heard by the weaker singers in front and around them. Having said that, it is also important to judiciously intersperse solo-quality (clear, focussed or strong) voices throughout the choir so as to give weaker singers the opportunity to hear themselves and not always be over-shadowed by stronger singers. Avoid placing two strong singers (“leaders”) next to each other. Weaker voices (“followers”), or voices without soloistic qualities, but good voices nevertheless, that blend easily, help to smooth out the individual characteristics of the solo-quality voices and this ensures better

overall choral blend. The stronger voices, on the other hand, enhance weaker voices, which can lead to greater confidence levels for the “followers”. These “followers” are then more secure and inclined to make a more positive musical contribution. One needs to rearrange the individual choristers’ seating, or standing order, until a satisfactory blend is achieved. (Refer to **Part II**, 4.8 “Balance and Blend”.)

If the choir is experiencing pitch problems, it often helps to change the positioning of individual choristers. The combination of two specific adjacent voices may be experiencing an over-tone mismatch. By separating them, the pitch problems may be solved. Some voices blend together better than others because of the tone quality of each voice. Choristers that are consistently inclined to drag the pitch down, should be placed between two strong, secure choristers. If these chronic “flatters” are seated together, the problem is magnified and it will adversely affect the intonation of the choir as a whole.

Choristers who sing with animated, interesting faces need to be placed in prominent places. Allow for ample spacing between choristers. If the choristers are cramped and standing on top of each other, their sound will be smaller. (Refer to **Part II**, 7.7 “Acoustics”.)

Experimenting with seating arrangements for the different sections in the choir, can have a dramatic effect on the overall sound in such areas as balance, blend and intonation. When one has an imbalance in the number of singers to a part, one could place the smaller group (usually the altos in two-part singing) in the middle, with the bigger group on either side of them. The following formation would then be the result:

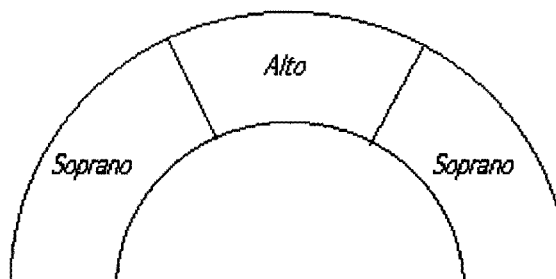


Figure II - 3-1 Formation for a treble choir with the smaller group in the middle and the bigger group (split up) on either side

Dividing the bigger group like this will help to reduce their prominence, which would greatly assist balance in the choir. (Refer to **Part II**, 4.8 “Balance and Blend”.) Standing in a semi-circle allows the choristers to better hear each other and the other parts as well.

The formations illustrated in figures **II - 3-2a** and **II - 3-2b** are commonly used with treble choirs that have a strong and secure soprano 2 section.

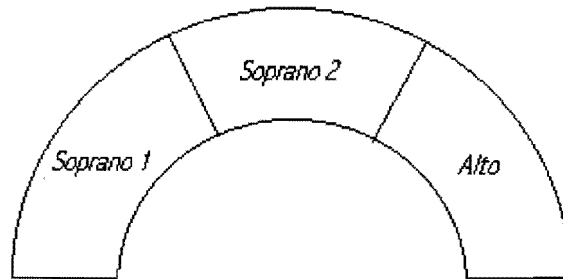


Figure II - 3-2a Formation for a treble choir singing in three parts, with a strong and secure soprano 2 section

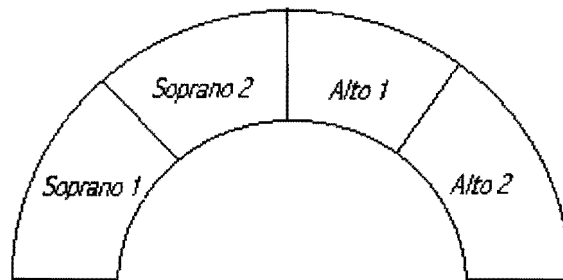


Figure II - 3-2b Formation for a treble choir singing in four parts, with a strong and secure soprano 2 section

Should the soprano 2 section not be strong enough, one would have to move them away from the altos and place them where they hear the soprano 1 section clearly and the altos only faintly. The second sopranos can thus harmonise more readily with the first sopranos. The outer voices, S₁ and A, are together and can also tune the chord better. (Refer to figures **II - 3-3a** and **II - 3-3b**, below.)

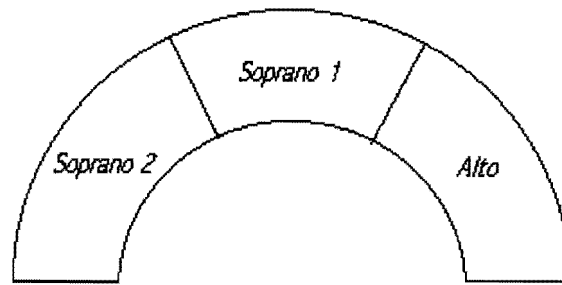


Figure II-3-3a Formation for a treble choir singing in three parts, with a weaker and insecure soprano 2 section

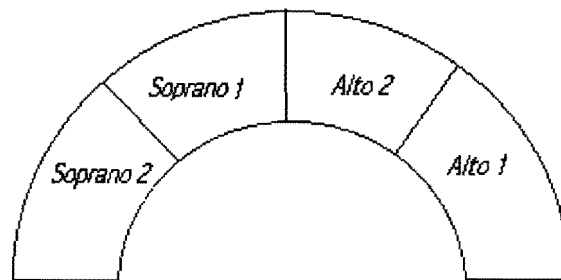


Figure II – 3-3b Formation for a treble choir singing in four parts, with a weaker and insecure soprano 2 section

Placing the outer voice parts in S_1 S_2 A_1 A_2 (i.e. S_1 and A_2) next to each other may promote better intonation because they can better hear each other and tune up. (Refer to figure II - 3-3b, above.)

Below, in figure II - 3-4, is an alternative seating arrangement for a treble choir singing in four parts.

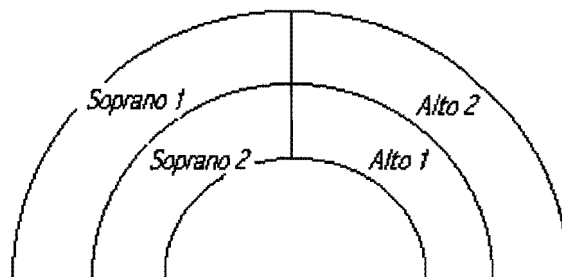


Figure II - 3-4 Alternative choir formation for a treble choir singing in four parts

After one has decided on a seating plan, and each chorister has been placed, one could designate letters to the rows. Let's assume there are four rows; these are then called A, B, C, and D. From left to right they are then numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.. Figure II - 3-5, below, illustrates this idea.

D 1 2 3 4 5 ...etc.
C 1 2 3 4 5 ...etc.
B 1 2 3 4 5 ...etc.
A 1 2 3 4 5 ...etc.

Figure II - 3-5 Designating each chorister with a number in a particular row

Each chorister must remember his/her number, e.g. A 4. Draw up a seating chart with little blocks on a large A₃ sheet with each chorister's name in the correct block. This is also a tremendous help for the teacher in learning the names of all the choristers.

3.10 Routine Rehearsal Plan

One needs a fairly consistent routine in the rehearsals, but something new or unexpected adds interest to each rehearsal and the choristers should continually be stimulated by fresh ideas and variety. Boredom sets in if the choristers know exactly what to expect and the teacher's approach to rehearsing has become too predictable. A variety of teaching strategies and musical experiences will prevent monotony.

There are certain aspects that should always be in place and certain rules and routines that do not change, like having the chairs for seating or the choral risers in place when the choristers arrive and each chorister entering the rehearsal room quietly and going straight to their assigned place. As previously stated, it is better to have a few rules that have to be adhered to and are non-negotiable than to have a highly intricate discipline system that is not consistently enforced. (Refer to **Part II**, 3.8 "Motivating the Choristers".)

Rehearsals should begin and end on time. If the teacher consistently starts the rehearsals promptly, the choristers will be more inclined to make haste to be on time for the rehearsal. The rehearsal should start with a definite sense of urgency and seriousness. (Refer to **Part II**, 3.6 “Pace of Rehearsal”.) The teacher should, likewise, make every effort to finish rehearsals on time. Choristers are more likely to be motivated and work hard for the duration of the rehearsal if they know that the teacher respects their time.

It is absolutely essential that a balance is maintained within the rehearsal between the demands of performance and the responsibility to the long-term development of the choristers. The preparation for performance should not take precedence over the education of the children. This principle should consistently be applied in the planning of rehearsals.

3.11 Behaviour Management in Rehearsal

Behavioural guidelines and expectations should be made very clear and these have to be implemented consistently and tactfully. If these guidelines are fair and the teacher reinforces them in a positive way, the children will respond enthusiastically and with confidence. Disruptive behaviour should be corrected, but choristers should not be belittled in the process. The choristers have to be respected as individuals. A choral educator’s role is to nurture; not to injure. We should all strive to acquire greater competence in communication with our choristers and hence become less abrasive and less provocative. The ideal is to be firm, fair, consistent, understanding and professional in one’s dealings with the choir members and to show sincere interest in every child.

Positive reinforcement works wonders with the children. Use comments such as, “Anna, you are singing with a wonderfully animated expression!” or “Peter, you are standing tall like a prince!” and watch the impact it has on those standing next to the person you are praising.

3.12 Audio and Video Aids

Listening to a recording of the choir’s own performance provides an added dimension of critical appraisal because the choristers can hear themselves objectively; i.e. choristers can

concentrate on listening without other distractions. The use of a tape recorder during rehearsal is an exceptionally beneficial means of improving the interpretation of a selection. Recordings are most unkind and are inclined to “exaggerate” mistakes. On listening to the playback of the tape recording, choristers, and teachers for that matter, are often surprised at the flagrant mistakes that went unnoticed during the rehearsal.

The use of the tape recorder can be an exceptionally valuable means of facilitating the choristers’ musical development. The choristers are fascinated when they hear themselves sing on a recording. The idea is to play it back to them for evaluation. Ask questions that require critical listening skills and musical judgement. Compliment them on their performance and then challenge them to improve further. Solicit their suggestions for improvement. It is important to then immediately implement the suggested changes. The conductor also has the opportunity to listen more objectively to the performance and can re-run the tape in order to study and analyse it in detail.

Comparing two (or more) recordings of the same work is a valuable aid in developing the evaluating skills of the choristers. This procedure is especially beneficial if this is a recording of a song that the choir is about to learn or has already learnt. (Refer to **Part II**, 4.4 “Presenting New Repertoire”.)

Video taping presents us with all the advantages of an audio tape but also affords us the extra dimension of vision and gives the choristers the opportunity of assessing their body stance or attitude, movements and facial expressions. Are all the choristers watching the conductor closely? Do the eyes convey the expression of the music and the text by being focussed and alert, or are the eyes glazed over or perhaps roving all over the place?

