

# Let's Talk Method

## Warm-Ups

*By Cristian Grases*

Before we analyze the methodology behind the crafting of the warm-up period, I believe it is paramount to devote some time to understanding the importance and the reasoning behind spending precious rehearsal time warming-up. In their book *The Complete Choral Warm-up Book*, Russell Robinson and Jay Althouse offer eight reasons that support the need for warm-ups. These are:

1. *Warm-ups establish focus.*
2. *Warm-ups prepare the voice for singing.*
3. *Warm-ups allow singers to hear themselves and each other.*
4. *Warm-ups establish physical readiness for singing.*
5. *Warm-ups establish proper breathing habits.*
6. *Warm-ups achieve unification of vowels.*
7. *Warm-ups establish intonation melodically and harmonically.*
8. *Warm-ups establish a connection with the music to be sung in the rehearsal (to which I would add that they can help solving challenges in the repertoire ahead of time).*
9. I would like to add a ninth one: it helps to create the spirit, the atmosphere, and the energy for the rehearsal.

There are many ways in which warm-ups can be structured. In my

view there are basically two structural levels: the first one has to do with the exercise itself, its melodic line and the combinations of sounds and syllables used; and the second one has to do with the order in which the exercises are presented within the warm-up period. Combinations of these two structural levels are endless, and each conductor has personal preferences in regards to the organization and length of the warm-up period. Allow me to share my own thoughts.

**Activity #1, Focus:** One of the most challenging moments of the rehearsal period is the very beginning. It is a transitional moment in which the pressures of our daily activities (stress, traffic, financial pressures, academic evaluations, family, etc.) must give way to the appropriate conditions for making music together. There are many ways in which the conductor can create the proper conditions for singers to make this transition. I tend to always start with some kind of physical activity. Some are more active (i.e. a call and response game clapping different rhythms, or some coordination exercise), which help energize the choir or help them focus if they are too excited and/or absentminded; and some have a slower pace (i.e. creating a circle and having each singer massage the shoulders of the person in front of them while singing very long notes in a comfortable range, or an exercise with their eyes closed), which would in turn help to release tension and calm everybody down so they can be prepared to sing. At times, when my ensemble is working on a piece that has eurhythmic considerations (movement and body percussion), I tend to use some of these eurhythmic difficulties during this first warm-up activity. In my experience, the most effective exercise depends on the general state of mind of the singers. No matter what you plan for this first activity with your choir, the conductor must be aware and prepared to adjust this activity depending on the ensemble's particular condition for any given day.

**Activity #2, Breath support:** Afterwards I tend to work on breathing technique (steadiness, placement, length, and control of the breath). The goal of this activity is to remind the singers of the correct abdominal breathing technique. Whether the breathing exercise addresses different articulations, lengths, or uses different consonants (such as [f], [s], [z], [ʒ], etc), the emphasis is always to reconnect with the proper feeling of a supported breath. After all, this is the platform for a free, healthy, and released phonation. I find myself doing these types of exercises more often with beginner's choirs and with children's choirs. With ensembles that have more preparation, I usually craft a warm-up exercise that overlaps activities 2 and 3.

**Activity #3, Vibration/Phonation:** At this moment the singers would be ready to sing. This first sung exercise should be centered on the idea of a healthy phonation based on a properly supported abdominal breath column. I usually present melodic exercises that have three distinct characteristics: a) they are descendant in order to bring the "head" voice into the "chest" range and avoiding the opposite, b) they are not larger than a 5<sup>th</sup> in range, which would imply then that we would start on "sol" (5<sup>th</sup> grade of the tonality) and move to "do" (tonal center), and c) they have no leaps, at times going to the extreme of blurring the intervals so as to essentially sing a descending glide. I ask the singers to focus on an abdominal breath (for which I usually ask them to put one hand on their abdomen so they can monitor themselves), and on the vibration of the mask (for which I also ask them to put one or two fingers right on top of their noses and between their eyes). This exercise moves up and down in the range, but within a comfortable tessitura for all singers. I recommend using phonated fricative and/or nasal consonants such as [z],

[ʒ], [v], and an open mouth [ŋ] and [ŋ]; the last one being my favorite because it automatically produces a low and relaxed position of the jaw.



