

Teachers who implement healthy vocal hygiene and conservation practices run the risk of being able to teach and sing for a lifetime!



There are periods in history when change is necessary and other periods when it is better to keep everything for the time as it is. The art of life is to be in the rhythm of your age.

—Oswald Mosley (1896–1980),
British politician and philosopher

Rhythmic Integrity in the Choral Rehearsal:

A Bag of Tricks and More

by

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Robert Shaw, the legendary conductor, was tenacious in his pursuit of precise rhythm in every ensemble he conducted. From attacks and releases to the placement of diphthongs and consonants, Shaw instilled a sense of rhythmic integrity with all of the musicians under his direction. I believe one of the keys to his great success was his belief that choirs shouldn't merely feel the rhythm; they needed to think carefully about what defined the various rhythmic components of any work. The use of count-singing became an important tool for developing group musicianship in any Robert Shaw chorus.

Count-singing is the practice of rehearsing a choral work on counts rather than singing the text. Singers use a number on every beat containing a pitch, thus engaging the singer for the entire length of long notes. When subdividing rhythms for eighth note patterns in duple time, singers should sing 1 & 2 &, etc. Shaw replaced the number "three" with the syllable "tee" to make the tongue move faster and not slow the rhythm on that beat. For greater rhythmic definition, singers should count sixteenth notes as 1 ee & ah, 2 ee & ah, 3 ee & ah, etc. To perform a cut-off more accurately, singers should place the appropriate consonant on the rest following the last pitch, for example, 1 & 2 & 3 & "t", if the rest is on 4 and the concluding consonant is "t." Variations on this method should also be utilized for all compound meters.

Understanding and having a method for solving counting problems is vital to the musical health of an ensemble.

Rushing or Dragging Tempi

- Accent "ee"
- Metronome
- Get physical
- Telegraph
- Recording
- Slow down
- Fewer beats
- Count 8

Accent "ee." Start with count-singing. By accenting the second sixteenth note in a beat group, stress is taken away from the down beat in any beat group. Singers are forced to think about the forward motion of the music.

Metronome. If singers are having difficulty internalizing a steady beat, impose an external beat. An amplified metronome can make them aware of when the tempo starts to pull ahead or fall behind.

Get physical. An ensemble often rushes a tempo because singers have not internalized the steady beat. Marching in place can be a way to use large body movement to internalize beats. A variation is to stand in a circle and face the center. Instead of marching in place (left-right left-right), step sideways (left foot to the left, then right foot moves to touch left foot, repeat same motion) so that the circle rotates in a clockwise motion to the beat.

Telegraph. Have singers place their right hand on the shoulder of the person beside them. Gently use the forefinger of the right

hand to tap the beat on the shoulder of that person. This can also be done in a circle with consistent effect so that singers get both kinesthetic and visual reinforcement as they sing. When the ensemble has had success telegraphing the beat to other members, then internalize the beat by tapping their fingers on their own chests.

Recording. Record your rehearsal. Often, singers are not aware they are having tempo problems until they hear a recording. Don't wait for the concert! Record rehearsals and let the singers listen. Then, they are more likely to work on techniques that lead to good rhythmic singing.

Slow down. When a group rushes the tempo, the singers may need to focus more on the subdivision of beats. Changing the tempo, slowing it down, and forcing singers to internalize sixteenth notes instead of eighth notes will allow them to concentrate on placement of the downbeats.

Fewer Beats. When tempos are dragging, try conducting the music in two instead of four beats to a bar. With triple meter, try conducting in one. The visual change for the singers will lead to a different feeling about the phrase and help pull the tempo forward. This is preferable to your conducting the same pattern even larger. A bigger-looking four pattern takes longer to execute than a simple two pattern and can actually contribute to the tempo problem.

Count 8. Give a down beat to the ensemble and stop conducting. Tell singers to keep the beat in their heads and when they reach the number eight, shout it out. See how much variation there is in the placement of the end of the phrase. As the group gets better at internalizing eight counts, try 16 counts.

“Slushy” Articulation

- Isolate
- Speak-sing
- Alternate text and numbers
- Softer
- Begin somewhere else in the score
- Get visual
- Where's the consonant?
- Diphthongs

Isolate. Eliminate some of the confounding variables present when singing. Singers have a plate full of components with which to

deal—pitch, rhythm, text, tone color, etc. By isolating a single element, the singers are more likely to achieve success. Gradually add the other elements into the mix.

