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Sight-singing: break it down!

Seven Steps to Student Success

Sight Singing Methods for the Younger Training Choir or Elementary General Music Classroom

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Introduction

At our Winter Choral Workshop in January, I shared my methods for teaching younger or inexperienced singers how to sight sing. My students are almost always singers who do not play instruments, and their greatest struggle has been in trying to find pitches out of thin air when they do not have the aural repetition engrained in them as instrumentalists do. Our young, strictly choral students need tools for success.

Setting up for success

I like to start with rhythm. In my experience, if the singer can read the rhythm quickly and accurately, he/she stands a better chance of being able to focus on the pitches. Keep in mind that we're asking young brains to do a lot. They must identify a note, its value/length, the pitch, other notation on the page, and a language (and for many of my students English is a second language, if it is in English to begin with!), all within a split second. No time to fix mistakes; you have to keep going!

It's a huge accomplishment for our young singers if they are able to find some success in sight-singing. I have found that reading rhythms accurately seems to be the place to start. They can find success, and that builds the confidence they will need when they start to tackle the more difficult task of finding the pitch with their voices.

My favorite rhythm reading system is the use of the Kodaly mnemonics, but I have also found some success with the Gordon mnemonics and with using numbers. I usually tend to come back to Kodaly, though; there is some comfort for my singers in knowing that a quarter note is always "ta" and they don't have to worry about what number they should be on.

At the beginning of the year, I keep rhythm and pitch exercises completely separate from each other. I really drill the rhythm reading, using an old percussion methods book for exercises. My 4th grade students can easily read the complex sixteenth patterns after a few weeks of rhythm drills, both

individually and in the large group setting, and the dotted quarter/eighth and triplet patterns are easy for them as well.

When it comes to pitch, I use the Curwen hand signs with moveable “do” solfege. The vowels lend themselves to good choral singing, students learn to recognize intervals as they become more adept at using solfege, and the use of Curwen’s hand signals give children and adults a kinesthetic tool that they would otherwise lack.

We begin with echo patterns using my magnetic solfege tools. My suggestion to anyone tackling this for the first time is to choose the methods most appropriate for the developmental level with which you work. You may find yourself using a combination of methods if you’re like me!

Once the singers have a basic mastery of the two major components, I begin the process of combining the two elements of rhythm and pitch by breaking everything down into manageable units. Question: Why do we need to break things down into smaller tasks? Answer: We teach this way in our elementary music classes. Kids are familiar with this. Why change what works? When we make the task smaller and more manageable, kids will gain confidence as they gain skills. The large task can be very overwhelming for inexperienced singers! Your ELL and IEP kids will find success, too. The method I am about to describe empowers students to eventually become independent musicians that can read music well and sing it expressively. This requires a comprehensive K-12 music education, and our attention to even the youngest singers.

Sue’s Seven Steps to Student Success

First, I must give credit where credit is due. Most of the ideas I am going to share with you come from the work of Dr. Gary Wilson, who was a professor of music education at the University of Arizona while I was completing my master’s degree in the early 1990’s. In my usual fashion, I have taken his ideas and modified them slightly to fit my particular style of teaching, and I highly suggest that if this resonates for you that you do the same. Take what works for you and modify it to fit what you do.

I do have a few methods books that I use that are lying around the room at Meeker Middle School, but I have found that the kids buy into it much more quickly if I get rid of the methods books after a few weeks and get right into literature. It gives me the ability to take any problematic section of any piece I’m doing, employ these steps, and then have the kids solve the problem. At the same time, I try to have one song that is taught *completely* using these steps. I *never* play a part, even a couple of notes, for the kids; they must learn the entire thing through this method. They will applaud themselves when they get it, and I’ve learned that it is almost criminal for me to steal away that success from them by trying to take shortcuts. We put the accompaniment part in *after the students have learned the parts and can sing them a cappella*.

Don't get me wrong—it will take some time on your part to find songs that you can use for this, so you will need to do some research, but trust me, they are out there. If you've done your preliminary work teaching rhythms, it will be much easier to find songs. If you're just getting started, look for songs that use accidentals only occasionally. You can tackle those accidentals once the kids become familiar with the method.

Step 1: Choose a short passage (*preferably 2-4 measures*). Read the rhythm using the Kodaly mnemonics or whatever method you choose to use. Correct mistakes by isolating a measure and then put it back into context. You're teaching your students that they should *isolate the problem and fix it before they move on*.

Step 2: Identify the solfege. For young children, the director must establish do. For older singers, give them 2 rules about key signatures: *The last sharp is ti, and the last flat is fa. When there are no sharps or flats, middle C is do*. Let younger singers write the solfege in their music (lightly), but ask them to just put the first letter of the word, un-capitalized. I usually let them work with an elbow buddy, and then we do it together as a group. Once they get comfortable with identifying solfege in that key I have them start to do it without writing it in. When they do write it in, I don't punish mistakes; I ask them to erase any mistakes and fix them before they go on. When I want to assess them after sufficient instruction, I have them do it individually and turn it in for a grade, but all initial work is in small or large groups.

Step 3: Say the solfege in rhythm using the hand signs. This helps kids get their mouths around those syllables while practicing the rhythm again. It also introduces the kinesthetic “handle” that kids need. Refine practice until they can do it without stumbling.

Step 4: Establish the key by having the students sing “do-mi-so-mi-do-low so-do” (You can use regular “so” for younger singers if the key goes too low for their voices). Find the first note of the passage of the group and then play EON (Every Other Note). EON is a pitch matching activity. It is played *without rhythm*. You sing the first note, they sing the second, you sing the third, and so on. **Don't correct mistakes!** Go back and switch. They sing the first note, you sing the second, etc. By the time they are finished, they will have heard all of the correct pitches.

Step 5: Sing all of the pitches on solfege, using hand signs, without rhythm. Refine practice until they can do it without mistakes.

Step 6: Sing all of the pitches on solfege, using hand signs, with rhythm. Refine practice until they can do it without mistakes.

Step 7: Sing the passage using the words. Add the additional notation if it is

marked. If they miss a section, go back to solfege/signs, and then have them re-do it on words. If they master this, repeat the entire process with the next 2-4 measures, and when you have a full section ready, you may add the accompaniment. Remember, they must be able to do it error free, with dynamics and other notation, before you add accompaniment.

Final thoughts

We've all been in that place where it's a few weeks before a performance and the sight-singing practice takes a big back seat to the rehearsal of the performance pieces. I would like to present to you the idea that if you really stick to prioritizing the literacy part of your rehearsal, your students will need less time in the long run to learn songs, which will free up more of your time for polishing. If you avoid including literacy practice in your everyday routine, you are shortchanging yourselves and your singers. I want to highly encourage you to pick one method and commit to it. No matter how hard it may be to keep it going, stick with it. I can promise you that your choir will be the better for it.