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## *The Unaccompanied Choral Rehearsal*

Consistent rehearsing without accompaniment can improve a choir's sight-singing, intonation, sense of ensemble, and ability to respond to conducting gestures

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At a recent high school choral festival, I spoke with a young conductor who confessed that she spent a majority of her choral rehearsal time teaching from behind the piano. She admitted that as someone with strong keyboard skills but little previous conducting experience, she felt “safe” there. In fact, she was able to reach a large repertoire of music this way, and her choirs were considered successful.

However, after a number of years of using this approach, she felt she had “created a monster; a choral program that was completely dependent on the piano, made up of choirs that could not read well, respond to subtle conducting nuances, or sing in tune without the aid of a keyboard.

In programs that benefit from good student or staff accompanists, the conductor's ability and willingness to get out from behind the piano and really conduct can lead to an immediate improvement in a choir's sense of ensemble and ability to respond with sensitivity to conducting gestures.

However, even these measures can fail to solve a basic problem that many choral programs face: continued dependence on the piano for music learning and intonation. Although conductors hope that at least students in their advanced ensembles will be strong, independent sightreaders, it is often not the case. Many students are unable to learn their parts without the aid of a piano.

Even students with some theory and ear-training experience often find it difficult to transfer the skills obtained in course work or lessons to the reading of “real” choral music in the rehearsal situation.

To foster the development of independent musicians who can both sight-read and sing in tune without complete dependence on the piano, as well as singers who will have the skills to go out into the world and teach both themselves and others, each conductor needs to develop a plan.

## **Choosing a System**

To help students achieve musical independence from the piano, a sight-reading system needs to be selected to give singers a tool with which to approach the music. A variety of systems are available, including a Kodaly-based movable do system, a fixed do system, and a number system. Any of these systems can work if it is used consistently. However, for several reasons, many teachers prefer the movable do system, with a do-do scale for major keys and a la-la scale for minor keys.

One of the advantages of the movable do system over the fixed do system is its ability to highlight the harmonic function of each note in a scale (for example, in a major key, do is always the tonic).

The recurring function of each syllable, regardless of the key, not only serves as an aid for sightreading, but also introduces students to the theoretical construction of a composition.

While the number system has the same advantage (“1” is also always do in a major key), it is unnecessarily complex when altered notes are introduced. Instead of saying “do, di, re, ri...,” students using the number system say, “one, sharp-one, two, sharp-two....” The introduction of a sharp or flat alters the rhythm of the note in the number system, making quickly moving passages more difficult to sing.

Another advantage of the movable do system is that students learn to sing pure Italian vowels, which encourages them to work for beauty of tone even during sight-reading exercises. Students may stumble over the syllables at first, but consistent practice will bring consistent improvement and greater facility, and students will become used to singing syllables different from those that the other singers around them are singing. Because of its advantages, the movable do system is the sight-singing system referred to in the following discussion.

## **Unaccompanied vocalises**

The first step in the process of weaning choirs away from the piano is to discontinue its use in vocal warm-ups. The conductor, not the piano, needs to model the vocalises. The first few attempts by the singers might be unsuccessful, and it might become apparent that the piano has been hiding many instances of poor intonation. Even the most advanced choirs may have difficulty singing scales and arpeggios in tune and modulating up and down by half steps without help. It will be, at first, frustrating and then liberating as singers really begin to hear the pitches that previously had been covered by the piano. Students will begin to listen more carefully to each other and to make adjustments in their pitch and tone. Soon, even in beginning ensembles,

discussion may begin to take place regarding tuning the third of a triad or raising a leading tone.

In addition to warming up on neutral syllables, students need to start practicing vocalises on movable do syllables in order to develop an aural understanding of each syllable's relationship to other pitches.

After starting with simple triads and scalar passages, the conductor can move on to exercises that include arpeggios and complete scales, as well as other patterns.

The next step is to integrate the students' aural understanding with visual understanding. Advanced ensembles may begin singing from major and minor scales written on the blackboard. With the conductor pointing to notes in a scale, students may respond by singing the corresponding syllables. With a beginning choir, it may be necessary to move more slowly by starting with sol, mi (written on the board in numerous keys), adding la, do, re, and finally completing the scale with fa and ti. Simultaneously, students need to spend time clapping and counting all basic rhythmic values. The next step is to advance to non-scalar passages. These may include conductor-created diatonic melodies or previously existing folk-based melodies, which can be taken from a variety of sources.

### **Choosing music**

An essential component of learning to sing without accompaniment is having students begin reading choral music as soon as possible. The beginning choir can start by reading a single line of a diatonic choral piece (usually the soprano part) on syllables, later adding a second line (usually the bass part) for two-part sight-singing. In time, students can advance to easy, four-part diatonic sight-reading. A more advanced choir may begin reading in four parts immediately, starting with diatonic or primarily diatonic music in a variety of keys, such as easy Bach chorales or early American fuguing tunes.

Eventually, after a significant amount of time has been devoted to diatonic reading, choirs can move to music with a greater number of accidentals and, later, to music with modulations. In both beginning and advanced choirs, a portion of each rehearsal should be devoted to reading part or all of a choral work without accompaniment. In advanced choirs, tonal reading needs to be supplemented by work on intervals as well, so that students have a way to

approach non-tonal music, which requires purely intervallic reading. Students who sing without piano accompaniment typically gain more confidence, learn more quickly, and sing with better intonation.

### **Rehearsing without a piano**

As advanced choirs become proficient at sight-singing, it is possible to take an additional step: the removal of the piano from the rehearsal entirely, with the conductor using a pitch pipe for starting notes. Conductors may approach this decision with a great deal of trepidation, fearing the loss of a very familiar “crutch” and worrying that rehearsals will fall apart completely. Initially, some rehearsals may fall apart. In the early stages, music learning may be much slower than it was with a piano, which can be frustrating for the conductor and the choir.

After a time, however, students who continually practice sight-reading in class and take responsibility for working on difficult passages outside of class will improve markedly. Because most choirs perform music that is at a level significantly higher than their reading level, the students’ commitment to individual practice outside the rehearsal is essential to the success of the unaccompanied rehearsal.

Students may even begin to take pride in a piano-free rehearsal. Rehearsing without the piano forces students to figure out problem intervals themselves, resulting in more accurate retention and in making students more secure in intervallic singing. As with unaccompanied vocalizing, unaccompanied rehearsing covers up nothing, allowing students to hear themselves and improve their intonation.

Ultimately, however, the success of the unaccompanied choral rehearsal is highly dependent on the preparation of the conductor. Without the piano for a guide, the conductor has only his or her ears to detect wrong notes and intervals. The conductor needs to know every note of every score and have an inner conception of how the music should sound. A choir’s least successful unaccompanied rehearsals will occur on days when the conductor’s preparation is less than sufficient.

While the unaccompanied choral rehearsal has the power to create stronger, more independent singers, less advanced ensembles may not be ready for

completely unaccompanied rehearsals. However, even a beginning choir can sing at least one composition per concert that it has learned without piano accompaniment. The piano may continue to be a helpful tool for at least a portion of all beginning choir rehearsals, as well as for advanced choir rehearsals when studying extended works. Also, piano accompaniments that are part of any choral work will, of course, need to be added in as a concert date draws near. Whenever possible, however, unaccompanied choral rehearsal will serve as an aid in the achievement of every conductor's goal; the development of a choral program filled with capable, independent singers whose musical abilities continue to grow stronger each day.