3.13 Use of the Piano

If we spend most of the choral rehearsal time teaching from behind the piano, we will produce choristers who cannot sing in tune without the aid of the piano. The piano hides many instances of poor intonation. Neither the choristers nor the teacher can hear small mistakes when the piano is sounding. *A cappella* (unaccompanied) singing reveals mistakes that the piano covers. In order to improve the choir’s intonation, one has to move away from the piano

and rehearse without accompaniment whenever possible. This will encourage the choristers to rely on their own aural abilities. (Refer to **Part II**, 2.5 “Selecting Appropriate Repertoire” and 7.8 “Compiling a Programme”.)

The choir only truly knows a selection if they can sing it without the assistance of the piano. They must be able to hear mentally instead of depending upon the piano to give the pitches.

3.14 Accompaniment and the Role of the Accompanist

In the Foundation phase, dissonant or complex multi-chord progressions in the accompaniment may jeopardise melodic accuracy. In the Intermediate phase, the instrumental accompaniment may be more dissonant and complex. (Refer to **Part I**, 3.2 “Choral Unit Standard: Intonation”, “Western Music Specifics” No. 2.)

The piano is a traditional accompaniment instrument, but there are many instruments that lend harmonic support and are suitable accompanying instruments for the treble voice choir. Examples of this type of instrument are: the guitar, autoharp, harp, accordion, pipe organ and instrumental ensembles. Suitable, appropriate accompaniment to a selection **adds another element of interest** for the listener. It is resourceful to select repertoire for a performance programme that includes both a variety of styles of accompaniment and *a cappella* singing. The percussive timbre of the piano may be rendered less so by the *addition* of a flute, recorder, clarinet, oboe or stringed instrument, playing a counter-melody. These additional instruments lend renewed interest and make for more fascinating and engaging listening by providing timbre variation to a programme. (Refer to **Part II**, 7.8 “Compiling a Programme”.)

Children’s choirs do not have a **bass line** and the accompaniment thus has to fulfil this role. Adding a bass instrument like a cello or a bassoon may lend greater balance to the overall harmonic structure, which in turn will facilitate better intonation. Judicious enhancement of the bass in the piano accompaniment will also contribute to better intonation by the choir.

The children’s choir requires an accompanist that is particularly sensitive to the **balance between the accompaniment and the vocal line**. To avoid covering the vocal line, the accompaniment should be played lightly and without over-pedalling. The piano

accompaniment should support and add colour and harmony to the singing, but it should not overshadow. There is a fine balance between how much colour and vitality will *support* a choir but not *cover up* the voices. A skilled and sensitive accompanist will know when to emphasise a particular melodic line or rhythmic accent in the accompaniment to enhance the overall effect.

A choir that has an accompanist is most fortunate indeed. It **frees the conductor** to move around and also paves the way for better communication with the choristers. Another advantage is that the conductor can listen more acutely and with greater discrimination, away from the piano. Should a staff member from the school not be available as an accompanist, one might consider approaching the parent body and try to establish if there happens to be a skilful pianist amongst them that would be prepared to act as an accompanist. (Refer to the section that the parents have to fill in on the *Choir Audition* form, Example II - 2-1 a.)

Unless the accompanist is an exceptional sight-reader, the music needs to be given to him/her well in advance to ensure proficiency. The accompaniment should be played accurately and expressively. The choral teacher needs to meet with the accompanist **before the rehearsal starts** to discuss expressive aspects like tempi, dynamics, phrasing as well as breathing and any modifications in the score.

A good, susceptible and supportive accompanist will be **as one with the choir** by breathing and phrasing with them. They realise when the choristers are faltering in a performance and will immediately give the necessary remedial support. They have the ability to follow the conductor's directions and learn to anticipate the conductor's actions and reactions. Furthermore, they can adapt quickly to the unexpected. Their ability to sight-read is excellent and it is an added bonus if they can transpose with ease.

The following are some personal characteristics of accompanists that are most desirable:

- Dependability and punctuality are absolutely essential. Nothing is more nerve-wracking than waiting for an accompanist who is late, with the performance about to start;
- A co-operative colleague who is always willing to help;
- The ability to use sensible initiative in unforeseen, problematic situations that may arise;
- Fondness of children; and

- A good sense of humour in rehearsal which can often help to alleviate tension.

A good accompanist is vitally essential to the success of the choir. The choral teacher would be well advised to cultivate a good relationship with the accompanist. It is absolutely essential to give due recognition to this valuable member of the choral team.

3.15 Guidelines for Dismissal from the Choir

Very little learning will take place in a chaotic environment where children do exactly as they please. One needs a manageable environment and *constant* disruptive behaviour from any particular child should not be tolerated. However, there is a difference between occasional mischief, and genuine, incessantly disruptive behaviour.

Occasionally one may find a child that is totally uninterested with a poor attitude which negatively affects the atmosphere in rehearsals, or a child that continually distracts the other children and refuses to come to terms with choir discipline. Speak privately and frankly to the child and ask him/her to co-operate. Should the disruptive behaviour continue, it may be best to advise the pupil to leave the choir.

No child should be dismissed from the choir because their singing is no longer acceptable. Once they have been accepted, after the audition, they must be confident in knowing that they are a valuable asset to the choir. Choir members should only be dismissed in rare circumstances where their behaviour proves to be totally unacceptable.

Chapter 4

REHEARSING THE CHOIR

4.1 The Choral Teacher's Voice as a Role Model

Male choral educators of children's choirs find it difficult to provide an appropriate model for treble singers because the man's normal singing voice has a different timbre and sounds an octave lower than children's voices. Research investigating the effects of male and female models on children's vocal accuracy has shown that children are most successful when matching female voices as opposed to male voices. (Refer to **Part I**, 2.3.2 "Male Vocal Modelling with Children".)

Children have been shown to sing most accurately with a female model. However, this should not be construed to imply that children cannot learn to match pitches sung by a male model, but rather that this may be more difficult (Goetze et al 1990: 31).

Studies examining the issue of male vocal modelling with children are consistent in reporting greater vocal accuracy when a male teacher models in the treble octave singing with minimal vibrato (Dunn 2000: 54).

Researchers have also found that children respond more accurately to a female model than to a piano or oscillator (Hermanson, 1971/1972), a flute (Petzold, 1966), or a male model (Green, 1990; Sims, Moore, & Kuhn, 1982) (Price et al 1994: 270-271).

Children find it difficult to reproduce tones that they hear in a register other than that in which their voices lie. Male teachers should therefore resort to either:

- using a child in the choir as a model to demonstrate pitch-matching activities;
- using an instrument like a recorder;
- using falsetto to provide the pitches for singing; or
- recording songs and patterns with a female model for introducing songs.

The choral teacher's voice does not have to be a remarkable solo voice, but rather a voice that is well modulated and a model for the children. (Refer to **Part II**, 1.2.1 "Musical Skills" of the effective choral educator.) There should be no excessive vibrato or heaviness of sound. The children are inclined to follow an example directly and the teacher's voice should therefore present good singing habits and accurate intonation at all times.

4.2 Intonation

Intonation refers to the preciseness of pitch or the extent to which a singer is in tune. (Refer to **Part I**, 3.2 "Choral Unit Standard: Intonation".) It refers to the ability to listen to another voice or instrument and to match (reproduce) the pitch exactly. Faulty intonation is probably the single most annoying aspect that can ruin a choral performance. It is therefore extremely important that the choir sings in tune. Explain to the children that singing "flat" means that they are singing slightly under (or below) the pitch and that singing "sharp" means singing slightly above (or higher than) the pitch. Choirs are more inclined to singing flat than sharp.

The choral conductor has to insist on good intonation at all times. If one repeatedly ignores, or skims over any poor intonation, it may become a habit. The following strategies may prove to be expedient:

- Stop the choir as soon as intonation becomes a problem. Identify the cause of the intonation problem and find a remedy;
- Tell the singers to stand tall, to sing it softly once more and to listen to themselves *very* carefully. Singing too loudly inhibits the listening process. Do not use the piano in this instance so that both the conductor and the choristers are encouraged to rely on their own ears to a greater extent. Likewise, it is a good idea to often sing an accompanied work without any accompaniment during the rehearsal. We want to wean the singers from constant accompaniment, and specifically from the piano, as much as possible, as this encourages finer listening skills.
- Use physical metaphor. Ask the choristers to physically pick up the pitch with their hands as though they were picking up a small object. This is an aid to lifting the pitch.

Poor posture is often the cause of bad intonation. The reason for this is that poor posture is an impediment to good breath management. Problems with breath management have a dramatic effect on pitch accuracy. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.3 “Correct Singing Posture”, and 6.4 “Breath Management”.) When the choristers are not using sufficient breath, the pitch will usually become flat.

Vowels that are not sung uniformly may also contribute to intonation problems. Both the pitch and the vowels have to be tuned. One has to constantly work on the **uniformity of vowels** because fine intonation cannot be achieved unless the vowels are unified. “Dark” vowels tend to cause flat singing, whereas “bright” vowels tend to lead to sharp singing. (Refer to Figure **II** - 6-14, “Dark to bright vowel sounds”.) If one section of the choir is singing flat, the choral teacher can help to remedy this by having that section slightly modify the vowel sound. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.8 “Italian Basic Pure Vowels, Uniform Vowel Colours and Vowel Modification”.)

A **throaty quality**, which is caused by poor tone production, leads to flattening in general. More often than not, this involves rigidity in and around the base of the tongue. This can be avoided by:

- relaxing and dropping the jaw;
- relaxing the tongue and lightly resting the tip at the bottom of the lower front teeth;
- singing with correct vocal embouchure; and
- arching the soft palate.

(Refer to **Part II**, 6.2 “Choral Tone Quality”, and 6.5 “Resonance”.)

Temperature and humidity affect intonation significantly. If the rehearsal room, or performance area, is too hot, flattening often occurs. Open the windows to ensure that the room is better ventilated. High humidity in the atmosphere has a depressive effect. The choristers will lack vitality and feel lethargic. To counter-act this, the choral teacher has to direct with extra vitality. Stress the importance of good posture and correct, deep breathing.

Rehearsals or performances **early in the morning** are inadvisable because the voices are “cold”. This will adversely affect intonation. The ideal time for rehearsals is in the late morning or early afternoon.

The **acoustics of a room** have an effect on pitch. Hard surfaces result in a reverberating or echo effect, whereas drapes, carpeting, audience, etc. absorb the vibrations and the sound is then less resounding. “Dead” or “dry” acoustics in a room or performance area will tend to cause flattening. The choristers cannot hear each other properly. It will help to let them stand closer to one another. The tempi should also be slightly faster in dry acoustics. If you are fortunate enough to sing in a venue where the acoustics are live, the spacing between the choristers should be further apart and the tempi can be more relaxed. If the area is excessively reverberating, the tempi should be quite a bit slower to prevent the tone from becoming sharp.

Fatigue may cause intonation problems. Ask yourself: have the choristers been sitting or standing too long? Sometimes a few physical stretches to release tension in the shoulders, head and neck will help to revitalise tired muscles. When the choristers are tired, the teacher needs to demonstrate extra vitality and sparkle that will energise the group and restore some of the alertness. Vocal fatigue may also set in if the choristers have been working on the same music for too long a period in the rehearsal. The best thing to do then is to change to a less demanding or strenuous selection.

