Fast and focused choral rehearsals create a sense of engagement and enthusiasm that limits opportunities for disruption while maximizing time and accomplishment in our ensembles. We often experience these rehearsals by chance, but with a little forethought and efficient teaching strategies, these can become the norm. We have found the following strategies support this type of rehearsal focus and pace and hope you can gain some ideas to help maximize the time you have with your students.

Before Rehearsal

Repertoire Selection

The path toward rehearsal efficiency begins and ends with music selection. With repertoire serving as the curriculum, our selections are crucial to the ensemble’s success and morale. The most efficient rehearsal technician cannot succeed against over-programming, so choose literature that is accessible for the singers. We never want a concert to be a negative learning experience, so we must select repertoire wisely.

Score Study

“I don’t read [music] well, so I solfège everything.” —Robert Shaw

After selecting repertoire, we should make time to study it. Perhaps you’re thinking you hardly have time to use the restroom, let alone do score study. While that’s certainly reality for many music teachers, nothing can substitute for a thorough knowledge of the music when it comes time for the initial rehearsal. Edit the score for such items as phrasing, dynamics, cutoffs/carryovers, articulation, and syllabic stress before handing it out to the students. This will allow you to recognize main thematic material as well as any musical anomalies. Comprehensive score study creates an aural blueprint to draw from and places the ensemble (including the director) on a path to success.

Warm-ups

Daily warm-ups support individual members’ development, and they benefit the group as well. Selecting these exercises is of the utmost importance. Scrutinize them. Every application must serve the purpose of building vocal technique. In the following paragraphs, we offer our opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of various vocalises and how the warm-up sequence can enhance the efficiency of your rehearsals.

Keep It Simple

We believe the most efficient way to improve and build the vocal technique of the ensemble is through the implementation of a consistent sequence of simple vocalises. Drills that utilize the partnership between stepwise and arpeggiated motion sung on one or two vowel sounds work exceptionally well. The simplicity and continuity of these exercises allow students to focus solely on the vowel sound(s) and musical style of the line sung, which, in turn, carries over to the actual performance repertoire.

Establish a Routine

Kids respond well to routine and struggle with abnormalities (think about rehearsals on pep rally days!). A consistent warm-up regimen utilizes a sequence that allows the students to settle into a
rhythm that minimizes the need for verbal instructions while transitioning from one exercise to the next. Nonverbal directives come in various forms and are practical for efficient rehearsal pacing and can be anything from playing a riff on the piano to clapping or tapping a rhythm. The continuity and flow of these exercises instill a daily expectation of fast and focused rehearsals, and our students reap the benefits.

Tongue-Twister (Warning—Controversial Topic!)

Tongue twister exercises (e.g., red-leather-yellow-leather) and highly florid/virtuosic vocalises are quite time-consuming and often yield diminishing returns. We acknowledge their value and popularity as effective icebreakers or fun Friday activities, yet our opinion is that these exercises are typically (not always) lacking in pedagogical soundness and serve mainly as vocal gymnastics.

Sight Singing

We have found that one of the most efficient ways to teach sight singing is to rely on unison singing. Not only does unison singing promote an advanced sense of intonation and vowel unification, but it also allows the entire ensemble to share the same learning experiences. By employing a unison texture, especially when teaching new concepts, we can ensure every singer focuses on the content you want them to learn. Unison sight singing also allows you to increase the rigor of the material, providing a challenge for your stronger readers while simultaneously scaffolding the less advanced singers.

Many of us hold valiantly to the belief that sight singing should happen daily. This notion is valid, but we should not settle for just doing it. The act of reading music by sight every day undoubtedly increases our students’ skills, but we should also be resolved to teach the “techniques” of sight singing. Two essential sight singing techniques are reading ahead and quickly identifying common musical patterns.

For an ensemble to learn to read ahead, they must be forced to read ahead. While you can likely use software to accomplish this, we simply use a large posterboard to cover up the music a few beats ahead of the choir while reading melodies from the whiteboard. When it comes to identifying common patterns, the ways to teach this are endless. Focusing on scales (by step and thirds), triads, and neighbor patterns for sight singing create a proficient process for student mastery.

