

# Building Choral Tone • Dr. Richard Nance • Pacific Lutheran University

## Introduction

This article is meant to offer a very concise look into the subject of developing a healthy and artistic vocal tone with the choral ensemble. Volumes have been written about this topic, and I must put forth the disclaimer that the ideas I present here are not new. The vocalises I have used here have come down through the years from teacher to teacher, and the pedagogy I will talk about is consistent with the ideas of many other choral teachers.

I will start by saying that any concept of excellent choral tone cannot exist without a basic understanding of the human vocal instrument and the way it creates a beautiful sound. This is of course a huge topic, but here are some fundamental ideas:

An excellent vocal tone can be said to be clear, resonant, free, and pleasing. It is rooted in:

1. Excellent, consistent singing posture.
2. The proper inhalation, suspension and exhalation of the breath.
3. Proper coordination of the breath and phonation.
4. Proper vowel formation, alignment and placement for resonance.
5. Ease of transition between the various registers of the voice (passaggio).
6. A natural, flexible and pleasing vibrato (not developed in younger singers).

Most choral directors are the only voice teacher their singers will ever know. It is absolutely important that choral directors have at least a working knowledge of how the voice works. Indeed the teacher can actually do harm to his or her students if not informed. It is vitally important to dedicate a good segment of time out of each rehearsal for vocal training. This is the conductor's chance to focus only on vocal training, and many of the singers will not receive this in any other form. If the singers in the ensemble do not have a solid understanding of proper vocal production as it relates to their own instrument, great choral ensemble tone will not be attainable. **Remember, the choir has to have an excellent sound to be successful--nothing else matters.**

A successful vocal warmup follows a rather simple system, and all the elements I will mention should be included:

### Stage 1: Proper posture and breath

1. First, the singers have to be placed in a proper position to sing: standing in a tall, strong posture with the chest elevated (but not tense), shoulders relaxed, knees not locked, and one foot placed slightly ahead of the other at shoulder width. The head should be centered and level, the neck relaxed.
2. When taking a proper breath, a singer must have an animated face, and should have a feeling of space and relaxation inside the head as air is inhaled. The soft palate is lifted, the tongue down and relaxed, the throat open. As the air enters there should be no constriction, no sound ("silent breath, or warm breath"). Some visualizations to help achieve this:
  - a. Put an imaginary fragrant flower under your nose, breath in fully through the nose and take in the aroma. Open the mouth to exhale.
  - b. Breath in through an imaginary straw.
  - c. Hot "mashed potato" breath: put an imaginary spoon full of hot mashed potatoes in your mouth. Quick! Get the tongue down--don't burn it, roof up also! Pull air in to cool the food.
3. Many singers have no concept of how the air naturally fills their bodies. Without getting technical, give the singers some visualizations to help them understand this.
  - a. If possible have the singers lay on the floor on their backs. Place a small stack of books on the abdomen, just below the sternum. As air is inhaled, the books move naturally up and down.
  - b. When standing to breath, have the singers begin with hands in front of their abdomen, then move the arms gradually down and out as air is taken in. Reverse this as the air is exhaled. Be sure the singers take the air in with an "open" breath, and have them watch one of their hands to be sure the air is being gradually inhaled and exhaled.
4. When exhaling the air must be controlled and not completely consumed by the end of a musical phrase. A good way to practice this is with hissing exercises or long tones. The air must feel like a constant stream of water, the sound produced is like a leaf riding on top of this water.
5. When proper phonation occurs the flow of air is coordinated with the vocal folds causing a natural vibration. A healthy onset without a glottal attack is necessary. A flowing hand motion and a very slight aspirated "h" may help this. The "h" eventually needs to be imagined.
6. Once phonation occurs, the tone must be properly placed in the mask of the face in order to resonate. Have the singers imagine throwing the sound into the mask, using the hard palate like a deflector. This may cause a slight feeling of nasality, but the sound must not be nasal. Put some nose in the sound without the sound being in the nose. Another idea is to have the singers put a hand at arms length in front of the face in a strong, semi-cupped position, then have throw the sound forward into the palm of the hand.
7. Always breath as if you were going to sing 'ah' (the tallest vowel), then send the sound forward so it is not swallowed. This feeling of space is maintained for the other vowels, but there will be subtle changes in the position of the tongue and walls inside the mouth. "Breath for 'ah,' but sing 'ee,' and send the sound forward."
8. The best vowel progression for a unified sound is ee-eh-ah-oh-oo. Now, we are ready to sing!

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### Stage 2a: mid-range descending exercises

Always stay in medium range with stage two exercises. Begin each vocalise at medium volume and descend in a decrescendo, ending mp or piano--bring the head voice down to the lower range for beauty and warmth. Sing these exercises musically, use good phrasing. There are lots of options for adding beginning consonants or combining vowels for all of these. Always insist on a beautiful, light, lyric quality, but with good forward focus. Try singing them in minor keys!