When the **tessitura** of a song is too high and remains uncomfortably high in pitch for an extended period, the choir will, more often than not, start singing flat, because the laryngeal muscles become fatigued. The result is that the intonation suffers. In this instance, it may help to transpose the selection down into a more suitable key. It is important to select repertoire that has a suitable range and tessitura. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.6 “Children’s Vocal Ranges and Registers”, and 2.5 “Selecting Appropriate Repertoire” .) Sometimes, however, it may be that the piece is in an inappropriate key and by transposing it up a semi-tone, the key is brighter and more suitable. F major often presents this problem, but one can easily transpose this up to F[♯] major.

“**Key fatigue**” results when singing in one key for too long. The order of the selections to be rehearsed or performed should be chosen to include a variety of keys and tempos. The ear needs key relief to avoid becoming “lazy” with resultant flattening.

Repeated notes tend to become flat. To avoid the tone from sagging, tell the choristers to “think up” as they sing the repeated tones. **Sustained tones** are also inclined to become flat. Keep the tone supported, vibrant and alive right to the end. There is a saying: “the pitch will sag if the music drags”. On the final chord, the conductor should assist the sound, and prevent the pitch from sagging, with a slight upward movement of the arms and hands.

The 3rd degree of the scale, *mi*, and the 7th degree, *ti*, are particularly susceptible to intonation problems. Should these occur, they have to be remedied immediately. More often than not choristers sing the *mi* or the *ti* flat. Tell them to think the tone(s) slightly higher and practise this until the tones are completely secure. Occasionally, however, the *mi* and the *ti* are sung sharper. In this instance, one would remedy the intonation problem by telling choristers that the tone(s) is too high and that they must think it slightly lower. Once again, practise this until the tones are absolutely secure.

There are **certain notes in each voice range** that are inclined to cause problems. In the soprano range these are from d^2 (on the 4th line of the treble clef) to f^2 or f^2 (on the 5th line). In the alto range they are from a^1 (in the 2nd space of the treble clef) to the c^2 or c^2 (3rd space of the treble clef). Should any intonation problems occur, they have to be set right immediately.

Any **special accidentals** (that are not part of the key signature) in a selection, need to be sung with extra care. These accidentals cause a temporary modulation into a new key and this may confuse the ear. Sharp signs need to be sung higher than would seem correct in the original key, and flat signs, lower. The natural sign should be sung higher in a key with flats, and lower in a key with sharps.

Sometimes the **pitch is inclined to become flat on a descending passage**. The conductor may help to prevent this by using a gradual *upward* motion of the hands and arms as the passage descends. Alternatively, one could point upwards while singing a descending line. When singing a descending passage, the following suggestion may prove to be effective: tell the singers to take narrow (small) steps down as they are descending; and vice versa, when singing an ascending passage, the singers must take wide (big) steps up. For a more vivid illustration, suggest walking upstairs or downstairs “in the dark”. When the pitch becomes flat, it may also help to brighten the vowel sound in order to sharpen the pitch.

It is absolutely essential to **energise** (support) singing to a greater degree when the choir is **singing softly**. Very soft dynamics require excellent breath control and may, more often than not, cause flattening of the pitch if one is not very careful. It is usually a better idea to ask for “hushed” singing rather than “soft” singing. This will result in the singing being more focussed, vibrant and alive. When singing a **diminuendo** (gradually singing softer) one also has to be extremely circumspect not to start singing flat. It is important to point this out to the children and to be extra careful to avoid flattening.

If the choristers are not sufficiently **secure with the music**, intonation problems may occur. Should the choristers learn their individual vocal lines more thoroughly, their ability to sing with better intonation will improve. Part-independence can be made more secure by asking the choristers to sing their particular part while the other part(s) are played on the piano.

The opposite of not knowing the music well enough may also happen. This is when a selection has been “hammered to death” and **the piece has become stale**. It is not wise to repeat a selection over and over again, rehearsal after rehearsal, and to expect the choristers to maintain their enthusiasm. Should boredom set in, it is best to leave off practising that particular selection for a period and to resume it at a later stage with fresh, new approaches. One should not “peak” with a work too long before a performance. The rehearsals should be efficiently planned, spaced and timed to ensure that the choristers “peak” for the performance itself.

Nervousness has the tendency to cause the choir to become sharp. This is mainly due to shallow breathing. The choral teacher must calm and reassure the choristers before the performance and do a few deep-breathing exercises, which help to steady the nerves.

4.3 Unison and Part-Singing

In the Foundation phase the choristers only sing unison songs because they are still learning to pitch accurately. Until the choristers can sing perfectly in tune, it is a waste of time to attempt part-singing. An introduction to singing in harmony could begin towards the end of grade 3, and certainly by the beginning of grade 4. One could start by initially singing simple ostinato

patterns to familiar melodies and then proceed to the singing of simple rounds. Because of their harmonic structure, rounds are well-suited to ostinato patterns. Apart from using rounds as part of the repertoire, one could also use rounds for warm-up purposes. Rounds improve part-singing and they are a valuable aid in developing aural acuity.

There are certain basic principles that are a prerequisite for successful part-singing:

- Choristers should know their part well and be able to sing it without any assistance from the teacher or an instrument;
- Choristers will be better able to sing their own part and listen simultaneously to the other part(s), should they initially sing *mezzo piano* only. Singing softly enables them to listen more carefully and to tune to the other part(s) while singing their own part; and
- As a first step to introducing the actual part-singing, the teacher should sing the harmony part while the choristers sing the melody. Once the choristers understand the relationship between the melody and the harmony, they can proceed with singing their respective parts.

For part-singing in the Intermediate phase, it is important to know that the upper part (melody line) in two-part music is easier to sing than the lower part. The choristers find harmonising below a melody a greater challenge than singing a descant above a known melody. When new part-singing repertoire is studied, it is advisable that the lower part is learned first to make the learning process less onerous. (Refer to **Part I**, 3.2 “Choral Unit Standard: Intonation”, “Range Statements and Assessment Criteria” number 3, “Vocal independence with pitch accuracy in part-singing”.) Singing in three parts should not be attempted until the choir is confidently singing in two parts. In three-part singing, the middle part is the most difficult to pitch.

In part-singing in the Intermediate phase, the second (or third) voice part should be structured in such a way that the part is sufficiently interesting and sounds like a melody. Rounds, counter-melodies and ostinatos are particularly useful because they maintain their own independent melodic line. Choristers at this stage find it difficult to sing in parallel thirds or sixths. The second (or third) part should not constantly have the same contour, rhythm and text as the melody, like in a second part written in parallel thirds or sixths. Inexperienced

choristers easily become confused when singing parallel thirds or sixths and wander back to the main melody.

4.4 Presenting New Repertoire

In order to inspire the choristers, the choral teacher needs to be enthusiastic about the new choral work. When presenting a new work to the choir, the teacher has to “sell” the music to them. The score has to be brought to life for the choristers and this has to be done in an exciting and enthusiastic way. The teacher has to know the music well, be a hundred percent convinced about the aesthetic value of the composition and be very enthusiastic about the music. Only then can the teacher transmit his/her enthusiasm about a new work to the choristers.

In the Intermediate phase one should give the choristers background information about the song/work so that they have a better total concept of the music. (Refer to **Part I**, 3.7 “Choral Unit Standard: Stylistic Authenticity”.) The following are some possibilities:

- Tell them something about the style of the song/work;
- Give them the name of the composer and some relevant/interesting information about the composer and/or the cultural background of the song/work;
- Discuss the historical period in which the song/work was composed;
- Indicate on a map the country of origin;
- Discuss the mood of the music; etc.

The choir members have to be made aware of the fact that one cannot love something without knowing it. If it is at all possible to obtain a good recording of the new work, this may be an excellent opportunity for guided, critical listening. This is particularly beneficial if the performance is by a children’s choir because the choristers identify more keenly with the choral sound. Playing a recording to the group gives them an overall concept or an initial sense of the character of the work. That does not mean that a choral recording should be slavishly imitated. It is merely suggested that it is a most useful way of introducing a new

work to the choristers. After they have gained an overall impression of the new work, they can then proceed to study the various sections in detail.

4.4.1 Song Acquisition

In the Foundation phase one would, first of all, read the text expressively to the children. Ask questions about the content and meaning of the text and explain difficult words. When the choristers know what the song is all about, have them read through the text with you. Next, working with four-bar phrases, read each phrase with exaggerated, clear diction, and have the choristers repeat after you. (Refer to **Part II**, 4.4.2 “Expression of Text”, below.)

Sing the song through for the choristers with (piano) accompaniment if possible, taking special care that you sing the way you want them to perform eventually. First impressions are very important. Children are exceptionally perceptive and will mimic your performance. Proceed by teaching the song phrase by phrase. First sing the phrase to the choristers and then have them repeat it. Mistakes need to be corrected consistently. At this stage one works with both melody and words. Have the choristers sing the song through from beginning to end.

At a subsequent rehearsal, separate the words and the melody. Say the words to the rhythm of the music, being very precise about enunciation and articulation of consonants. Sing the melody to a neutral syllable like “moo”, “noo”, or “loo”, making sure that all intervals are pitched correctly. Combine the words and the melody again and point out expressive elements. Do not postpone the expressive interpretation of the song/work to a later stage. This should be a continual process, starting right from the beginning. Try to use the piano as little as possible at this stage and focus on correct singing. At the conclusion of the rehearsal, one could have a “mock performance” and sing the song through with accompaniment, only stopping if there is a major problem. This gives the choristers a tremendous feeling of accomplishment. Remember to be liberal with praise and to look for positive elements in the “performance”.

The following procedures apply mostly to song acquisition in the **Intermediate** phase. Read the text through with the choristers. (Refer to **Part II**, 4.4.2 “Expression of Text”, below.) Constantly remind choristers to have a pencil and their sheet music ready for marking the score. Discuss and ask questions about the textual content and explain difficult words. It is essential to explain the organisation of the music score to the choristers. Make sure that they understand and know how to follow their specific part in the maze of music notation. It may be expedient to place a mark before the line they are to sing in each system or to mark their part with a highlighter pen. Use different colours for each voice part.

One could use a melodic pattern from the song as a warm-up exercise. If there is a refrain or section in the selection that repeats a few times, this should be attempted first, because in this way the choristers learn a substantial part of the song/work relatively quickly.

In a two-part selection, teach a segment of the alto part first, the same segment of the soprano part next, and then combine the two parts together in that segment. If one of the sections is experiencing difficulties, that part should be isolated and rehearsed. The other section should then either study their part by following the notation and listening to it in relation to the other part or they could hum their part softly. Another possibility is for them to sing their part to “loo”, while the section that needs special attention, sings their part to words with the piano reinforcing its pitches. Do not let one section of the choir sit and wait for a long time while you are rehearsing another voice-part. Work with short segments of the song/work at a time, switching back and forth between parts and combining the parts as soon as the choristers are secure in their own part.

One could also divide the choir up for a short sectional rehearsal, with the accompanist (and/or parent volunteer) taking one section and the (choir) teacher taking the other. Each part is then worked out separately. The two sections are then combined again to sing the two parts together. Should the accompanist (or parent volunteer) not be available for this, sectional rehearsals may be scheduled before or after school. Even if

all the choristers within the section do not attend, those present will be able to assist the others who are unable to attend, to learn more quickly.

Expressive singing relies on several elements and some of these will now be discussed under the following headings: “Expression of Text”, “The Musical Phrase”, and “Rhythm and Pitch”.

4.4.2 Expression of Text

The conductor has to be completely familiar with both the text and the music.

