

Choral Singing Basics

Important singing techniques:

In some ways, singing in a group puts special demands on the singers. In order for the group to produce a clear, resonant choral sound, it's particularly important that all aspects of the sounds produced by the singers in each part are the same - pitch, vowel sound, timing, etc. The following techniques are important to achieving this.

- **Sing vowel sounds clearly.** The vowel sounds (“ee, eh, ah, oh, oo” in English) are the sustained sounds that are the core of what a listener hears. It is critical to the clarity **and pitch** of a chorus’s sound that **every singer sing these sounds in the same clear way**. If some are singing a clear “ah” while others have let their sound slip into something that’s closer to an “uh”, the choir will sound fuzzy and slightly flat. Don’t get lazy and let yourself “swallow” your vowel sounds or let them “spread”. Pay attention to how you sing each vowel and keep the sound “forward” and focused. Exercise: Sing “mee, meh, mah, moh, moo”; how clear and distinct can you make each vowel sound?
- **Be alert to diphthongs; remember that a diphthong is composed of two different vowel sounds that should each be sung separately.** Some languages use very pure vowel sounds, that is, each vowel letter (a,e,i,o,u) is pronounced using a single vowel sound. In Italian, for example, the letter “a” is pronounced with the vowel sound “ah.” English, on the other hand, is loaded with diphthongs, that is, vowel letters pronounced by combining two vowel sounds. For example, the “a” in the word “rate” is actually composed of the sounds “eh” and “ee” (reh-eet). It is not possible to shape your mouth to sing both these sounds simultaneously. It is therefore important to recognize diphthongs and sing each component sound separately. If called upon to sustain the vowel over a couple of beats, the usual practice is to sustain the first sound, then add the second sound only when moving on to the next word or syllable. For example, to sustain the word “rate”, you would sing “reh” for the required number of beats, then finish off with the “eet.” If you think this seems a bit over the top, listen carefully to a professional choir sing a sustained word, then listen to a weak amateur choir do the same. The clarity and focus achieved when everyone is singing the same vowel sound is astounding.
- **Put the vowel sound on the beat; put the consonant *before* the beat. (i.e. use “early consonants.”)** To a listener, timing and rhythm are determined by the *vowel* sounds, the sung sounds. It’s therefore critical that the vowel sound, not the consonant, come on the downbeat. Certain consonants and consonant combinations - like the “m” in “moon” or the “gl” in “glorious” – take time to say. This means you must actually voice the consonant slightly ahead of the beat so that the “oo” of moon or the “aw” of glorious comes on the beat. Failure to do this makes the word sound slightly behind the beat. Attention to early consonants is particularly important, for example, in Baroque music. If all parts hit the beats (i.e. the vowel sounds) at the same moment, the independent lines of the polyphony weave a wonderful texture with a clear pulse; if even one part is a little late, the pulse becomes fuzzy and the listener hears mush.

SPECIAL CASE: To avoid unpleasant hissing sounds, an initial “s” sound should always be as short as possible.

Marking techniques to help you sing accurately:

Marking your music is not simply a matter of recording the interpretive colors the conductor wants you to express (crescendi, diminuendi, marcato passages, etc.). It is also a matter of recording things that will help you to sing difficult entrances, tempi, and rhythms correctly. Below are some of the techniques used by many singers to do this. We hope these will be useful in helping you to develop your own personal marking vocabulary.

- **Use “granny glasses” to mark the points where it is critical to watch the conductor.** Unless you’ve memorized the music, it is probably impossible to look at the conductor 100% of the time. Nevertheless, there are usually points in a piece (e.g. significant changes in tempo or volume, rubato sections) where everyone *must* be looking at the conductor. Many singers remind themselves to be sure to watch the conductor at a particular point by drawing a pair of “granny glasses” there.
- **Circle the source of your entrance note.** If you have trouble finding your entrance note, look at the other parts singing before you come in. Often, another part’s line or the accompaniment will give you or lead you to the note you need. Circle that part to remind you to follow it to your note.
- **Mark tricky half-step/whole-step intervals.** In some cases, the structure of a passage can lead you to sing a whole step where a half step is called for, or vice versa. Early music (especially Gesualdo) is known for these. If there’s a spot where you repeatedly fall into this trap and sing the wrong interval, write a “1” or a “½” above it to remind you how it should sound.
- **Use aids to help you hear and sing tricky larger intervals:** There are various techniques for ensuring that you sing a larger interval accurately. Here are two:
 - Some find it useful to connect a particular interval with a well-known tune. For example, to sing an accurate ascending fourth, think of “Here Comes the Bride.” (The “here comes” interval is a fourth.) Ask other singers for the tunes they use to find certain intervals. Use the tunes that work for you.
 - For larger ascending intervals, a useful technique is to write in the second note an octave below its actual position. The interval between the first note and the note you have written in will then be a small one that is easy to hear in your head. For example, an ascending seventh becomes a simple descending second. Or an ascending tenth becomes a simple ascending third. When singing, use the written in note to find the basic pitch in your head, then sing the note an octave above. Use the same technique for large descending intervals.
- **Subdivide measures where the beat points are not clear.** If a measure contains a lot of notes of various lengths, it can be difficult to get the timing right, particularly if the phrase contains syncopated elements. In these cases, it is often helpful to draw vertical lines to show where each beat of the measure occurs.
- **Re-bar passages where the provided bars do not capture the rhythm.** In some cases, the provided bar lines do not capture the rhythm. For example, a 5/4 measure may actually be felt as a 3/4 measure plus a 2/4 measure. Additionally, a 4/4 measure of eighth notes may actually be felt as a 3/8 measure plus a 3/8 measure plus a 2/8 measure. Early music, which was not originally organized into bars as we know them, is sometimes forced into modern four beat bars that can make it difficult to see and feel the

actual rhythm. If you find yourself faced with one of these cases, add additional bars or re-bar the passage to fit the rhythm you feel.

- **Circle consonants that are important to articulate.** It can be very easy to forget about initial consonants, particularly since they often must be voiced a little ahead of the beat. But they are very important to the listener's being able to understand the words. Pay particular attention to the initial consonants of key words, particularly if the consonant is an "m", "f", or "v".