

An Approach to Effective and Efficient Choral Warm-ups

by Drew Collins

Some General Thoughts

- It's best to start each warm-up in a mid-range key (usually D-major) and move gradually outward.
- Start with a warm-up that has a narrow range (no more than a 5th, preferably a 3rd).
- Each of the first 1-2 warm-ups should begin with an ascending pattern. The second or third warm-up, however, should be a descending pattern to encourage a relaxed throat.
- Up by half-steps, down by whole steps (although, once your singers get used to that, going up by whole-steps can have an energizing effect).
- A *cappella* or accompanied without melody are better options than playing along with the singers. This helps strengthen your singers' independence and confidence.
- Make warm-ups a musical experience so that your singers practice musicality while they warm-up. Incorporate dynamics, vowel purity and articulation into your warm-ups.
- When using the piano, use the quiet-pedal (*una corda*) if at all possible.
- Warm-ups should take 5-10 minutes (maybe 15).
- Use your own warm-ups, the suggested warm-ups on the attached page, or a colleague's. Every choir is different, as is every conductor; always assess afterward if the warm-up served its purpose for your singers. Do not waste your singers' time by doing two different vocalises that accomplish the same goal.
- Do not waste singers' time with a vocalise that does not accomplish a specific goal such as teaching articulation, activating the breath, *etc.* "Getting the voices warmed up" is not good enough.
- When possible, choose a warm-up that can serve multiple purposes.
- Determine what vocalise types to use based on (1) what pieces will be rehearsed during the rehearsal, (2) any weaknesses displayed by the ensemble during the previous rehearsal, and (3) any goals you might have for your singers' vocal development.

Pre- Warm-up

Draw the singers in psychologically; that is, let them get their minds focused. They will also, of course, be preparing their bodies and voices for the impending rehearsal.

Physical - There are a lot of possibilities: stretching, back rubs, touching toes, shake out the arms, rolling the shoulders, head to one side, *etc.*

Diction - Focus on consonants (vowels should be discussed and corrected throughout the warm-up sequence).

Puppy Whimpers - Particularly effective and important for choirs with changing voices, this gets the head voice warmed-up first.

Part I - Warming Up the Vocal Instrument

Get your singers' voices limbered up using this sequence.

JGES - I have three favorites, but you can make up your own. A fifth is probably the widest range you will want to use; a third is better.

Breath - While there are musical exercises you can use, sometimes an unpitched exercise is better (hissing, "sh," panting, *etc.*).

Tone (brilliance) - Most warm-ups in this category use consonants such as "N", "NG," "D," "B," or "V" followed by an "ee" vowel in order to get the sound forward.

Tone (warmth/depth) - Humming and syllables starting with an “M” sound. Vowel sounds such as “oo” and “oh” are best.

Range - Perhaps the most important type of vocalise: warming up the upper parts of the range can positively affect tuning, dynamic control, *et al.* Many warm-ups can exercise the upper range, but I have included a couple that are particularly effective. Depending on the highest note they will be singing that day, you may opt to do another range vocalise later in the warm-up sequence, or right before the piece with the high note/tessitura.

Flexibility - A particularly important type of vocalise to use if you will be rehearsing a piece that requires vocal agility. Otherwise, this warm-up type may be omitted from your sequence. Another effective flexibility warm-up is #7 from Jennings’ book “Sing Legato.”

Sighs - Singers should (1) start at *almost* the top of their range; (2) glissando slowly downward; (3) use an “Ah” vowel; (4) end at *almost* their lowest note. Let them know it’s okay if their voice “cracks” or “breaks,” and that the point of this exercise is to bridge the gap between the upper (falsetto / head voice) and lower (chest voice) registers. Some conductors intersperse sighs throughout their warm-up sequence, or do one at the beginning and one at the end.

Part II - Ensemble Building

Your singers are ready...vocally. But, there’s a difference between a group of individual singers and an ensemble.

Fun & Brain Warm-ups - Sometimes, your singers will need a “mind clearing” warm-up. Something to distract them from their concerns, and focus their mental energy on the task at hand: rehearsal. Depending on the particular situation, this can be time well spent.

Blend & Balance - Though the word “blend” should probably not be said out loud in a rehearsal setting (to avoid singers sacrificing their core tone to match someone else’s voice), establishing that homogeneity of tone is - at least to some degree - a concern of yours is a good idea. The best way to do this is by achieving proper tuning of perfect intervals. Start by establishing an in-tune unison (such as middle ‘C’), then octave (Robert Shaw used an ‘E’), fifth and fourth.

After a few rehearsals, have the choir sing major-seconds and whole-tone clusters, which is the easiest way to train them to listen for balance.

Intonation (Melodic) - Anything chromatic will be helpful. You will find only two options on the attached sheet; I prefer using the first one, as it worked so well for Robert Shaw.

Intonation (Harmonic) - The culmination (and synthesis) of the Ensemble Building sequence should be a warm-up that gets the singers listening to each other, and thinking about relationships between vocal parts.

Part III - Concept Warm-Ups

The music educator’s favorite type of warm-up!

Design one that targets a concept or difficulty found in a piece. This can be anything: scale type, mode, rhythm, intervallic leaps, *et al.* AND, it can come at any time in the rehearsal (not just the beginning... between pieces, too).

Resources for Choral Warm-Ups

Sing Legato

Kenneth Jennings
Neil A. Kjos Music Company
Singer's Edition (V74) • Director's Edition (V74A)

Building Beautiful Voices

Paul Nesheim (with Weston Noble)
Roger Dean Publishing Company
Singer's Edition (30/1055R) • Director's Edition (30/1054R)

The Choral Warm-Up Collection

Sally Albrecht
Alfred Publishing Company (21676)

The Complete Choral Warm-Up Book

Russell Robinson and Jay Althouse
Alfred Publishing Company (11653)

Group Vocal Technique

Frauke Haasemann and James Jordan
Hinshaw Music, Inc.
Text (HMB183) • Video (HNS.VH103)

Vocal Techniques for the Choral Educator

Robert Page & Christine Jordanoff
Tape 2 in a series of 6 videos (Choral Triad Video Workshop) and companion workbooks
Available through MENC (#3091) • Series workbook (#1003)

Teaching Vocal Production in the Choral Rehearsal

Robert Page & Christine Jordanoff
Tape 3 in a series of 6 videos (Choral Triad Video Workshop) and companion workbooks
Available through MENC (#3092) • Series workbook (#1003)