

Because this column is written from Brandon Manitoba, I am tempted to give you tips on how to stay warm in cold weather. Thankfully, so far, we have managed to keep the snow away which allows some time to talk about awareness of the vocal warm up. The warm up period is a wonderful moment to leave the day behind, quiet your mind and relax your body to connect with your voice and spirit, and to be aware of the presence of your fellow singers. The warm-up gives you the opportunity to use your ears in an active way to listen to your voice, your section and your choir.

From the point of view of conducting, my objective during the warm-up is to use an open, dynamic stance that provides me with mental availability to listen to the choir and hear the sound 'in depth.' How can I move as little as possible while communicating plenty of energy to the choir? I do this by opening the body and use minimal gestures to elicit the healthy, relaxed yet focused and vibrant sound needed to project the voice, to communicate the text and engage the emotions.

As a singer, responding to the instructions of the conductor, I strive to stand like a 'tree.' Am I still relaxed? Do I lift my shoulders? Can I breathe and keep my jaw and tongue relaxed? It takes time to listen to the body. Am I able to attend to my breathing and yet be aware of the other singers with whom I am trying to be in sync? Once the breathing routine is established, I need to ensure that I connect the breath to the voice. I do so, on the exhale, either by rolling an 'r' or by setting the lips to vibrate.

I do this by inhaling to expand the lower ribs (front and back). The precise point where you start to exhale, begin to roll an 'r' or vibrate the lips (without a vocal sound). You might need to try a number of times before your lips will actually vibrate without creating body tension and insuring that the body does not hold the breath between inhaling and exhaling. The inhale-exhale sequence should be continuous. Keep your teeth apart inside your closed mouth. Once you are able to sustain vibrating your lips (or roll an 'r') for a few seconds, add a sound. Glide from one pitch to the next on a short scale of 5 notes down, up, down again. Aim at keeping the sound continuous (without starting with an accent) and the breath support constant. Move up a half step and repeat the melodic sequence. Once this sequence becomes easier, expand the five-note scale to one octave-scale. Begin rolling or vibrating at the bottom or at the top of the scale. Transpose the scales as high and low as long as the vocal sound has the same colour and your face and neck area is free of tension. After some practice, you will be surprised how little air is required to set a vocal sound. This exercise teaches a number of important points.

CHORALICIOUS NO. 2

THE WARM-UP!

Producing a sound while I roll an 'r' or vibrate the lips makes me aware of the crucial point I reach at the end on the inhalation and at the beginning of the exhalation without holding my breath. This exercise makes me aware of how much air and how constant the air needs to be to enable me to produce a vocal sound. It reminds me about how to provide constant breath support while I sing a musical phrase. In other words (I am a Francophone after all, we use lots of words sometimes) it teaches the monitoring of the external intercostal muscles to slow down the return of the diaphragm to its initial position. Voilà!

As a conductor I use the preparation beat to breathe and to communicate indispensable information. This very precious and artistic gesture (supported by my breath, and my non-verbal communication (face and body) provides info about the tempo, the articulation, the dynamic, the style and character of the phrase I am just about to conduct. As a singer, am I able to attend to my body and breathe simultaneously with the gesture of the conductor, capture the emotion and come in on the right pitch, the right word AND respond to the conductor exactly with my section?

This exciting moment requires the attention of all of us. I better let you go until next month. Feel free to keep in touch!