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Blikket Auf! Look Up!

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I remember a sixth grade general music class that was especially responsive and focused. I was talking about following instructions and learning to listen without making noises. I challenged the class to walk around the school as an entire class without one little “peep”. No sound by voice and quiet with the feet. We went through the hallways of the school. The students were silently reminded to be quiet no matter what happened.

We left the main building and walked onto the ugly asphalt which led to the portable building we used for music class. When we walked outside, it was raining, but oddly enough, the sun was brilliant. The sun made the raindrops sparkle like glitter and diamonds. It was beautiful. Arms began to point loudly to the sky as we saw two complete rainbows. The students looked at me with silent joy and delight. They were hungry to scream, but the instructions had been given. No sound. In desperation we leaped and danced with one another, pantomiming utter hysteria, licking our lips and clapping without touching our hands together.

This story happened a few years ago, but I remembered it after a recent rehearsal for Mahler’s *Symphony No. 8*. We came to the section in which the youth chorus sings, “Blikket auf!” The pitches are quite simple. They could be from any octavo that we sing with our choirs. The altos sing “do, re, mi” and the sopranos are a third above singing “mi, fa, so”. Simply ascending in parallel motion with the words translated “look up”, was incredibly moving.

This section comes near the end of the symphony. The words have been sung by the tenor punctuated by the adult chorus singing, “Komm.” It is one of the few times the youth chorus sings in harmony during the symphony. The chorus members were unable to sing it beautifully until they captured the type of infectious joy that is described in the story above. We talked about the type of looking up that compels those around us to look. We have all experienced it. The sensation evokes the openness of the child within us. We talked about looking up at something lovely that was some distance away. Students were breathing quite deeply and quite naturally. The tone had buoyancy and direction. The words made sense and were connected to the music. The

simplicity became profound, especially in the context of the poetry Mahler chose for his work.

I was reminded as a teacher just how much should happen in the silence that precedes our sound. Beautiful singing does not happen instantly. It is in the preparation. It is in the inspiration. It is in the thought and the anticipation of the sound. Our students can understand this. We have to tell them about it. We should be attentive in what we say to our choirs. Do we say, "Don't sing during the rests," without telling them what to do during that pregnant silence? As a result of that one musical phrase in the Mahler, we can now say, "blikket auf," to one another as a cue to keep buoyancy, joy, and a lift in our voices.

Recognizing that regardless of all the inspiration we might bring to our singing, we must have rehearsal routines that prepare our students to know the music. These are the guidelines I am using to prepare the chorus for the Mahler. The procedure will work for the preparation of any choral or solo music:

- 1) Provide pertinent information and supplies to the student:
 - a) A packet with music, highlighter, pencil, and cassette tape. Tapes can be dangerous if students merely imitate (used for the Mahler to count rests and hear orchestral accompaniment.)
 - b) Rehearsal schedule
 - c) Chorus roster
 - d) Assignment sheet
 - e) Pronunciation guide for Latin and German.
- 2) Give instructions on how to learn the music:
 - a) Study the text; copy text away from the score; read text aloud; refer to pronunciation guide.
 - b) Speak with good articulation and good speech tone.
 - c) Mark strong and weak beats; underline important words and syllables.
 - d) Mark the places for breath; bracket the phrases.
 - e) Speak the counts of the rhythm; sing the counts!
 - f) Speak the words with correct rhythm; speak with good inflection.
 - g) Learn the melody line; practice mentally before singing.
 - h) Practice the melody with correct rhythm on a vowel sound.

- i) Mouth the words while thinking correct pitches and rhythm.
 - j) Sing the counts of the rhythm with correct pitches; count rests.
 - k) Put text and melodic line together.
- 3) Guide the students to: Study the score (form, dynamics, tempo, and harmony).
- 4) Do not skip or rush steps in learning the music. If procedure is followed, one can learn a score solidly. Memorization is easier. If the students do not have musical independence, they will need help from the teacher or stronger students serving as section leaders. This procedure is used in the rehearsal. Basically, students are learning how to practice.
- 5) Plan your practice.
- a) Include vocal exercises; choose phrases of songs on which to vocalize.
 - b) Practice your problems; choose a short rhythmic or melodic problem.
 - c) Limit the time on a specific exercise or song.
 - d) Rest vocally; practice mentally.
 - e) Stay relaxed; maintain good posture while singing and practicing.
 - f) Have water bottle for refreshment.
 - g) Physical condition is important; practice when rested.
- 6) Write down any questions and problems to ask your teacher!

A good rehearsal has elements of surprise, but how a piece is learned should not be a surprise. In fact, I am going to share this article with my students and see how close we are to learning these routines. They will be honest and tell me the areas in which we need to improve. When our students leave our class, we should have given them the tools to interpret music. The procedures work for simple and complicated music.

The confidence our students gain by knowing the music will certainly make the difference when we ask them to “Blikket auf!”