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Are warm-ups really necessary for children's chorus?

By Lynn Brinckmeyer (reprinted in UNISON but originally written for WMEA's magazine called "Voice.")

I imagine that many of you perform either as a singer or as a conductor. I am constantly searching for new techniques to get my girls chorus energized, so one of my favorite activities is observing other directors working with young singers. As I watch and listen, I look for activities that the children especially seem to enjoy. Furthermore, I am often reminded of activities that I used several years ago, but forgot about.

Nancy Telfer served as a clinician last year in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she started her session with these words, "You don't blow on a dry reed or it will break." This made so much sense to me. Our voices are produced by a system of living tissue. They are even more delicate and valuable than a new and perfect reed. Warm-ups help us to get our instruments ready and focused for a rehearsal. Since students' voices are their instruments, we should treat them as carefully as we treat their minds and bodies (Peggy Bennett). Every warm-up session might include exercises in breathing, flexibility, tone, breathing, endurance, diction and ear training. Here are some warm-up ideas others have shared with me:

1. Breathe in until you fill up your lower back (Nancy Telfer).
2. Hold your hand up and blow an imaginary feather off your "shelf" with one puff of air. Next, scoot the feather along the shelf, being careful not to blow it off onto the floor (Jodie Lyons and Lanelle Stevenson).
3. ALWAYS take a quiet breath. A noisy breath is dysfunctional (Margory Halvorson).
4. Whisper all of the ABC's on one breath. Try to say them twice on one breath.
5. Have your singers breathe through a soda straw then sing a descending five note pattern on the vowel of your choice.
6. Do your singers feel the inhalation from the hip to the armpit, and from the tailbone to the shoulder?

7. Sometimes it is nice to take a break from the usual warm-ups. You can sing echo songs, partner songs and/or canons.

8. Stand in a circles as you sing and "line up" your vowel shapes with the other singers. Think of the vowel as a circle of sound. (Nancy Telfer)

9. The vowel shape usually determines the accuracy of intonation and color (Henry Leck). Match your sound to every other singer in your section. 10. Have students watch each other's larynx as they sing ascending and descending scales.

11. Make sure that you sing every vowel sound at least once in your warm-up session.

12. Always reinforce: are you really listening to your sound?

13. Try singing with different "attitudes" such as: boring face, sad face, excited, angry, in love, three years old, etc.

14. Sing the literature you are preparing and try: singing only every other measure, or singing every other word.

15. Using your literature, vocalize the pitches on a neutral syllable and sing all other pitches except one. Designate a pitche to "hear" in your head (such as C).

Singing involves the coordination of unseen parts of anatomy. The more you can help students internalize what you are trying to tell them or show them, the more apt they are to understand what you are saying. Hopefully, these ideas can add variety to rehearsals and help your young singers get focused and ready to work.

Editor's note: Many of these excellent ideas are workable with older singers and adult choirs.