

REHEARSAL BREAKS

Customizing Choral Warmups

by Steven Demorest

MOST conductors use warmups at the beginning of a rehearsal to establish a supported sound, increase vocal flexibility, and build vocal technique. This is often done through a series of exercises that remain relatively unchanged from day to day. In recent years, the late Frauke Haasemann and others have shown the possibility of using warmups to build vocal techniques tailored to different styles of music.¹

By customizing warmups to the literature being rehearsed, a conductor can prepare a choir both vocally and musically. The basic principle behind this approach is that a choir should never sing without some kind of musical goal or intention. This can be accomplished in one of two ways: 1) altering existing warmup pat-

terns to reflect general characteristics of a piece; or 2) extracting a particularly difficult pitch or rhythmic pattern from the music to be rehearsed and writing an exercise around it.

Altering Existing Exercises

One of the simplest adjustments a conductor can make is to alter common warmup patterns to fit the articulation, dynamics, tonality, or rhythm of the literature being rehearsed. One common vocal warmup is the five-tone pattern in Figure 1.

This simple pattern can be adapted in a number of ways to reflect musical characteristics of a piece. For instance, the articulation could be performed *martellato* (Figure 1a). The pattern could be altered further to reflect sixteenth-note

runs (Figure 1b) or eighth-note groupings (Figure 1c). Notice that each of these exercises has a meter and a dynamic marking. Instead of having a choir just sing an exercise, have them sing it *mp* or *mf*. This builds an awareness of and sensitivity to dynamic variation from the beginning of rehearsal. Warmups are often taught by rote, but specifying a meter allows the conductor to better model a rhythmic shape for the exercise. This adds to the musical quality of the warmup and makes it easier for the choir to imitate.

Intonation and tonality are other areas of choral technique that can be addressed through warmups. It is always surprising to see a choir warm up exclusively on major-scale patterns and then rehearse a minor or modal piece of music in which the tuning demands are completely different. A simple adjustment in the tonality of the five-tone exercise in Figure 1 can help prepare the choir for the tuning demands of different modalities. Figure 1d shows the shift to minor, and Figure 1e and Figure 1f introduce the sixth scale degree and the lowered seventh to provide further drill in minor tonality.

Steven Demorest is Assistant Professor of Choral Music Education at the University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.

Figure 1 consists of six musical staves, labeled a through f, each showing a vocal exercise in 4/4 time with a dynamic marking of *mp*. Each staff begins with the syllable 'Lah' and is followed by a five-tone pattern. (a) The exercise is performed with a *martellato* (staccato) articulation. (b) The exercise features sixteenth-note runs. (c) The exercise features eighth-note groupings. (d) The exercise is performed in a minor tonality. (e) The exercise introduces the sixth scale degree. (f) The exercise introduces the lowered seventh scale degree.

Figure 1. Variations on five-tone exercises

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By varying the rhythm of the exercise, one can introduce a particular rhythmic motive or characteristic of a piece. Figure 2a shows the five-tone exercise in a dotted-rhythm pattern that could be used as preparation for its appearance in a piece such as Costeley's *Allon Gay Bergeres*. Figure 2b shows how a simple metrical adjustment to the five-note pattern can help prepare the rhythmic feel of triple meter. It is surprising how few traditional warmup patterns are in triple meter.

A common warmup is to vocalize on an arpeggiated chord. The exercise is often performed on an open vowel with a staccato articulation (Figure 3) to improve vocal flexibility and support. It may be difficult, however, to transfer vocally from that exercise to the type of supported legato sound needed for a piece, such as Brahms's "How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place." By altering the articulation and meter, it becomes a more effective preparation for the piece (Figure 3a). Often a variety of articulations or dynamics are needed within a piece, and exercises like those in Figure 3b and Figure 3c can be used to help the choir move easily from one to the other. It is important to distinguish between articulation and dynamics so that legato is not always *p* and staccato always *f*. Tonality demands can also be incorporated into this exercise, but one must be careful not to combine unusual tuning demands with extreme range, or it can produce the very vocal tension that should be avoided. The vowel and consonant combinations that are chosen for these exercises can be varied to reflect the language and the sound ideal of the literature at hand. For example, one might use the exercise in Figure 3d to prepare for a Romantic work and the exercise in Figure 3e for a Renaissance piece.²