Choral music represents the essence of the human experience because it fuses two distinct yet inseparable elements into one creation: music – the language of the soul – and word – the communicator of our thoughts, feelings, dreams, and experiences (Dickson 1993:19).

Textual expression has to be taught right from the start. Before they start to learn the notes, the choristers need to understand the meaning, mood and message of the words. Do not assume that the children understand the text even if it is in their own language. In the discussion of the text, the choristers’ should be encouraged to offer their interpretations or understanding of the meaning or message contained within the text.

Read the text aloud as a poem to the choristers. Pinpoint specific phrases and analyse them for:

- correct enunciation;
- the rise and fall of emotion (communicative potential); and
- appropriate articulation.

No two syllables or words should receive equal emphasis and the choristers need to find out which are the most important (essential) words and syllables.

Ask the choristers to determine which descriptive words in the lyrics could be used for “word painting”. Word painting involves giving special attention to consonants and

vowels of descriptive words for dramatic impact, thereby creating a “sound picture”, for example:

- in the words “love” and “soft”, the initial consonants are treated smoothly by “leaning” into the words (or elongating the consonants rather than quickly articulating them);
- in the words “glory” and “roar”, the initial consonants should be stressed emphatically.

These key words should each have a special emotional interpretation, colour, weight or texture and must be sung descriptively with imagination and discretion. The meaning, atmosphere, and significance of the word should be drawn out or “painted” for the listener; i.e. the manner in which the word is pronounced should conjure up an image in the listeners’ mind:

- “Peace” should have a completely different colour or texture to “fight”;
- “Love” should not sound like “hate”;
- “Beautiful” not like “monstrosity”; and
- “Dark” not like “light”.

It is essential that each and every chorister is executing the “word painting” together and to the same degree. Obviously, facial expressions that mirror word meanings, contribute tremendously to the expressive result.

The teacher has to provide a vivid explanation of the text by using carefully chosen images and metaphors to stimulate the choristers’ imaginations. When the children understand the emotional content of a composition, that content is more likely to be conveyed to the audience.

4.4.3 The Musical Phrase

Music does not consist of a flow of formless sound. It can be divided into musical phrases and these can be compared to a sentences in speech. The text and the melody

indicate appropriate, logical phrasing. Phrases in music vary in length; some are short, others are long. A musical phrase is usually sung in one breath, unless it is too long, in which case “staggered breathing” is used in choral singing. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.4.3 “Staggered Breathing”.)

Should we break a phrase in the wrong place by taking an unnecessary breath, the meaning could be obscured, or even changed. One should also refrain from taking unnecessary breaths between short word phrases. For instance, the song “Happy Birthday”, consists of 4 word phrases. The first two lines may be grouped together and sung as one musical phrase; likewise with the last two lines. Take a breath where it makes sense, both musically and textually. (The ✓ represents a breath mark.)

Happy birthday to you,
Happy birthday to you, ✓
Happy birthday dear Someone,
Happy birthday to you.

The phrase structure needs to be pointed out to the choristers: where does the phrase start, where does it peak (climax), and where does it end? A phrase starts with a forward momentum (or surge, or swell) and moves towards a peak (or climax), before it subsides. The analogy that may be used here is that of a wave that swells bigger and bigger up to a peak, before it breaks and then washes out to shore.

Tempo rubato refers to the elasticity or the flexibility of the time within a bar or phrase. A literal translation from Italian would be “robbed time”. This refers to a “give and take” allocation or distribution whereby robbing time from one note (or group of notes) and adding it to another in order to compensate. This is done to heighten the expressive power of the music and the expressive nuances of text. By hastening a segment of the phrase, the forward momentum is intensified. Likewise, the subsiding of the phrase is achieved by a relaxing of the mathematical precision of pulse by the lengthening of some notes. *Tempo rubato* has to be used with utmost discretion and taste.

One should refrain from working “just with the notes in isolation” as this will lead to a dull and lifeless interpretation. Phrases need to be shaped expressively to reflect the

intentions of the composer. In the interpretation of a phrase, it is absolutely essential that there is a strong sense of *drive* in the “building of the wave” or the forward momentum towards the climax, after which the tranquil, subsiding winding-down of the phrase follows. This results in a *tension* and *relaxation* or *release* effect. A musical phrase should never be stagnant; it should always suggest direction, energy and vitality.

In some instances, the climax of the phrase occurs close to the beginning, and in other instances, nearer the end. In most instances, however, the climax occurs towards the middle of the phrase, creating a kind of arch-effect. This melodic flow could be illustrated by using diagrams as follows:

- In the first example, the last two word phrases (or the last musical phrase) of “Happy birthday” is used. The climax of this phrase occurs close to the beginning of the phrase. (Refer to Figure II - 4-1, below.)

Hap-py birth-day dear some-one, hap-py birth-day to you

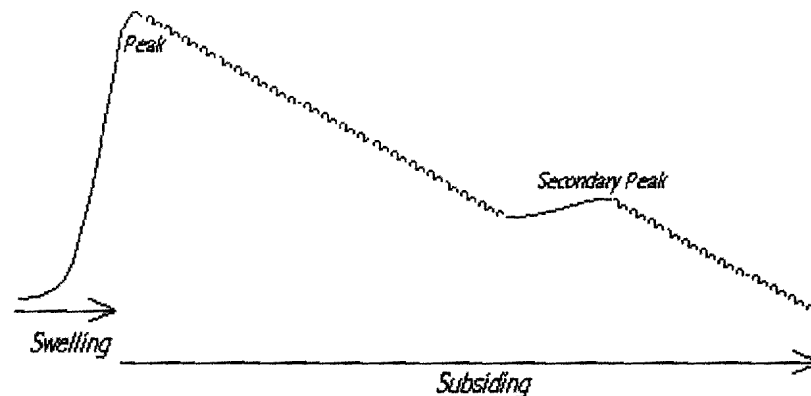


Figure II - 4-1 Climax close to the beginning of the phrase: “Happy Birthday”

- In the song, “Silent Night”, two short word phrases are combined to form one musical phrase. The climax of the phrase occurs, more or less, in the middle of the musical phrase. (Refer to Figure II - 4-2, below.)

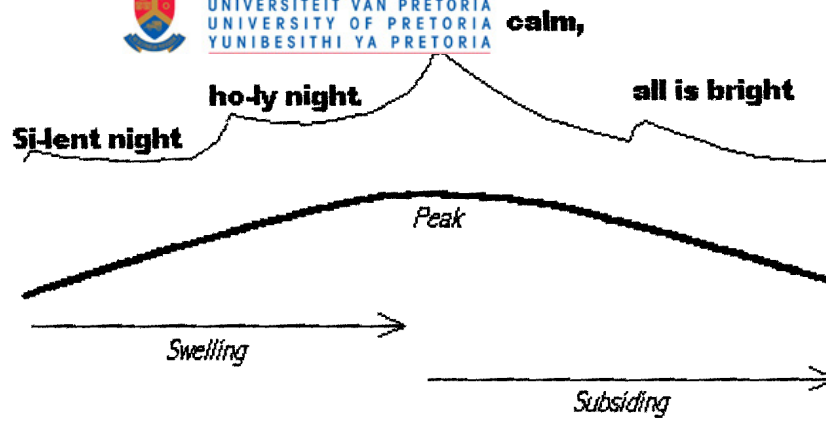


Figure II - 4-2 Climax more or less in the middle of the phrase: "Silent Night"

- In the third example, an extract from the South African National Anthem, the climax of the phrase occurs near the end of the phrase. Two short word phrases have been combined to form one musical phrase. (Refer to Figure II - 4-3, below.)

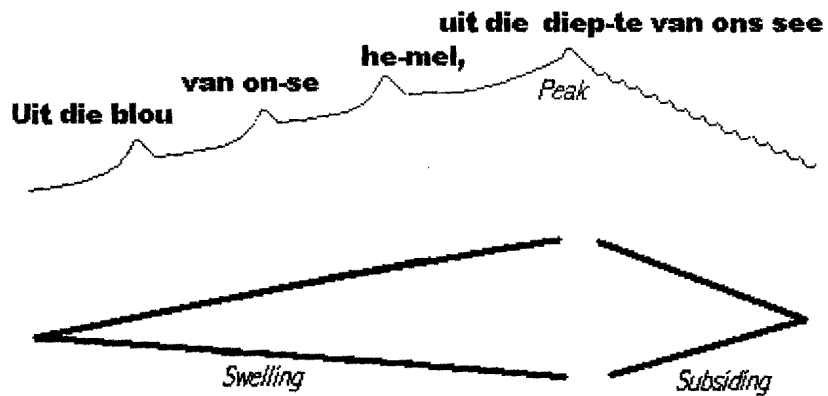
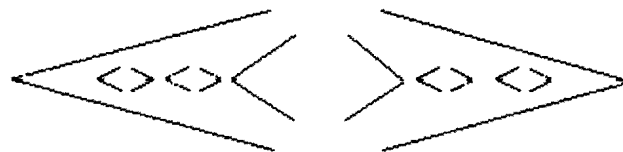


Figure II - 4-3 Climax near the end of the phrase: "South African National Anthem"

Donald Neuen (1992:16) states that:

Every note, every syllable, every word, will function within a crescendo or within a diminuendo. In real music making, there never will be the sterile, stagnant, boring sound of equally emphasised consecutive pitches. Within a long crescendo/diminuendo, there may be several lesser ones:



There should never be static plateaux of sameness, unless in exceptional instances where the word text specifically demands this.

Choristers need to know exactly where to begin singing louder and where to end off a *decrescendo* in order to create smooth, effective *crescendos* and *diminuendos*. Avoid undue vocal strain by aiming for too loud passages with young voices. To create successful dynamic contrasts with choristers in the Foundation and Intermediate phases, remember that dynamics are relative. It is better to compensate on the “*piano*” side of the vocal dynamic spectrum and to aim for softer singing than to attempt to force louder singing on the “*forte*” side of the vocal dynamic spectrum.

In the singing of a *diminuendo* (*decrescendo*), it is important to ensure that choristers maintain a good singing posture and support the tone to the end, in order to avoid “flattening”. Tell the choristers to “energise” the tone right up to the end. (Refer to **Part II**, 4.2 “Intonation”, above.)

4.4.4 Rhythm and Pitch

The choral conductor needs to remain faithful to the score and constantly has to listen for incorrect rhythm and pitch. One has to determine exactly where the mistake was. This has to be corrected immediately – it does not set itself right. Rhythmic and pitch accuracy may be improved by initially rehearsing a fast work at a slower tempo. Difficult or unusual intervals may be played on the piano, keyboard or melodica, with the choristers responding. Ensure that all choristers perform rhythmic passages accurately. Long notes must be held for their full value.

It often helps to lead the group in echo clapping the rhythm of a passage that presents a problem. Proceed by having the choristers speaking the text in the correct rhythm. This may improve both diction and rhythm.

It is essential for the choral educator to be as patient as Job with all the mistakes and fumbles. The secret is to find the most appropriate remedial devices and to persist until success is attained. Success needs to be liberally rewarded.

4.5 Polishing and Interpreting Music

Once the music has been learnt by the choristers, conductors continually seek ways to shape the performance with a sense of style appropriate to the cultural and historical aspects of the work. More important than anything else, however, are the attempts to find that which is beyond the printed notes on the page, namely the expressive intent of the music – to let the composer speak. We have to compare our pre-determined aural soundscape, aural template, or aural ideal, with the actual sound the choir is producing and provide critical feedback.