*Tip: you can also use a simple lip-trill instead of a consonant*

**Activity #4, Vowels:** The next goal is to open the vibrating sound into a vowel. Use any of the above-mentioned fricative or nasal consonants for the onset and then open into a vowel for the best results. This exercise could be ascending or descending and could include leaps if desired. I tend to still remain within the range of a 5<sup>th</sup>, but take the exercise higher and lower within the tessitura. I remind my singers of the importance of listening across all sections in order to match the color of the vowel. It is a way to keep them actively thinking as an ensemble.



*Tip: Make sure that the pitch for the [z] is the same of the vowel. This will avoid any ascending glide and will ensure a clean onset*

**Activity #5, Range:** This is the moment in which we stretch the vocal chords. The exercises employed at this point must be at least an 8<sup>ve</sup> long (although they can surpass this limit if desired), and should explore the upper and lower range of all singers. I remind my singers of concepts like vowel modification through the *passaggio*, singing only vowels at the upper ranges, and brightening the sound in the lower ranges.



*Tip: you may use body motion such as opening your arms and/or bending your knees in order to release tension and free up the sound*

**Activity #6, Connection with the repertoire:** It is at this point in which I use a specially crafted exercise that introduces a difficulty or challenge from any of the songs that will be rehearsed (i.e. singing an augmented 4<sup>th</sup>, a scale in a different mode, a rhythmic challenge, a cluster, a particular articulation, foreign languages, etc.). This activity is optional, but very beneficial when the ensemble is in the initial stages of learning a new song.

**Activity #7, Ensemble:** In this final activity we work on issues that pertain to ensemble singing. The one that I tend to work the most is training the singers to sing a sound while they have to listen for another; but you can also focus on vowel unification, balance issues, particular chords or chord

progressions, intonation, or any other aspect of singing as a group. Activities 6 and 7 can be interchangeable depending on your particular rehearsal plan.

### **Some final considerations:**

1. Using exactly the same exercises in successive rehearsal periods can be advantageous because it could help to create proper singing habits; but using them for many rehearsals in a row can make them uninteresting, can allow them to be done in an “autopilot” mode, and can generate rejection from the singers. I would suggest always using different melodic materials that address the same vocal aspects of singing.
2. When done efficiently, all seven activities can be done in 6-8 minutes. In my experience, a warm-up period that is longer than 10 minutes could become tedious and ineffective.
3. Include high doses of energy, humor, and dynamism within the process so as to create a positive atmosphere. In this way the singers will not equate the warm-up period with some kind of choral torture.
4. As much as you can, connect the ideas presented in the warm-up period with the repertoire that is being studied; and subsequently, when rehearsing the repertoire, make reference to the warm-up exercises that were employed earlier. In this way you would be making the warm-up period an integral part of the rehearsal.
5. Do not be afraid of being creative and making this important part of your rehearsal as fun, energetic, and interactive as you can. Just have fun, and your singers will too!

**Some additional resources you might want to consider are:**

- Robinson R. & Jay Althouse. *The Complete Choral Warm-up Book. A Sourcebook for Choral Directors*. Van Nuys: Alfred Publishing, 1995.
- Jordan, James. *Evoking Sound. The Choral Warm-up*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005.
- Adams, Charlotte. *Daily Workout for a Beautiful Voice*. DVD. Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Music Publishing, 1998.
- Ala-Pöllänen, Kari. *The Secrets of the Tapiola Sound*. Tapiola: Tapiola Choir, 2006.
- Johnson, Jeff. *Ready, Set, Sing! Activating the mind, body and voice*. Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Music Publishing, 2000.
- Frauke Haasemann and James Jordan have a series of publications (books, cards, video material) called *Group Vocal Technique*, published by Hinshaw Music.
- Sanna Valvanne recently created a DVD entitled *Sanna's Warm Up DVD* and is available through her website.

Regarding warm-ups, every ensemble has singular needs that reflect their technical abilities, their experience, their vocal proficiency, and their particular repertoire selection. The ideas I am offering are just one way of approaching this important part of the rehearsal. These ideas can be adapted, built upon, combined with other ideas of your own or other colleagues, or stretched and explored within new boundaries. In any case, it is important to keep in mind that the warm-up period is not only a section of the rehearsal in which the vocal instrument is prepared for the activity to come, but that it creates the overall atmosphere of the rehearsal to follow and should be considered as an integral part of the ensemble's process to become as successful as possible.