

Planning Interesting, Vital Rehearsals

By Dr. John Warren, Director of Choral Activities, Syracuse University

Edited by Louise Wiseman, UK

Planning rehearsals day after day can be a grind. It is helpful to have a formula or pattern as a starting point. In this article I present two rehearsal patterns that can help you develop consistently effective rehearsal plans.

The method I primarily use is based on variety.

1. Start with something fast and familiar so everyone can sing comfortably and feel positive. For morning rehearsals it is better not to start with an extremely high or loud piece. Do not spend too long on the first piece since it will be familiar. Usually, for me, this first piece is in a faster tempo, allowing the music to help create energy in the ensemble.
2. Vary tempo, difficulty, and familiarity throughout the rehearsal. It is impossible to vary all three characteristics with each selection, but changing at least one will help maintain interest. It is particularly dangerous to rehearse several slow works back-to-back. This will make the singers sluggish – they will likely sing poorly and lose focus. Rehearsing several easy or very familiar pieces consecutively can have the same effect. Often, if I have a group that tends to not rehearse with intensity and energy, I will begin with two fast works. The second one will require more vocal demands and need more work.
3. Follow a new or challenging piece with something familiar or easy. This prevents the choir from becoming frustrated and helps develop confidence.

4. End with something enjoyable or familiar so singers leave rehearsal with a positive feeling. Ending rehearsal positively is more important than ending with something familiar. If you sense a feeling of accomplishment among the singers after making substantial progress on a challenging work, stop. There is nothing better than the sound of choir members singing or humming music from rehearsal in the halls after rehearsal.
5. Cover lots of music. However, remember to teach the whole work. Run through pieces from time to time, occasionally without rehearsing. This takes little time and gives the choir a sense of the whole composition. It can be difficult to arrive at a good balance between rehearsing isolated passages and complete works. When a rehearsal is less effective than I had hoped, it is often because I spent too much time on too few pieces—maybe two or three in an hour. Rehearsals seem faster paced when moving quickly between pieces and having specific goals for each. I tend to rehearse five to seven works and have a warm-up in a fifty-minute period. When rehearsing a brief passage, it is important to tie it to the rest of the piece by starting a few measures before the section begins and continuing for a few measures beyond it. Rehearsing transitions is critical to successful, meaningful performance.
6. Vary tessitura and vocal demands. This is necessary for vocal health and growth.

When planning a rehearsal using this method, it helps to divide the music into four piles: slow and easy; slow and difficult; fast and easy; and fast and difficult. Choose the first and last pieces from the fast and easy pile. Choose the others from different piles in succession, usually alternating fast and slow. To use this method you have to select repertoire that fits these categories. A repertoire that is varied in style, historical or cultural origin, texture, and

so forth, contributes to a successful, varied rehearsal.

Sample Rehearsal Plan
Syracuse University Singers

TITLE	COMPOSER	ACTIVITY	TIME
Warm-up			5-6 min
Star-Spangled Banner (moderate tempo) (easy)	Traditional	Circle formation Sing through Unify vowels	6 min
Gnome (fast tempo) (moderately difficult)	Bruno Regnier	Row seating in sections Affirm pitches and rhythms Start French text if time	10 min
Ubi Caritas (slow tempo) (easy to moderate)	Maurice Duruflé	Circle Balance chant melody and 4-part tenor-bass parts Affirm pitches in SATB section Text accentuation	12
Unknown Region, pages 6-9 (fast tempo) (quite difficult)	William Schuman	Row seating – sopranos with tenors; altos with basses Speak text to affirm rhythm and phrasing Check pitches – very dissonant	13
I Got Me Flowers from 5 Mystical Songs (slow tempo) (easy)	Vaughan Williams	Regular row seating Sing on text – affirm phrasing and vowels	5
My Soul's Been Anchored (fast tempo, spiritual) (familiar)	Moses Hogan	Rows; clean introduction; work final 3 pages for precision	7

Additionally, not all music needs to be rehearsed with the singers in the same position. Most singers enjoy moving around and singing in different formations. Consider rehearsing in a circle – it allows the conductor to hear all parts equally and the singers to hear each other better. We frequently rehearse

in section circles – each voice part makes its own circle. That way they hear their part very clearly but can still hear all parts. Alternating these formations with traditional rows or mixed parts is another way to keep rehearsal interesting and singers engaged.

Sometimes it is impossible to select a truly varied repertoire; examples could include: preparing an extended, multi-movement work; or rehearsing a program of works of one genre, period, or composer. The principles of variety can still apply, although it is certainly more challenging. One still should look for as much contrast as possible and plan rehearsal accordingly. Consider rehearsing music at different tempi than that of performance. Rehearsing slow music at a fast tempo can invigorate it and allow singers to have a broader sense of phrase. Rehearsing fast music at slower tempos allows for greater attention to precision.

Another effective way to organize a rehearsal is to create an arch-like plan.

1. Start with something low-pitched that is easy, familiar, and vocally undemanding. Spend little time on this piece.
2. Increase vocal and mental demands with each successive piece and increase the amount of time spent on each.
3. Your highest priority work for the day should come in the middle of the rehearsal. This is when you are most demanding of the ensemble and where you will spend the most time.
4. After this central piece, decrease demands and time with each successive piece.
5. The last piece should have few demands and be light or fun. Spend little time on it.

An example of timing using this method for an hour-long rehearsal follows:

WORK	TIME SPENT
Warm-up	4 minutes
Slow, easy, low tessitura	4 minutes
More challenging/demanding	7 minutes
More challenging, increasing intensity	10 minutes
Most demanding, priority, greatest intensity	15 minutes
Still challenging, but less intensity	10 minutes
Relatively easy or familiar	6 minutes
Easy, light	4 minutes

This method is especially useful on “low energy” days. It allows the conductor to bring the choir’s energy and focus along steadily instead of attempting to fill a listless group with instant intensity. The principle of increasing energy and expectations as the rehearsal progresses can be incorporated into the first type of rehearsal order as well. As one increases or decreases challenge and intensity, one can vary tempo, texture, style, etc. This produces an invigorating, well-paced rehearsal. Body language, facial expression, conversation level as singers enter, and speed of response indicate the energy level and mood of the singers. The conductor should be aware of these factors and adapt the rehearsal pace to the energy level of the choir, gradually increasing the pace to the desired level.

Regardless of how you choose to organize your rehearsals, it is important to keep the principles behind these methods in mind:

1. Maintain a quick pace.
2. Use a varied selection of music in each rehearsal.
3. Have a specific goal for each piece you rehearse.
4. Account for the vocal needs of the singers.
5. Be aware of the emotional state of the singers.
6. Allow the singers to feel successful.