Facial expression and body attitude/language can suggest excitement or boredom about the music. It is important to convey the poetic aspects of the text to the listener in an interesting and distinctive way. Dead-pan, expressionless faces and passive body attitudes render a dull performance. Choristers need constant reminders about the importance of singing with vitally animated faces and performing the selection with complete emotional involvement both with regard to the musical and textual qualities. Under no circumstances may we as performers bore the audience. The drama within the music has to be conveyed to the audience. The face, and especially the eyes, are very important in conveying thoughts and feelings.

Misaligned vowels and poor articulation of consonants will result in a dreary and poor performance. When we sing we have to form the vowels uniquely. This is not necessarily the case when we speak. Should we have a casual approach to vowel formation when we sing, the tone will be anaemic and dull, and diction will be poor. This will result in a boring delivery of the text and the audience will not be able to understand the meaning of the text. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.8 “Italian Basic Pure Vowels, Uniform Vowel Colours and Vowel Modification” and 6.9 “Diction”.)

Do not start singing a song right from the beginning every time it is to be repeated in rehearsal. **Trouble spots** need to be isolated and dealt with first. We need to discriminate between sections of the work that are difficult and those that are less difficult or easy to grasp.

Refuse to accept a **poor, dreary performance in rehearsal**. We need to tell the choristers when their work is not acceptable. At times this may mean a reprimand. Most of the time, however, one should coax, cajole, charm and inspire them to reach for greater heights. Either way, one needs to demonstrate that standards matter. It is a tremendous challenge to help the children to continually find new meaning in the music and to remain involved each time they rehearse or perform the song.

Teach the choristers to sing in a manner that will enchant their audience. They need to be reminded that even in rehearsal their performance has to be energetic and alive; the way the choir sings in rehearsal is the way they will sing in performance. The singing must be filled with abundant spirit and vitality. Selections that are sustained and in a slow tempo can often sound very dreary when children sing them. In this type of song it is imperative to stress the need to energise the singing and to maintain the energy level so as not to bore the audience. The choristers need to be mentally focussed and physically vibrant.

Physical movement should be encouraged. If the choristers stand like pillars, the music they make will be drab and lifeless. Facial expression and gentle movements of the head will add to the vitality of the music. This is not something that one can add at a later stage. Should the choir in rehearsal consistently sing with **facial and physical involvement** to reflect the text and mood of the music, that is the energised and captivating rendering of the work one can most likely expect to ultimately obtain from them in the performance.

It is essential to perform a selection in the appropriate **tempo**, otherwise the mood of the music can be detrimentally affected. The conductor needs to compare his/her own tempo concept with the suggested metronome marking. The metronome marking does not have to be adhered to exactly, but it certainly gives one a very good idea of the composer's (or arranger's) intent.

A fine line exists between learning a song thoroughly and **over-rehearsing** it. Should you find that the song is now at a standstill because of over-familiarity and has thus become stale, then it may prove to be a good idea to put it on hold for a while, even if it is only for one or two rehearsals. When the song is then re-introduced, one may find that there is a renewed focus and vitality.

Exaggeration can be an excellent teaching tool to improve dynamic expression. Ask the children to exaggerate a *crescendo* (or *diminuendo*) to the absolute extreme. It then becomes an easy task to chisel it down to the desired effect.

Children in the primary school often want to sing too loudly. They have to be reminded that they may never sing so loudly that it no longer sounds beautiful. We have to teach them restraint; to learn to **sing with intensity, but without yelling**.

Messa di voce refers to the technique of creating a *crescendo* and *diminuendo* on a single sustained tone; i.e. swelling and diminishing on a sustained tone. The musical expressiveness of a song/work can be greatly enhanced if this technique is mastered and applied with discretion.

The key to the magic and wonder of music making lies in artistic expression. The choristers need to experience what it is like to be true musicians. They will only wholeheartedly dedicate themselves to a choral programme if they feel successful and experience a high level of accomplishment and artistic development.

4.6 Memorising the Music

The conductor should be able to conduct a fair amount of a song/work from memory. This prevents him/her from having to constantly refer to the score and will ensure greater eye-contact with the choristers. Children, especially, rely heavily on the conductor's eye-contact and facial expressions.

It is advisable for the choristers to memorise the repertoire that is to be performed. This may, however, exclude a very difficult, extended work. The main advantage of memorising, is that the choristers are free to maintain eye-contact with the conductor.

4.7 Mouthing the Words

The choral teacher should refrain from singing while conducting as this will, for one thing, diminish the ability to listen to the choir's performance. Another consideration for not singing with the choristers, is that the conductor's voice will not blend with the children's choral sound. The result is that the listener hears it as a separate sound source, which distorts the choral tone colour and may prove to be disturbing. The occasional soundless mouthing of words, however, is often necessary in the singing of memorised selections, especially when working with children.

4.8 Balance and Blend

Balance between different vocal sections in the choir is important. Balance refers to the equalisation of dynamic weight of sound between vocal sections. One section should only be louder than another because the music demands it at that particular moment. In an attempt to achieve satisfactory balance, the number of singers on each vocal part may have to be changed and one may have to redistribute some of the voices and place them with the weaker group. (Refer to **Part II**, 3.9 "Seating/Standing Arrangement and Placement of Voices". Also refer to **Part I**, 3.6 "Choral Unit Standard: Balance & Blend".)

In the Foundation phase "balance" between voice parts is not really applicable because they sing in unison. Balance is, however, relevant as regards the "balance" between the choral singing and the accompaniment.

"Blend", on the other hand, is a concept that has to be explained to all choristers at all levels. In order to produce a beautiful choral quality, all the voices should blend in well with the rest of the ensemble and no one's voice may stand out. Remind choristers that they are singing too loudly if they cannot hear their neighbour singing, which would show a lack of ensemble awareness. Some of the young choristers are inclined to think that singing in the choir involves showing off their singing capabilities and they try to sing as loudly as possible and with a forced tone. They should be told that the choir is a team and that no voice should stand out; they must never sing louder than that which is beautiful.

Uniformity in vowel production is essential to a good blend. Demonstrate to the choristers exactly how you want the vowel to be pronounced and ensure that vowels are produced identically throughout the choir. Vowel modification in the upper range needs careful attention in order to ensure good choral blend in the upper range. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.8 “Italian Basic Pure Vowels, Uniform Vowel Colours and Vowel Modification”.)

4.9 Historical/Stylistic Guidelines and Cultural Context

In the Foundation phase the choristers are introduced to the names of at least two master composers and they listen to an extract from a work or a song by each of them. (Refer to **Part I**, 3.7 “Choral Unit Standard: Stylistic Authenticity”, “Range Statements and Assessment Criteria” number 1 for Foundation phase.) If this is performed by a good children’s choir, live or on a recording, the choristers have the opportunity to identify more keenly with the choral sound. There are numerous recordings of excellent children’s choirs available.

The text should be explained and discussed with the children. If the text is in a foreign or a local language that the children do not understand, one should give them a translation. Take special care and ensure that the pronunciation is correct. (Refer to **Part II**, 2.5 “Selecting Appropriate Repertoire”, and 7.8 “Compiling a Programme”.) Any distinctive cultural background information that may prove to be relevant and interesting to the age group will help to make the choristers’ aware and sow the seeds of an elementary understanding of other cultures’ musical heritage. (Refer to **Part II**, 1.1.2 “Non-Musical Benefits” of choral singing.) Apart from listening to other choirs performing, the choir could, obviously, also *sing* a song by a master composer. Songs from various South African language groups should also be attempted.

In the Intermediate phase the choristers must know the names of at least four master composers and listen to (or sing) an extract from a work or a complete song by each of them. (Refer to **Part I**, 3.7 “Choral Unit Standard: Stylistic Authenticity”, “Range Statements and Assessment Criteria” number 1, Intermediate phase.) The choristers are given short historical background information to the song/work that they are learning or listening to. This helps to put the material presented into a historical context. Choristers are guided into classifying musical

historical periods with one or two representative composer(s) in each. The following is an example of the basic information that can be provided:

- Baroque period, approximately 1600-1750. The harpsichord was a very popular keyboard instrument of this period. The music is highly ornate with turns and trills decorating the melody. The most important composers of the Baroque period are Bach and Handel.
- Classical period, approximately 1750-1820. The piano gradually replaced the harpsichord. The music has a definite and distinct formal structure and the style is delicate, elegant and formal. The most important composers are Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.
- The Romantic period encompasses the 19th century. There is a rebellion against the emphasis on form, which was characteristic of the Classical period. Composers express intense, uninhibited and individual ideas and emotions in their music. The music is very expressive and appeals strongly to the listener's imagination. Choral music thrived in the Romantic period. Some of the most important composers of the Romantic period are Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms.
- Twentieth-Century music is characterised by an extremely wide diversity of styles and has a variety of types of new choral music. Art music is reflected by a more dissonant (in some cases extremely dissonant) and fragmented style. To accommodate the variety of innovative choral techniques, new notational devices are used. Many composers utilise popular music as a means of serious expression. There is a large number of composers who write choral music specifically for children's choirs, with special consideration to the limitations of the child's voice regarding vocal technique, range and tessitura and dynamics.

The choir interprets the music in a distinctive way so that it represents the composer's intentions and the performance practice at the time it was written. To achieve stylistic accuracy, differences in style between historical periods, nationalities and genres must be taken into account.

The following points are some which need to be considered for stylistic authenticity:

- metre,
- stress,

- tempo,
- dynamics,
- texture,
- number of singers per part,
- desired tone quality,
- ornamentation, and
- phrasing.

Music is a mirror of life within a specific culture. Cultural context information advances an interest in, and understanding of, other cultures. The choristers are informed about the distinguishing characteristics of cultures and their choral tradition, e.g. Western, African and Indian within the South African milieu. Through discussion, listening and performance, the choristers develop an understanding of the similarities and differences between choral styles.

Chapter 5

DEVELOPING CONDUCTING SKILLS

5.1 Body Posture of the Conductor

One's conducting style is closely linked to one's personality. It is essential to practise conducting in front of a mirror (preferably full-length) to assess posture and facial expressions. The conductor has to stand tall and proud, without any tension in the neck, shoulders, and chest area. The tone quality of the choir will be detrimentally influenced by tension in the conductor's body. It is absolutely essential that the conductor assumes an exemplary, correct body posture, because the choristers will mimic (mirror) what they see. The correct basic posture of a conductor is exactly that which we want to inculcate in the choristers themselves. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.3 "Correct Singing Posture".)

When standing in front of the choir to conduct, one must convey an attitude of authority, confidence and relaxed, but focused, attention. This does not, by any means, suggest an *intimidating* demeanour, but rather, conveying the message of being in control and inviting the choristers to participate.

In Figure II - 5-1a, below, the elbows are drawn in too close to the body. This stance is not conducive to communicating the desired energy, vitality and concentration required from the choristers. It does not command attention. Freedom of movement is inhibited, and the movements tend to become too horizontal, with the result that the hands are then inclined to move out to the sides too much. Inexperienced conductors are more inclined to not hold the arms up sufficiently.



