

Breathing together, singing together, being in the moment together? ... Yes! But, where to start?

As a preamble, I would like to introduce two exercises intended to increase the singers' awareness of the presence of their fellow. Divide the choir into groups of 10 to 12 choristers. The bigger the number in each group the more challenging the exercise. The objective of the exercise is to create physical awareness of each other. Have everyone begin by standing close to each other. Direct every one to walk in random pattern, not quickly, just a nice easy pace. After instructing people to begin walking, the very dynamic of the group will determine when people will stop walking, pause, and start walking again. In order to succeed, everyone has to be aware of the movement of others. After a few attempts, the group will improve and refine its sensitivity to the presence of others, they will walk, pause, and walk again almost, if not perfectly, simultaneously. When this exercise works, it surely provides everyone with a strong feeling of belonging to the group and engendering group cohesion.

The second exercise involves pairs facing each other: one person is the leader and the other is the 'follower'. Grounded on two feet, the leader moves their arms on the vertical plane at glacial speed and when that becomes easy, the leader moves various parts of the whole body while keeping the feet in one place. The follower, in a mirror fashion replicates the moves of the leader. The leader can vary the speed and the directions of the movements. There is never more than about 6 inch-difference between the limbs of the two people involved. This exercise teaches us to be in the moment with those around us, to be available, to move together, and to be responsive to the conductor.

Now that we have started, let's move on to some choral ensemble principles. Again, I focus on awareness. Standing with good alignment, I respond to the gesture of the conductor by inhaling at the exact moment as the rest of my section. Well..., this is easy (or is it?). What about inhaling with the energy and the emotion of the phrase I am about to sing? Is my tongue relaxed, my lips and mouth space ready to sing the vowel written at the beginning of the phrase? ...Done!

Did I come in exactly together as my neighbours or a tiny wee bit before or after everyone else? Do I even notice if I am a little ahead or behind? The togetherness at this precise moment is paramount. Did I take a quick moment to think about the pitch I will sing? Is it the precisely the same note as everyone else around me? Or 'kind of'? Same dynamic and articulation? Or a tiny wee bit louder and with more detached articulation than what I can hear around me? All of the above requires some availability on the part of the singer. For the conductor it also requires a

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quality of availability, a state of openness to hear and to discriminate the minute detail of what is happening.

I often invite singers to listen particularly to the breath of everyone, or the initial consonant, or to the person on the left or right. In order to guide very precisely what to listen for I have only half of a section perform and ask the other half to listen specifically to one aspect of the singing. When it is the turn of the 'listening half' to sing there is always a significant improvement of the objective I am pursuing. This tool improves the overall performance instantly.

Ensemble principles involve all parameters: singing the exact same pitch, reproducing the same vowel shape, approaching consonants with the same degree of 'crunchiness', singing the tune 'in tune.' We make the music move together by gathering everyone into the beat, relating the different layers of subdivisions to the main pulse.

As a chorister I was told the following:

- do not sing the eighth note following a dotted quarter, late
- longer the note is, more important the note becomes
- do not mix up dotted eighth and sixteenth note with a triplet (quarter, eighth)
- be careful not to come late after a rest at the beginning of a rhythmic pattern

From experience I would add the following:

- do not rush quicker rhythms
- do not slow down the beat on half notes
- avoid breathing with insufficient energy causing a late entrance after a rest

So much to think about and listen for!

Finally let me share with you some helpful techniques:

- Sing in unison!
- Sometimes sing homophonic pieces.
- Sing only the down beat of every bar. Are singers coming in exactly together and on the same pitch?
- Sing works that are usually accompanied 'a cappella'. Singing 'naked' can reveal a number of habits such as the choir relying on the piano for pitches and pulse.
- In your warm-ups, have basses tap a whole note, tenors a half note, altos quarter notes and sopranos eighth notes. Everyone has to listen to the eighth note in order to clap exactly on time.

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- Use two-part warm ups with different rhythmic subdivisions for each part.
- Stop conducting and let the ensemble carry the pulse on their own.
- Have the choir sing in 'trios' or 'quartets'.
- Introduce some active listening (audiation): conduct one's section part, have another section sing mentally against it.
- Perform any scale or exercises aloud, change to silent and continue to alternate between the two.

Remember, I am just an email away!

And onward with sharing a common pulse in our choral rehearsals!

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