Though there is a wealth of excellent sight singing sources available to you, the most efficient exercises for your group are often those you write yourself. No one knows the needs of your ensemble better than you! Creating your own four- to eight-measure unison exercises allows you to meet the specific needs of the ensemble. Even if you aren’t a composer, the ability to write a simple melody that focuses on a specific rhythmic or intervallic concept is not out of reach.

Rehearsing the Repertoire
The Use of Modeling

Vocal modeling is a methodology that sparks debate among our colleagues. Some believe a teacher’s demonstration leads the students toward a manufactured tone quality that only mimics what they hear, where others believe it encompasses a form of rote-teaching that we should exclude from our instruction. We believe in the effectiveness of modeling and rote-teaching as viable pedagogical techniques and will

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discuss them in detail:

**Sung Model**

The sung model is a supremely efficient tool with which to achieve the optimal tone quality, rhythmic precision/articulation, dynamic level, and musical line sought over the course of a rehearsal. Effectual use of the singing voice can demonstrate those characteristics we find to be both desirable and undesirable for our students. This methodology enhances and expedites the learning process, as you sing more and talk less.

With that, some may fear that the young singers will merely imitate the teacher, thus causing them to produce an unnatural sound (“I don’t want my girls to sing like a 42-year-old man!”). We don’t adhere to that logic. The students won’t sound like you because they are in fact *not you*; these young singers only emulate the vowel sound(s) through empathy. We understand that modeling may make some of us uncomfortable. There is no need to be self-conscious (none of us are about to make our Met debut!), as the demonstration need only convey the idea behind the wanted musical thought or vocal technique.

**Unsung Model**

Unsung cues may also serve as models for our students. A physical gesture (such as showing tall [a] and rounded [u] vowel sounds) may serve as a reminder of previously taught techniques, concepts or pitfalls. This method is effective and efficient, as the movement may reinforce the application of previous instruction while avoiding the need for stopping and redirecting.

**Rote Teaching (It’s Okay—Really!)**

Many choral educators dispute learning by rote as a sound teaching method. Our stance on the matter is to *use it, don’t abuse it*. When responsibly utilized, rote-teaching can assist with pacing and limit frustration during rehearsal, especially while working on the challenging rhythms present in many pop and world music compositions. Give students an opportunity to attempt the complexities initially, and then model for them, if needed. If the teaching of music literacy is prevalent, then rote-teaching on occasion is acceptable.

**Gesture**

Choral directors’ hands are often occupied by the piano during our rehearsals, thus robbing us of one of our most effective teaching tools—the conducting gesture. Gestures that are clear and descriptive convey virtually every musical idea without the need for verbal instruction. The most basic gesture can communicate simple concepts such as tempo, dynamic, and entrances/releases. An advanced gesture can provide your ensemble with complex ideas like articulation, phrase shape, and mood. Even with clear-cut gestures, young musicians need instruction on what to look for during rehearsals. We suggest working gesture games into the warm-up period as frequently as possible. Consider having the ensemble sing something simple, like a scale, while conducting variations of tempo, dynamic, and articulation. These activities mentally engage the group and help them become familiar with your gesture.

**Solfège-Text Hybrid**

We’ve all been there. The choir sounds terrific on solfège, they move to text, and suddenly it’s as if they’re sightreading all over again. Combining aspects of solfège and text early in the learning process eliminates this sense of regression that often occurs. The simplest way to achieve this is for a portion of the group to sing the text while another continues singing the solfège, serving as scaffolding for those experiencing the text for the first time. Use silly ways of distinguishing the groups such as hair color or shoe size. After a few repetitions with different groupings, the choir can sing entirely on text confidently.

Additionally, consider having the choir interpolate challenging rhythmic consonants onto the solfège to address those places before moving to text. Lastly, when voices are in the extremes of range, have the singers use vowel sounds found in the text rather than the solfège, as this ensures not wasting precious rehearsal time working an [i] vowel on a high B-flat when they are singing the word *love* once they move to text.

The fast and focused rehearsal approach is student-centric. Efficient pacing holds the ensemble members’ interest and investment while minimizing opportunities for disruption. We have all taught students who seem to find trouble in every other class but are exemplary for us. Often, it is because our class structure works better for them. By keeping rehearsals well-planned and fast-paced, you and your students will be heading toward growth and success!

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