Figure II - 5-1a Elbows too close to the body

In Figure II - 5-1b, below, the elbows are raised excessively high. The stance looks extremely awkward and uncomfortable and would cause conducting movements to conceal facial expressions. The shoulders are not relaxed and both the conductor and the choristers will be too tense, because, as has previously been stated, the choristers will mirror the stance of the conductor. Nervousness may cause a conductor to conduct “too high”.

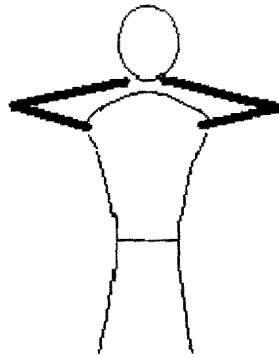


Figure II - 5-1b Elbows raised excessively high

In Figure II - 5-1c, below, the shoulders are relaxed and the elbows are raised slightly sideways, below shoulder height. The hands should be well away from the body, and the upper- and forearms form an angle of approximately 90 degrees at the elbows, as seen from above. (The angle is more acute in the frontal view of the figure below.)

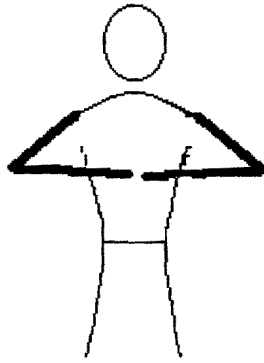


Figure II – 5-1c Shoulders relaxed and elbows raised slightly sideways

The palms of the hands should be facing down with the fingers slightly curved, relaxed and touching. The thumb is slightly separated from the index finger. The hands should be held at chest level, about two to three times the width of a hand away from the body. The exact distance will be dependent on the height of each individual person. The wrist should be more or less set (but not rigid) so as not to flap up and down.

5.2 Clear Conducting Gestures

The conductor's task is to interpret the music for the choristers. The skill of conducting is developed throughout one's career. Choral educators need to constantly modify their skill and technique in order to improve. One should try to attend as many choir-conducting workshops and lectures as possible and to read extensively. In due course, the conducting skill will improve and one's efforts will be rewarded.

Conducting is a potent non-verbal form of quick and efficient communication. The conductor transmits the vitality and mood of the music to the choristers through his/her body stance, facial expressions and hand gestures. Clear conducting gestures save time in rehearsal and improve the musical interpretation of the selection. Try to make musical interpretative corrections via your conducting gestures first; resort to verbal instructions only if a correct conducting gesture fails. The choral educator uses both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication in rehearsals. Verbosity should be avoided at all costs. Give short, clear and concise instructions. One should strive towards "less talk and more music".

Gestures should be descriptive of the music without any ineffectual, ungainly or distracting mannerisms. One of the ways one could improve conducting is to videotape oneself while conducting in rehearsal. Watching the tape a few times will quickly point to the areas that need to be improved.

Clarity and expressiveness are the cornerstones of effective conducting. The conductor makes use of facial expressions as well as head, hand and body motions to express the nuances within the music or to emphasise a point. If the conducting movements/gestures do not communicate the conductor's expressive interpretation of the music, then they should either be modified or discarded; the conducting movements should not be extraneous or distracting.

Should the choristers not be singing a particular passage well, one needs to analyse one's conducting gestures to determine if one is showing the choristers exactly what is required. In fact, one should assume that all errors the choir makes, or problems they have regarding the interpretation of the work, stem from obscure, ineffective or confusing conducting gestures. Obviously not all errors are the conductor's fault, but certainly *most* are.

5.3 Conducting with/without a Baton

It has become common practice for the choral conductor to conduct without a baton. Without the baton, both hands and ten fingers are available. The hand and fingers are far better capable of interpreting and expressing the emotion, articulation and nuances within the music than a baton. The choral conductor's close proximity to the choir results in a more intimate rapport and a closer and more personal bond with the choristers. This intimate rapport is not possible (to the same degree) with a conductor and a full orchestra. The choir usually memorises the selection and is therefore able to follow the conductor more closely, with the result that the finer nuances of which the hand is capable of, are an added advantage. Helmuth Rilling maintains that:

the empty hand is apt to function as a more natural human connection to the voice and can show specific vocal nuances, such as consonant endings and vowel shapes. It can assist in shaping balance and emphasizing certain aspects of language (Hansen 1997: 56).

The use of a baton is necessary, however, should an orchestra be accompanying the choir. The members of the orchestra need to be able to follow the movements of the conductor out of the corner of their eyes, because they are playing from the score. Furthermore, some of the orchestra players are simply seated too far from the conductor to see the movements of the hand clearly enough. The choir members may also be standing further away from the conductor than is normally the case.

The baton is an apparatus which came into use as the size of the orchestra was increased. Similarly, a large massed choir, with some of the choristers standing far away from the conductor, may also find the use of a baton beneficial.

5.4 Standard/Basic Conducting Patterns

The choral teacher has to master and be completely familiar and comfortable with conducting in various basic, internationally accepted, beat patterns. These standard conducting patterns should be familiar to the extent that they become an automatic, habitual response. The beat must be well defined and within the range of the expressive qualities of the work. The beat pattern is executed in the area between the waist and the shoulders. The wrist must not “flap around” but should be firm; not rigid. Floppiness of the wrist is not only inelegant and distracting, but also lessens precision in the conducting movements.

The first beat in a bar is called the *downbeat* and represents the primary accent. This is always a strong, vertically downward movement, in front and in the middle of the body. The other beats are to the right and/or left of this centre line. The secondary accent or strong beat, e.g. beat 3 in quadruple metre (4/4) or beat 4 in slow compound duple (6/8) metre, is executed to the outside (i.e. to the right of the centre line). The point in the pattern where the beat occurs is called the throb or *ictus*. The beat pattern is conducted with the right hand. The patterns for both hands, however, are illustrated so as to assist the teacher in using mirror image when teaching these patterns to the choristers. The “stick-figure” patterns for metre in 2, 3 and 4 are illustrated to simplify the teaching of these patterns to the choristers. (Refer to **Part II**, 5.11 “Getting Children to Watch the Conductor”.)

The standard conducting patterns in common metres are illustrated below:

- The **two-beat pattern** involves a strong downbeat, which is followed by a rebound on 2. It is used for music in 2/4, 2/2, moderate or fast moving 6/8 and fast moving 4/8.

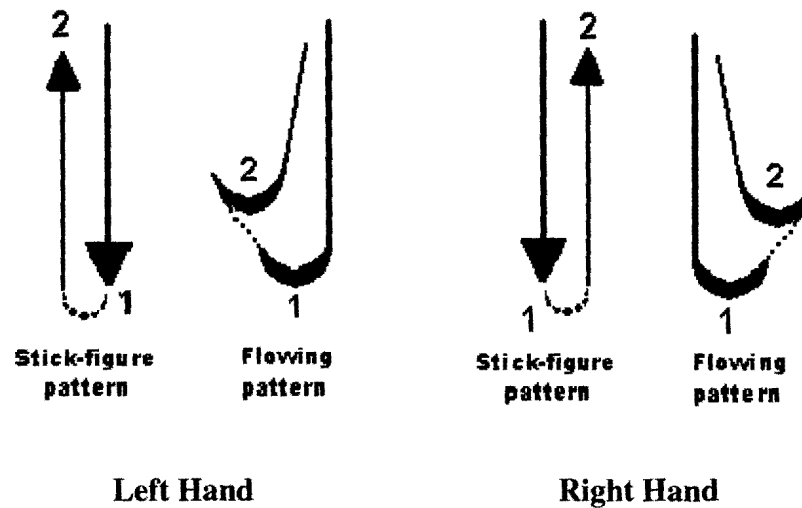


Figure II - 5-2 Conducting a two-beat pattern (both hands)

- The **three-beat pattern** involves a strong downward beat, followed by a weaker beat to the right and a final, light upbeat. (These movements refer specifically to the right hand.) It is used for 3/4, 3/2, 9/8 and *adagio* 3/8 time.

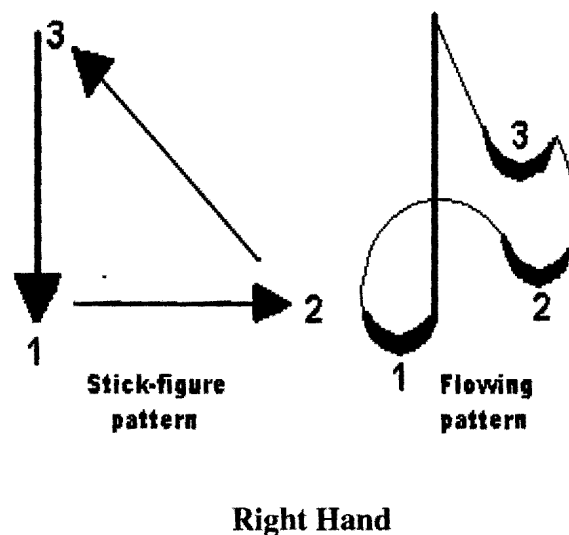
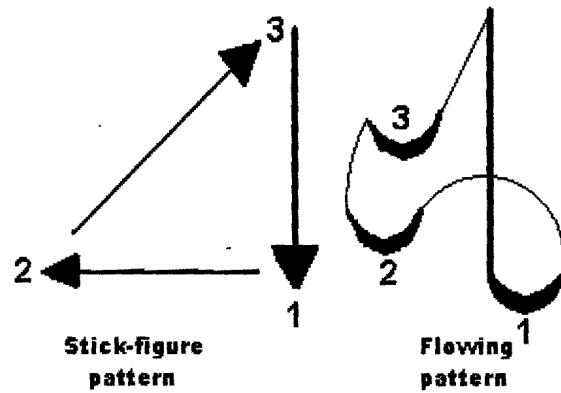


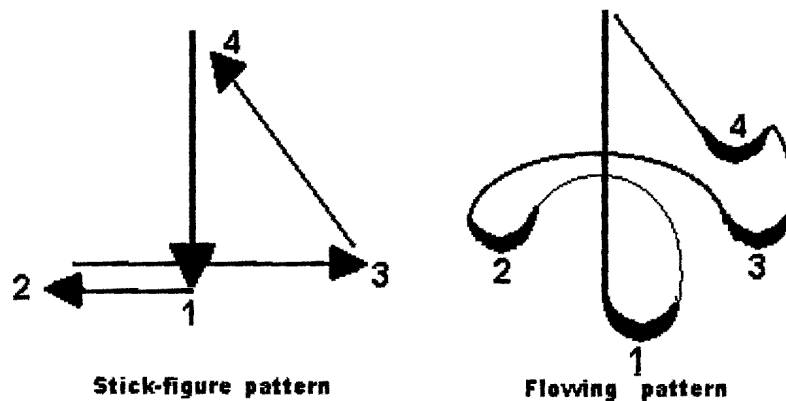
Figure II - 5-3a Conducting a three-beat pattern (right hand)



Left Hand

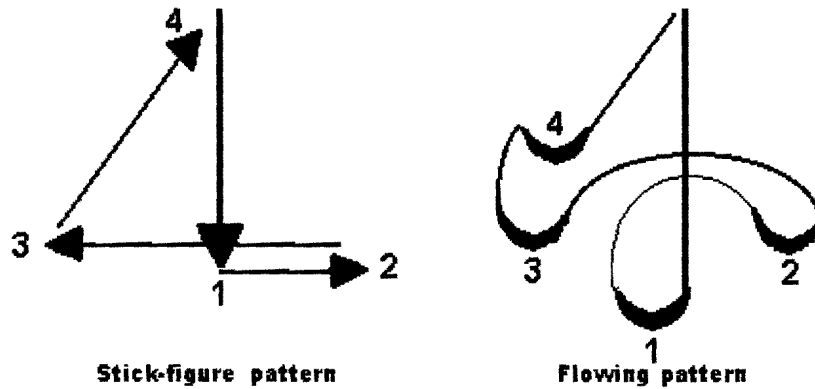
Figure II - 5-3b Conducting a three-beat pattern (left hand)

- The **four-beat pattern** is the most commonly used and is often designated by a **C** for “common time”. Beat 1 is a strong downward movement, beat 2 is a weaker movement to the left, beat 3 crosses the mid-point to the right, and 4 is up, to the left, returning to the position where beat 1 started. (These movements refer specifically to the right hand.) The four-beat pattern is used for 4/4, 4/8, 12/8 and *adagio* 2/2 metre.