Speak-sing. Speak the rhythm on a neutral syllable with a percussive attack. “Tah” and “dah” work better than “la” because of a faster tongue. Also, sing the rhythm patterns on one pitch. For variety, have the ensemble sing on a chord that defines the tonality of the music, e.g., the I chord. Then sing the written notes on a neutral syllable. Try the same sequence using the text. Speak the text in rhythm; sing the text on a single note; and finally try the text with the written pitches.

Alternate text and numbers. To reinforce rhythm, have one section of the ensemble sing on the text and the other sections counting (see above). There are many combinations, most of which can promote clear, accurate articulation. The men can count while the women sing text. The back row of each section can count while others speak the words. A random grouping of choir members, e.g., students wearing blue or black or those wearing glasses, is another way to divide the ensemble into counting and singing units.

Softer. The louder a singer is performing, the less likely he (she) is to focus on what he hears from other members of the ensemble. Singing at a softer dynamic will help focus attention on group consonants.

Start somewhere else in the music. Singers will memorize certain habits if the group always starts in the same place in the music. Change the pattern. Begin on a different page or phrase or section. Try isolating a rhythm problem until one measure is perfect. Add a measure on each side until the entire phrase is correct.

Get visual. Write problematic rhythm patterns on the board. Write out subdivisions for dotted rhythms. Create a warm-up containing the trickiest rhythms from the music you will rehearse; start the rehearsal with that rhythm as a warm-up. For a variation, give an incorrect rhythm to the ensemble and see if members can identify what is different from the rhythm clapped or played by the director. Keep a chart or poster on the wall to point out common rhythmic challenges in the music.

Where's the consonant? Determine if the singers should place a consonant on the beat or in anticipation of the beat so that the vowel occurs precisely on a beat. With percussive consonants (t, p, b), phonating on the beat is not a problem. With more sustained consonants (s, v, z), the tendency to wait for the beat before making

a sound tends to force the remainder of the phrase out of sync. Practice singing the music with only the vowel sounds found in the words. Anticipate and practice the placement of each consonant before adding it into the choral fabric.

Diphthongs. Because diphthongs require a singer to phonate two vowel sounds on one word (“night” = nah – eet), placement of the second vowel should be as precise as if it had its own rhythm. If the word “my” is notated as a half note, divide the two vowels so that the choir sings “ah” as a dotted quarter note and “ee” as an eighth note. Count-sing the first vowel in the diphthong and sing the second vowel where it should occur in the measure.

Selected Solutions for Common Counting Problems

Entrances early or late. Count sing. Pulse the tempo. Write beats into the music.

Note duration too short. Clap and sing the music simultaneously. Pulse the breath on every beat.

Contrapuntal entrances. Sing individual lines only until a new voice enters. Add a phrase to the theme with each repetition. Listen more actively while singing.

Ties. Often, the note after a tied rhythm is late. Imagine an eighth rest at the end of the tie as a stepping stone to anticipate the entrance. Think of ties that begin on an off-beat as a pick-up into the next beat.

Syncopation. Syncopated rhythms almost always start with a short note followed by a long note. Make the short note even shorter to anticipate the change in stress. Prepare the rhythmic resolution of the syncopated pattern by marking in the music the beat where the melody returns to regular metric stress.

Dotted rhythms. Use the short note following a dotted note as the subdivision to count the entire pattern.

Hemiolas. Write into the music the three-against-two patterns. Count-sing duples and triples simultaneously.

Tempo changes. Have the singers hold their music higher and watch you, the director:

Singing correct pitches and rhythms at the right time is only

the initial stage of an artistic performance. Ensembles must also incorporate appropriate tone quality, dynamics, phrasing, and style into the presentation; however, directors should recognize the importance of reviewing and focusing on the impact of rhythmic integrity on each of these elements in any performance.



Beyond the “Bass-ics” in Junior High/Middle School Music Programs

by

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Working at Discovery Middle School in Fargo, ND is amazing. What incredible colleagues I have! Unfortunately, my schedule leaves little time to observe and learn from them. Last year, we began discussing music theory and rhythm teaching issues during a typical department meeting and quickly realized we were all dealing with the same basic ideas but going about it in different ways. We have 90+ years of experience between the six of us—two choir directors, three band directors and one orchestra director—so there was no shortage of approaches that work.

We knew there had to be a way for us to work as a professional learning community to address our students’ needs. Why re-invent the wheel? We decided to use specific resources and assessments to create a more even base line throughout our entire music department. Not only would this give us a chance to work together, but we knew the experience would foster a unique learning environment.

Observing other teachers at work and exposing my students to new techniques and a different perspective have been incredibly beneficial. No longer does our music department operate in separate band, choir and orchestra circles. We operate as a more