



CHORAL SINGER

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|| *Building better ensembles voice by voice* ||

Warming up the American Boychoir Way

A Nutcracker Suite

If you want something done, so the old saying goes, ask a busy person. The Director of the American Boychoir certainly fits that description. Fernando Malvar-Ruiz (see Resources) prepares the Choir for its frequent appearances at national and international events. He travels, not only with the Choir, but frequently to serve as guest conductor for choral festivals and ACDA events. And every summer he teaches (conducting and musicianship) at the Kodály Institute at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio.

Despite his many obligations, Malvar-Ruiz is a firm believer in the value of warm-up time, even if the

rehearsal is short. “The five minutes out of 25 that you spend — or 10-15 minutes of an hour and a half rehearsal — will actually save time in the end. Warm-up time is an opportunity both to focus the mind and to concentrate solely on vocal technique.” He shared some of his methods at a conference of the Eastern Regional ACDA in New York City.

Guided imagery

This relaxation technique “gets everyone thinking about the same thing and helps them to focus. It’s especially helpful before a concert.” The conductor recommends varying the image, but this beach

example is a favorite of the boys.

- Close your eyes. Breathe slowly, and ever more deeply.
- Imagine the sand on your feet. It’s warm. You hear a seagull. You smell the sea. You really want to go swimming.
- Count down from 10 to 1, thinking about anything quantifiable, such as 10 favorite foods, 10 best moments in the concert, etc.
- You feel more and more restful.
- Stretch your arms upward, one after the other. Slowly twist your torso. Stretch your arms out straight in front of you and slowly turn the palms together. (It helps to add this physical movement to

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Editor’s NOTE

June, July and August traditionally provide a respite from the rigors of the academic year. For many of us, that includes a hiatus from singing. September, therefore, is a good time for gentle reminders about the vocal art, and a gentle re-introduction to choral routine. We’ve chosen to focus this issue on the concept of balance, which suffuses every aspect of singing – from the vocal apparatus, to how we think about and manage our bodies, to the very music we sing. So take a deep breath and wade in. We welcome you back, and wish you a most successful year.



Andrea O’Connell, Editor and Publisher

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How chord progression is linked to balance in music

Walking the Tightrope

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What does “warming up” the voice really mean?

Plus...

Resources



Vocal Technique cont.

Vocal Technique

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the warm-up — remember: body, mind, spirit.)

Focus on the breath

Breathing is a relaxation mechanism. Each inspiration helps to relax the vocal apparatus.

- Your breathing should be low and circular. We think of breathing in and out, but the breath itself doesn't ever stop.

Inhale silently, feeling

the relaxation in the back of the tongue. Exhale on shhhh.

- Lie down on the floor and put a book on your abdomen. Use breath, not belly muscles, to move the book.
- Blow, delicately, on an imaginary grain of sand in your hand.

Relaxing the vocal apparatus

It's important to warm up the facial muscles, especially the tongue and the lips.

- Do lip trills, exaggerated facial gestures, big yawns.

"Ah goes flat when the back of the tongue is too high," he says. "There is a tendency, especially with boys, to strain — to artificially stretch the vocal cords. This tenses

the throat and makes it difficult to lower the larynx." The director stresses relaxing the tongue (flat in back, but not pushed down), and resting the tip of the tongue behind the lower front teeth.



The Nutcracker exhibits the proper way to drop the jaw.

"Don't sing like Muppets®," (i.e., by stretching the neck), he warns, "but rather like a nutcracker" (by dropping the jaw, see illustration).

Vocalization

Malvar-Ruiz likes to start vocal exercises on **D**. Using the same

note each time is a good way to develop what he calls semi-perfect pitch.

- Start by simply humming, very softly, very legato. Then transition to **oo** ("pure head voice").
- Sing **soo** sliding down a fifth, going through "every little pitch."
- Give a "huge sigh, from extremely high."

For consonants

Choose any rhythmic pattern that is fun. It's important to be flexible and to allow sufficient time to breathe.

- Model a pattern of consonants with a certain rhythmic pattern. It should incorporate an explosive and good attack from the

diaphragm, for example:

P-P-CH-CH-SH-SH, etc.

- Change the consonants while the vowel stays the same, such as:

SINGAHMAHMAH,

KINGAHMAHMAH, etc.

For attacks

Good attacks are a function of starting the note right on the breath. Imagine you are throwing a dart (i.e., overhand).

Sing the following sequences, staying very light.

Ya ha ha ha ha ha ha

5 5 5 5 5 3 1

(The last three notes are legato.)

See ah ah ah ah ah

1 5 4 3 2 1

Both exercises are as effective going up by half step or going down. Any exercise that starts toward mid head voice range (A above middle C) and goes down will help to blend registers.

Malvar-Ruiz approaches warming up with gentle good humor. He likes to use colorful imagery. To help convey a desired quality of a vowel sound, for example, he might toss out almost any kind of descriptor: Happy. Sad. Bright yellow. Pizza! He demonstrates every day that taking time to warm up every part of the voice — and the mind and body as well — provides a handsome payoff. Unless you're a Muppet. ||