**1** *mp* **2** *mf* **3** *mp*

Fee ah\_\_ eh ee      Yawm yawm yawm yawm      Vee veh vee veh vee veh vee vee  
 I sigh\_\_ to sing      Glo - ri - a      Meh o meh o meh o meh o meh  
 Se - nyaw - re      Bee bee bee bee      Mah o mah o mah o mah o mah

**4** *mp* **5** *mf* **6** *mp*

Mm \_\_\_\_\_      Noo \_\_\_\_\_      Mm \_\_\_\_\_  
 Oo \_\_\_\_\_      Naw \_\_\_\_\_      Oo \_\_\_\_\_  
 Brrr \_\_\_\_\_      Zee \_\_\_\_\_ oo      Aw \_\_\_\_\_

**7** *mf leggiero* **8** *mp*  
*Close immediately*

Ma - ma made me mash my M & Ms      hung aw \_\_\_\_\_  
 Pa - pa pa - pa picked a pot of peas      zing ee \_\_\_\_\_

**9** *mp leggiero*

Mim mi mi mim, \_\_ mim mi mi mim, \_\_ mim mi mi mim \_\_ mi mim <sup>3</sup> mi mim \_\_ mi mim \_\_ mi mim  
 Mom mo mo mom, \_\_ mom mo mo mom, \_\_ mom mo mo mom \_\_ mo mom \_\_ mo mom \_\_ mo mom

The next exercise is great for helping your guys find their way through transitions from register to register in descending exercises. Have all the female voices sing a light “oo” to begin, then have the male singers match it in quality and register (falsetto is fine)--encourage the basses that it is alright to get up there with everyone else. The first few times it may be helpful for the female voices to just sustain the first note throughout to give the guys a reference point. Having the voices go in opposite directions is good for working on intonation. Be sure the male voices stay in falsetto as long as possible on the way down and have them mix gradually toward a fuller voice, but stay light. It may take some time for them to get used to this, and you need to make sure they know it is just fine for the voice to crack. Move up and down in key only a few half steps. As the singers get more comfortable with this exercise the men can go down a full octave. Moving up a full octave scale is challenging for the women if the key is too high. The “oo” vowel should be changed to “oh.”

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⑩ *p*

Oo oo oo oo

**Descending exercises for vowel alignment**

Vowel alignment and matching are of utmost importance in building choral tone. When breathing, always make space for the tallest vowel, the make the other vowels “revolve” around that space, but be sure to keep the sound forward in the mouth so the tone is not covered. These descending exercises are excellent for teaching the connection from vowel to vowel.

⑪ *mp*

Ee eh ah oh oo Ee eh ah oh oo

⑫ *mf*

Oo oh ah eh ee

**Stage 2b: mid-range ascending exercises**

Stay in a narrow range--the choir is not warmed up just yet. Make certain that the singers start lightly on the bottom end of the exercise. If they are too heavy, they will not be able to shift registers with agility and in tune. Have them shape the exercise with a slight crescendo as it ascends, and be sure the decrescendo on the way back down. Breath for ah, but sing ee--bring the sound forward! Use hand motions to help.

⑬ ⑭ ⑮

Zee ah Ah oh Zeh ah Fee oo Zee eh ah Hip hip ho ho ho ho ho ho

⑯ ⑰

Ee eh ah oh oo Mah oh mah oh mah oh mah oh mah Ee oo ee oo ee oo ee Ee eh ah oh oo

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## Stage 3: Extensions and cross range exercises

Once the choir has had a chance to feel comfortable and warm in the mid-range, move to some exercises that blend registers and extend to the outer parts of the range. Stretch the sopranos and tenors to their upper range, but allow the altos and basses to drop out or down an octave if too high. The opposite is true when doing lower descending exercises. It is very important to start at the bottom of ascending exercises in a light, shifted voice so there is less shifting to do in the passagio on the way up the scale. Keeping the sound forward in the mask of the face will help keep the tone resonant and not fuzzy at the bottom. Likewise, when descending into the lower range, gradually mix the head voice into the middle and lower registers, coloring the sound with beauty and warmth. Stay away from full chest voice, but allow your altos to sing in it using the warmth of the head voice to color it. Please note that some vowel modification must take place as voices ascend into the upper range. Female voices need to create space for vowels to place there--oh and ah vowels work well. Male voices work well with eh, aw (but not swallowed) or oh. Ee can work if the lips are pursed almost in a German ö vowel position. For female voices in the lowest range, try vee or veh. For male voices, relaxed but resonant (not swallowed) ah. Encourage your singers to move their bodies while the sing--give them motions to help energize their singing and help them be expressive.

18 *mp*

Mm \_\_\_\_\_ Zee \_\_\_\_\_ eh \_\_\_\_\_ ah \_\_\_\_\_  
Oo \_\_\_\_\_ Ah \_\_\_\_\_ oh \_\_\_\_\_

19 *mp*

Ah \_\_\_\_\_ oh \_\_\_\_\_

20 *mp*

I love to sing to - day

21 *mp*

Ee eh ee eh oh ah oh ah oh

22 *mp*

Bel - la se - no - ra

23 *mp*

Zee \_\_\_\_\_ Zim \_\_\_\_\_ Zoo \_\_\_\_\_

24 *mp*

Fee \_\_\_\_\_ Nah \_\_\_\_\_ oo \_\_\_\_\_

25 *mp* Begin mezzo voce, keep it even between registers

Ah \_\_\_\_\_ Mm \_\_\_\_\_ Bee \_\_\_\_\_ Vah \_\_\_\_\_  
Down to the bot - tom of the sea.