Right Hand

Figure II - 5-4a Conducting a four-beat pattern (right hand)



Left Hand

Figure II - 5-4b Conducting a four-beat pattern (left hand)

- The **five-beat pattern** is an a-symmetrical metre and breaks down into either (3+2) or (2+3), depending on the general structure of the music in a bar. In the first example (3+2), the secondary strong beat occurs on 4, whereas in the second example (2+3), the secondary strong beat occurs on 3. The secondary strong beat is executed to the outside, i.e. to the right of the centre line. (These movements refer specifically to the right hand.)

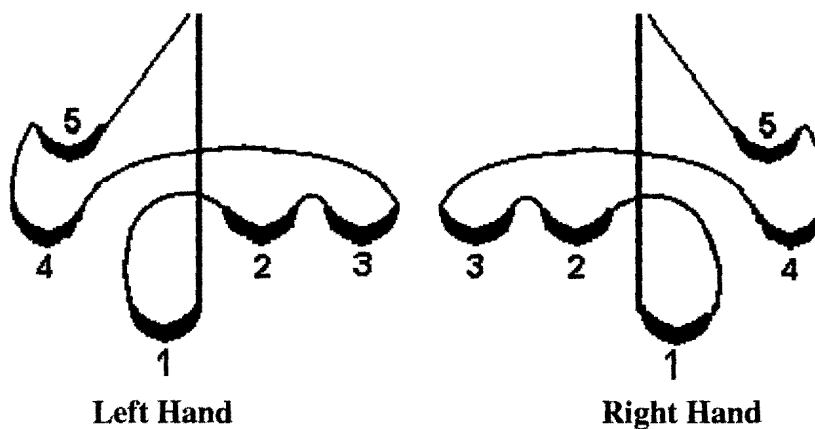


Figure II - 5-5a Conducting a five-beat pattern (3+2) (both hands)

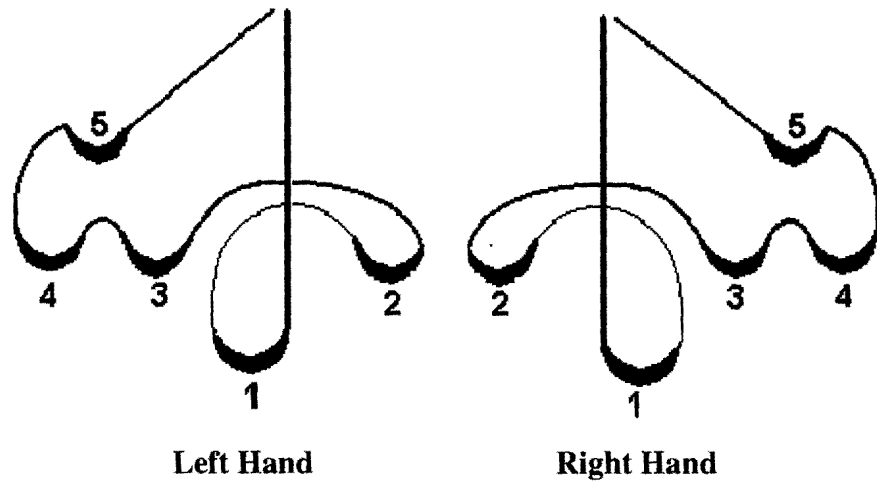


Figure II - 5-5b Conducting a five-beat pattern (2+3) (both hands)

- **Compound duple** (6/8 or 6/4) time is usually conducted in two, unless the music is in a slow tempo, in which case the pattern below should be used. It consists of a strong downward movement; two small movements to the left on beats 2 and 3; a stronger and longer movement to the right (past the mid-point) on the secondary strong beat of 4; a short movement to the right for beat 5; and a final upbeat for 6. (These movements refer specifically to the right hand.)

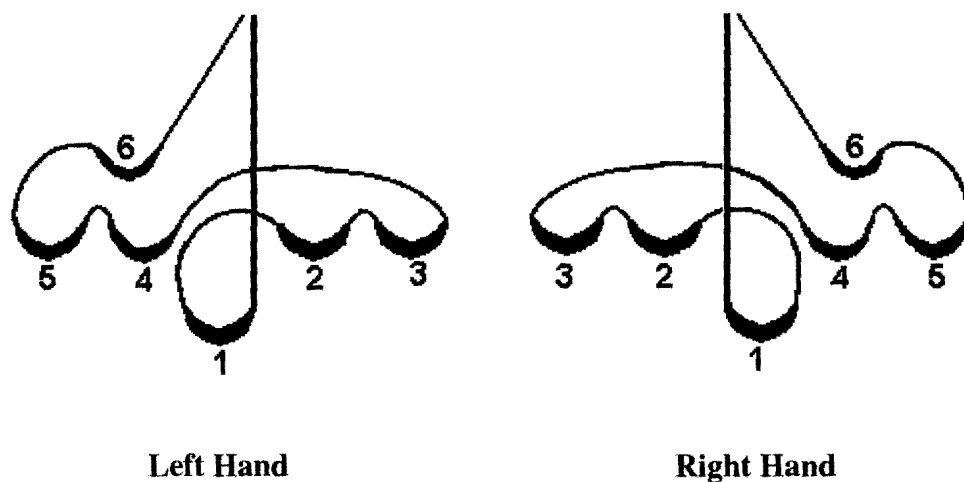
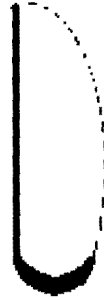


Figure II - 5-6 Conducting a six-beat pattern (both hands)

- Occasionally, a fast duple (2/4) or triple (3/4 or 3/8) metre only requires **one beat** per bar. The beat pattern is then as illustrated below. The pattern is conducted as an elliptical circle. However, should the bars be grouped in fours (as is usually the case), it may prove to be more satisfying to conduct one beat per bar, but using the four-beat pattern.



Right Hand

Figure II - 5-7 Conducting one beat per bar (right hand)

These standard/fundamental conducting patterns may be slightly modified to suit a personal style. They should, however, be executed so that they will not lose directional integrity and will always be clearly identifiable. The mood and style of the selection will most certainly have an effect on the movements, e.g. in a *legato* style, continuous, flowing movements are required, whereas a *staccato* style requires crisp, detached movements. The conductor may deviate from the basic pattern for some special interpretative effect, but should return to the basic pattern after a bar or two.

On the last note or chord, at the conclusion of a section, or the selection itself, the beat-pattern should cease. It is essential, however, that the conductor's hands do not come to a complete standstill in mid-air whilst the final note/chord is still sounding. A gesture that suggests continuous movement should be used, e.g. an expanded horizontal movement or a longer sustained vertical upward gesture. By using an upward/outward movement of the hands, the release is executed at a height that is clearly visible to all.

5.5 Height Level and Size of the Conducting Movements

The height of the conducting movements is, generally, between the shoulders and the waist. If the conducting movements are too high, the choristers' breathing will be influenced detrimentally in that they will resort to shallow, clavicular breathing. It will also cause tenseness in the shoulders and throat area.

There are several aspects and considerations affecting the size of conducting movements. One of these is the **size of the choir**. If it is a large choir, the movements need to be bigger so as to be visible to all the choristers and *visa versa*; a small choir only requires small movements because they are standing nearer the conductor.

The **tempo** of a selection also influences the size of the conducting patterns. The faster the tempo, the smaller the movements will be. For fast tempi the movements will be crisp, clean and bouncing with less upper-arm movement. In a slow tempo, the movements will generally be larger and more flowing (as if conducting under water).

Dynamics also have a substantial effect on the size and weight of the conducting movements. Generally speaking, the movements become larger and broader when the music is loud, and relatively smaller when the music is soft. Loud dynamics in the music can further be assisted by conducting with greater strength and muscular tension, by holding the chin further down, and moving the left hand up and outward with the palm facing up. Should an extra strong sound be required, the use of two clenched fists (to indicate intensity) may even be employed. This, however, should be used with extreme discretion.

Softness in the music can also be promoted and reflected by holding the head up and relaxed (to suggest lightness) with the left palm facing *down*. The beat will be conducted further away from the body. An exception to this would be when a *diminuendo* or hushed effect is indicated, in which case the hands will move back towards the body with the elbows hugging the torso. It is essential to conduct soft passages with lightness and small movements but at the same time to increase the vitality of the conducting movements to assist the choristers in energising and supporting their singing. Soft passages require greater support in order to

prevent a colourless, dull and boring result, which can lead to flattening. (Refer to **Part II**, 4.2 “Intonation”.)

5.6 Using the Left Hand for Cueing and Interpretation

The left hand is used for a variety of expressive purposes. These include shaping and moulding of dynamics, suggesting accents, and indicating various nuances and fluidity of phrases. The left hand should not, as a general rule, duplicate the beat pattern of the right hand. Beginner conductors, however, initially use both hands to learn the conducting movements.

To indicate a louder dynamic, it was previously stated that the right hand should increase the size of the beat pattern; and vice versa, the size of the beat pattern should be decreased to indicate a softer dynamic. (Refer to **Part II**, 5.4 “Standard/Basic Conducting Patterns”.) The left hand, however, should be used to supplement or reinforce the dynamics. A crescendo, for instance, may be indicated by slowly lifting the left arm upward and outward with the palm up.

For conducting to be effective, it is crucial that cueing gestures always *precede* the musical event or the specific beat on which the desired response is to take place. One of the most common conducting mistakes is that the cueing gesture takes place too late. If the cueing gesture takes place *on* the beat, it is too late for the choristers to respond. The tempo of the choral work will determine how long in advance the cueing gesture should be given. The cue should include an alerting signal, which will prepare the choristers for their entry and ensure precision of attacks and the required musical interpretation. This generally involves a timely look in the direction of the appropriate vocal section (or person).

There are several effective and accepted ways to give clear cues to the choristers. Sometimes a very slight signal will suffice and at other times a more vigorous movement is required. The head may be used by nodding toward a particular vocal section (or person). The use of facial expressions (like a smile, a wink or the lifting of the eyebrows) can be very effective with subtle entrances. When the entire choir has to be cued, both hands should normally be used.

