

April 2010

Creating beautiful phrases

by Leora Schwitters, WA-ACDA Treasurer and Past-President

There are some really basic rules to creating a beautiful phrase. Children as young as second grade and senior singers in your church choir, including every age/level in between, can easily grasp these concepts if you empower them to know. Many of these are “Obvious-Man” observations, but it may be worthwhile reviewing them now that Large Group Festival adjudication season is looming.



When is it OK to take a collective breath in a phrase?

- Never in the middle of a word, even if the word is in a different language.
- If the text has a comma, period, or other punctuation, a breath may be in order. Read the text as if it were a poem, and you will know exactly when a pause is appropriate.
- If there is a rest, a breath is obviously OK. The sound directly preceding the rest ends exactly ON the start of that rest—that would be the precise moment to place the ending consonant of the preceding phrase.

When the text demands a longer phrase that is too long for your singers to negotiate, teach them how to stagger breathe. This is really fun for the youngest singers! While holding a long pitch, they keep their mouth open, fade out, breathe, and merge back in, while the audience is given no clue. Or, when singing different words, they keep their mouth moving to the words while they sneak a breath on certain syllables. Advanced singers can be told to simply not breathe at the same time as their neighbors; younger singers may need to be assigned a syllable to ‘fake the audience out’ on, making sure it is a different syllable for each singer within a section.

How can each phrase be shaped?

Young singers understand the term “Rainbow Phrase” very quickly, and though that shape doesn’t apply to every phrase, it certainly does to many. This is simply starting a phrase at one dynamic and then adding a crescendo to the peak of the phrase before a decrescendo to the end. The director can determine which word is the ‘sweet note’ or peak of the phrase, or it can be determined collaboratively.

Shaping individual notes/words under the main umbrella of a phrase.

- Speak the word. Which syllable is stressed? Sing it that way, even if the melody doesn't reflect that inflection.
- Which words are most important? Give those a bit more stress and back off of words such as 'and', 'the', 'a', 'of' .
- Notes underneath the big umbrella of the whole phrase, especially the longer ones, can be shaped, too, so that there are smaller crescendos/decrescendos going on under the big crescendo/decrescendo of the entire phrase.
- A tied note across a bar line generally indicates a crescendo.
- A dotted quarter note before an eighth note generally indicates a crescendo.

Is your conducting conducive to beautiful phrasing?

Chances are, if you are just conducting with the basic patterns we were taught in college conducting classes, it isn't. Don't be confined to those patterns. Find ways to use your arms and hands to indicate these concepts outlined above. Sometimes just circles work wonderfully!

Once singers get comfortable with these basic concepts, they become empowered to make their own, informed decisions on producing phrases. As they become more involved with the text, much more comprehension occurs, which leads to more emotional involvement, which leads to REAL music making. Don't sell your singers short. Everyone can learn to be an expressive singer.