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### Developing Choral Tone: The Conductor's Role

Assuming that teaching proper vocal technique is a regular part of the choral rehearsal, how does the conductor take all these individual instruments and create or coordinated choral ensemble tone? Some ideas:

1. Choose repertoire that allows you and your singers to focus on sound. Remember, if the choir does not have an excellent sound, nothing else matters. There are undoubtedly great pieces of literature that you have always wanted to conduct and share with your singers. However, if the technical demands of the repertoire are beyond the ability level of the singers, they will struggle to just survive, and any concept of tone is the first thing that goes by the wayside.
2. If possible, place your singers in vocal categories and stand them in formation next to other singers that match their quality. Be sure to put a bit of space between the singers for resonance.
3. Be smart about balancing the choir, even if it means standing in some unorthodox way. Experiment with ways to create the best artistic and stylistic product. Often the structure of the music will help dictate this. For instance, if you have just a few men singing, it might be better to put them in the front where they can be heard without pushing.
4. Carry the work you put into vocal warmup into the rehearsal of the repertoire. This sounds like a no-brainer, but in my experience as a clinician, I have found that many choirs make a great sound in warmup and immediately regress to bad vocal habits when singing their repertoire.
5. Use unison Bel Canto art songs as a regular part of your repertoire. Many of the world's most outstanding youth choirs do this. Use them both in rehearsal and in concert. Many websites carry this music at a very inexpensive cost, and in a variety of ranges. One very good site is: <http://www.schubertline.co.uk/home.htm>
6. If you have sung in a choir, you understand that in many cases the singers cannot really hear how they sound. Record your group on a regular basis in rehearsal, not just in concert. Play the recording for the choir, and have discussions about the sound they are making.
7. Play recordings of great choral ensembles for your choir. Singers learn a lot by listening and emulating. With the advent of the internet, there is easy access to recordings by excellent choirs at all levels.
8. Geoffrey Boers uses the idea of having the singers in the ensemble rotate like a lighthouse as they sing in order to listen carefully to the sounds around them in order to match up. This works very well.
9. As you rehearse, ask for student feedback about the sound they are making both individually and as an ensemble. Relate this to the concepts for excellent tone that you teach every day in warm up. It is vitally important for the conductor to know that the students understand the sound they are creating, and that they have ideas for evaluating it. Occasionally bring students out front to listen and critique. It is important to couch all this in a positive way--the students will tend to be very critical, and often negative
10. Take a very close look at your conducting gesture--is it evoking the beautiful sound you are after? I have noticed in working with high school choirs that many teachers over conduct. They believe this is necessary in order to coax the desired sound out of the ensemble. The opposite could not be more true--the singers usually know very well what to do, they just do not feel empowered to do it because they conductor tries to do everything for them. Stop being a "traffic cop," you cannot sing the piece for the students. Less is more in conducting. You don't have to be a minimalist, just be subtle and expressive. Empower your students to be educated musicians--not just singers--then get out of the way.
11. When conducting be sure your face is active and expressive, a model for free and relaxed tone. Show breath preparations--young singers in particular need a consistent model for proper breath. Breath preps are much more important than cues--you know the old joke, "What is a cue? A conductor's response to an entrance!" If the prep is solid, the entrance will also be, and the singer will be placed in a good, open position for the initial vowel.
12. Drop the invisible curtain between yourself and the choir. Is the sound you have imagined for this piece what is really coming out of the choir? Listen--use your critical ear. Have your score prepared so you know where vocal issues are possibly going to occur. Have some ideas for fixing these problems at the ready. It might be best to record your rehearsals and listen to them critically when not in the moment of the rehearsal. Be honest with yourself and the choir, and if you are not getting the production you are after, do something about it. Be a stickler--letting things slide just builds bad habits that are difficult to break.
13. Finally, when a choir is singing with optimal choral tone, the individual singers are:
  - a. Producing the same pitch, in tune
  - b. Producing unified, consistent vowels
  - c. Producing a free, consistent vocal color that is stylistically correct and adaptable for any repertoire.
  - d. Listening carefully and critically to each other, and making adjustments in their tone as necessary to match other singers around them.
  - e. Comfortable with the repertoire so they can concentrate on the sound they are making.
  - f. Empowered to make decisions about their individual sound, but trusting in the conductor to control the overall sound of the ensemble.

Some good, general sources for vocalises:

*The Complete Choral Warm-up Book*  
Russell Robinson and Jay Althouse  
Alfred 11653

*Voice Builders for Better Choirs*  
Emily Crocker  
Hal Leonard 8743260

*The Choral Warm-up Collection*  
Sally K. Albrecht  
Alfred 21676