Uncertain entrances and cut-offs often occur due to the conductor failing to cue the choir effectively. In rehearsal the conducting gestures should be adjusted and practised to rectify the problem. If the choristers were at fault, point out the inaccuracy and rehearse it until the problem has been corrected.

The conductor needs to grab the attention of the choristers for an entrance with a breathing upbeat along with eye contact. A cue given with both eye contact and breath receives a much stronger response. Attacks should be cued with both the preparatory beat of the right hand *and* the left hand. These left hand cues must be prepared. The left hand should be lifted to chest height in anticipation one beat before the entry. The cue is then executed intentionally with a decisive, deliberate movement downward and slightly forward. It may facilitate the cue if the index (or middle) finger and the thumb are held together during the lifting of the hand, and released for the attack on the downward movement.

The left hand may also be employed to improve tone quality. Visual reinforcement for the use of the head voice, for instance, could be executed by poising the left hand in the air, cupped, with the palm down. This suggests a high arch in the roof of the mouth.

5.7 The Preparatory Beat

The preliminary beat that the conductor gives before the choristers start singing is called the *preparatory beat*. This prepares the singers and/or accompanist and it should set the mood and tempo of the work. The preparatory beat is also used for a new section in the music or after a *fermata* that ends in a complete break in sound.

Before giving the preparatory beat, the conductor must assume a self-confident, commanding and authoritative stance. This initial body stance should suggest a purposeful readiness to begin singing and to intensify the choristers' concentration. Stand tall and proud, with the shoulders relaxed, back and down. Extend the arms with the elbows slightly bent, and away from the body. (Refer to **Part II**, 5.1 "Body Posture of the Conductor".)

The position that the conductor assumes when s/he is ready to start conducting, with the arms raised and in position, is referred to as the *conductor's set*. It should be maintained long enough to ensure that all the choristers are giving their undivided attention. Establish rapport with the choristers through eye contact, and do not start until each and every choir member's attention is focussed on you.

Prior to executing the preparatory beat, the conductor must establish a clear idea of the mood and tempo of the music because the preparatory beat must characterise every aspect of the musical entry. Take a moment to mentally construct the mood and tempo (as well as the opening dynamic requirement) *before* the appropriate preparatory movement is executed.

The movement that is used for the preparatory beat is that which is used for the beat that immediately precedes the note on which the music starts. If, for example, a selection starts on the 1st beat in metre in 3, then the preparatory beat will be the upward movement used on the 3rd beat. Alternatively, if a selection starts on the 2nd beat in metre in 4, then the preparatory beat will be the downward movement on the 1st beat. It is important that the preparatory beat is executed with absolute clarity, decisiveness and precision. Note that the preparatory beat involves a *single* beat. It is unacceptable for the conductor to conduct a whole bar, or bars, before the music starts.

In moderate and slower tempi, the preparatory beat also gives the singers the cue to take a synchronised breath and start singing together. In faster tempi, however, the breath inhalation will have to take place *before* the preparatory beat, with the conductor inhaling and at the same time showing with the arms and hands, with a slight swooping movement, down and up.

Helmuth Rilling explains it as follows:

Every preparatory beat should contain the idea of a preparatory breath. Actually, a breath is the best upbeat. Too small a preparatory beat – and no breath – can confuse the ensemble. Prepare with a body gesture and breath which allows the ensemble to breathe with you naturally (Hansen 1997: 52).

5.8 Attacks and Releases

Problematic attacks and releases need to be isolated and carefully rehearsed. Exact pronunciation of attacks and releases should be established. Initial and final consonants need special care. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.9 “Diction”.) All choristers should be watching the conductor attentively to ensure precision of attacks and releases. (Refer to **Part I**, 3.4 “Choral Unit Standard: Diction”.) For greater precision in attacks, the choral conductor should breathe with the choristers. This breath should be taken with the mouth shaped in the form of the vowel on which they will enter. This is referred to as “vowel breathing”. The conductor thus mirrors the correct breathing for the choristers.

A tidy ending in any choral selection is important because it completes and rounds off the performance and leaves a positive impression in the listener’s mind. The movement that the conductor uses for the release should be decisive and clear so that the choristers are not confused in any way.

The final note or chord should not normally be “beat out” for the full duration. Only the first beat is given and the rest is then sustained on the rebound until *both* hands give the release signal. There are obviously many possible effective ways and signals that may be used to end off a music selection. The following procedure for the release is a mere suggestion. On the final note/chord, the first beat is conducted and the hands should then move away from the body in a continual, slow, pulling and gradual upward direction, and continue to move for the duration of the note/chord.

The upward rising movement of the hands intensifies the choristers’ focus which is essential for maintaining the pitch and support/vitality of the tone right to the end. The release signal is then executed by a small preparatory upward movement, which precedes the decisive downward movement for the release. The style, velocity, dynamics and mood of the music will determine the size of the release movement. Generally, music that is soft and subdued requires a small release movement, whereas the release for loud, dramatic music necessitates a larger movement. The size of the choir will also have an influence on the size of the release movement. To ensure greater precision in the release, the conductor forms the consonant with

the mouth. The following diagram (Figure II - 5-8a) illustrates the movement of the right hand for the release signal.

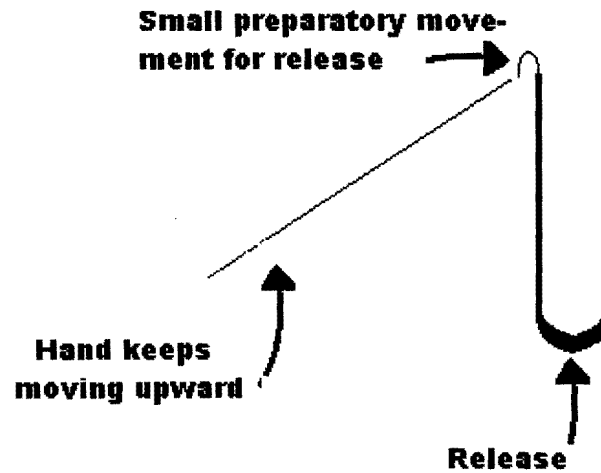


Figure II - 5-8a Release signal for a voiceless consonant (right hand)

The release action, above, is suitable for words that end with a vowel or a voiceless (unpitched) consonant, e.g. *p, h, s, k* and *t*. (Refer to **Part II**, 6.9.4 "Voiceless and Voiced Consonants".) A slightly altered release action is required for words ending with a voiced (pitched/tuned) consonant, e.g. *m, n, ng, l, r* and *z*. This involves the thumb and forefinger-tip touching momentarily at the conclusion of the rebound movement, which will signal the termination of sound altogether. This release action is illustrated in Figure II - 5-8b, below. The rebound movement must be slower than would be the case for a voiceless consonant.

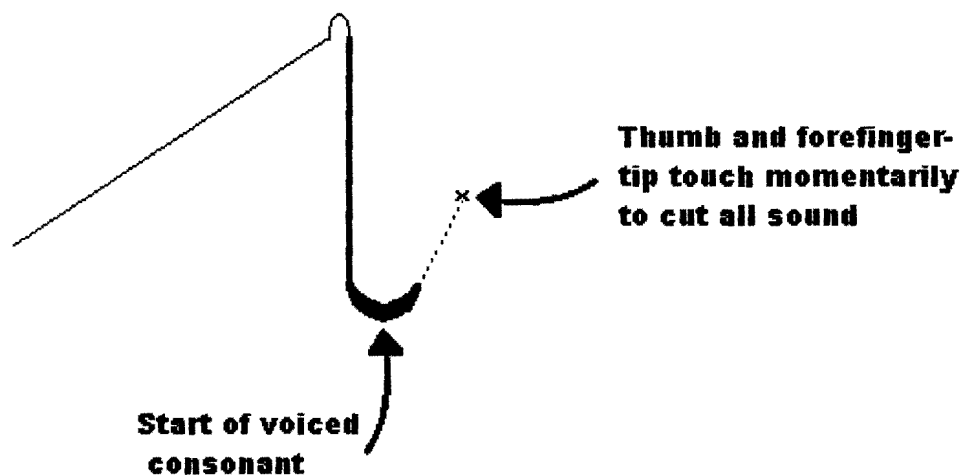


Figure II - 5-8b Release signal for a voiced consonant (right hand)

5.9 Rehearsal and Performance Gestures Differ

In performance, dramatic and excessive gesticulation is undesirable. The conducting gestures should rather be expressive, controlled and concise. Smaller movements that are executed with vitality, compel the choristers to watch the conductor more intently. It is important to remember that the conducting gestures are there for the choristers' benefit and not for the audience. The conductor's movements should not distract the audience's attention from the beauty of the music itself. The choristers should be able to interpret the gestures and facial expressions of the conductor and these should be consistent to ensure an optimum response from the children.

In performance, the conductor should be standing comfortably and remain in the same place and not walk around in front of the choir. (In African choirs the conductor often starts off the performance by standing in front of the choir and then joins the choristers by moving away to the side during the performance. Towards the end the conductor then moves back to the front of the choir to conclude the selection.) The distance from the front row of the choir should be sufficient for the conductor to see all the choristers at either end of the rows. The conducting movements/gestures in performance should only be executed by the upper body. From the waist down, the body should generally be kept still. The knees may not bob up and down to the beat of the music, and there should be no foot tapping either.

5.10 *Fermatas*

A *fermata* indicates a pause (or hold) on a specific note (or chord) for an indefinite length of time. It is used to intensify or increase the emotional qualities of the music and it adds suspense. The exact duration of a *fermata* will depend on the tempo, style and inherent dramatic qualities of the music. The ability to determine exactly how long to hold the *fermata* requires musical maturity and experience. Inexperienced conductors are, generally, hesitant to hold it long enough.

The suspension of the steady beat pattern and its resumption after the *fermata*, requires clear conducting gestures if precision in performance is to be attained. A slight *ritardando* usually

precedes a *fermata*. This requires a slowing down of the conducting pattern, which may be implemented by enlarging the beat pattern slightly. This will gain the attention of the choristers and prepare them for the *fermata*.

While holding the *fermata*, the conductor's hands should not remain stationary in mid-air, but rather continue to move slowly upward and outward (until the release) because the musical tone moves and is not static. This will assist the choristers in maintaining an even, steady flow of breath to support the tone.

The release for the *fermata* may be handled in two different ways, depending on the interpretative effect that follows. If there is to be a complete break in sound after the *fermata*, a release signal is given, which flows into the preparatory beat (accompanied by a breath inhalation) for the next note. (Refer to **Part II**, 5.7 “The Preparatory Beat”, and 5.8 “Attacks and Releases”.)

If the tone is to be carried over to the succeeding phrase without a break in the flow of breath, then one could treat the *fermata* as a kind of *ritardando* on that particular note or chord. The beat pattern is kept intact, but with a longer and slower “pull” on the *fermata*. After the *fermata*, the conductor merely proceeds with the beat pattern.

5.11 Getting Children to Watch the Conductor

It is a difficult and ongoing task to get the choristers to constantly watch the conductor. The skill of understanding the conductor has to be taught to the children. The most commonly used conducting gestures need to be explained:

- The beat pattern is conducted with the conductor's right hand;
- Louder dynamics are indicated by the use of larger movements and softer dynamics by smaller movements; and
- Release signals.

Teach the basic conducting patterns for metre in two, three and four to the choristers. If they know the patterns, they will understand better and will therefore be better able to follow. Tell