Some form of chord warmup, like the one in Figure 4a, may be used to establish consistent vowel uniformity and blend. One can vary the dynamics, articulation, and sometimes the spellings of the chords to match the rehearsal demands of the day. A particularly challenging dynamic marking like *sfz* can be practiced during the warmup period on a static chord, rather than in the midst of rehearsal with the added problems of

Figure 2. Rhythmic adjustments to a five-tone scale

Figure 3. Variations on an arpeggiated exercise

Figure 4. Chordal warmup



Figure 4 (continued)

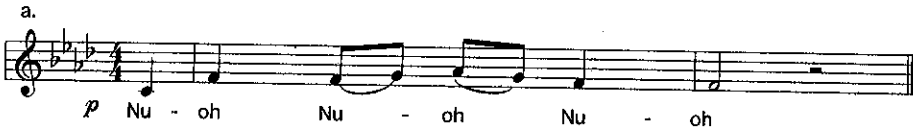
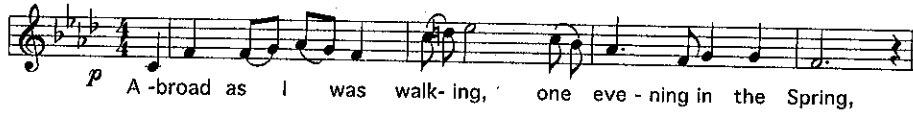


Figure 5. Warmup exercises based on the melody from Holst's "I Love My Love"

text, changing pitches, and other distractions (Figure 4b). This allows the choir to tackle new challenges couched in a familiar form and with particular emphasis on maintaining good vocal technique. Changing the standard five Italian vowels to reflect a different language can help to maintain good sound vocal production on unfamiliar syllables. For instance, when doing a German work, change "ni-ne-na-no-nu" to "ni-nä-na-nö-nü." Altering the rhythm and tonality of the chord warmup makes it ideal for section A of *Allon Gay Bergeres* (Figure 4c).

Writing Original Exercises

Sometimes the demands of a particular piece require that a new exercise be written that centers on those demands. The exercises in Figure 5a and Figure 5b were written to help prepare for the intonation challenges of Holst's *I Love My Love*. The first exercise prepares the opening melody's minor tonality and drop of a fourth. The second exercise emphasizes the raised sixth of the Dorian mode, which figures prominently in this piece. Notice that both exercises center on the intonation challenge, but not the entire sequence, from the piece.

The goal of creating specific musical warmups is to isolate the problem in a simpler context before encountering it in the choral work itself.

The exercises given in Figure 5 can begin at one pitch level and easily move up or down by half steps. This is best accomplished in exercises that end on the tonic or dominant. Ending on other scale degrees can make the chromatic shift harder to hear.

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One of the easiest ways to prepare for a difficult rhythm is to present it as a short rote sequence in the exercises at the beginning of rehearsal. The sequence from Daniel Pinkham's *Christmas Cantata*, movement one, while fitting the textual rhythm beautifully, can prove to be a difficult challenge. If the rhythm is pulled out and performed on *s* pulses as shown in Figure 6, it is more familiar when encountered in the score. In addition to hissing the pattern, the phrase shape and text stress can be reproduced for a more musical experience. To provide a mental challenge for the singers, have them identify where a particular pattern or exercise occurs in the piece.

In Figure 7 some exercises are given along with the musical sequence they were designed to prepare. Notice that all of the exercises begin in a comfortable range rather than in the original key of the work.

It is important to balance difficulties in one musical element with simplicity in another. Do not combine a difficult pitch sequence with a challenging rhythm, or the exercise could take longer to learn than rehearsing the passage in the piece itself.

Summary

These brief examples illustrate the potential benefits of using warmups as effective rehearsal techniques. Incorporating musical preparation in warmups can be something as simple as a rhythm pattern or tonality adjustment to a common exercise, or something as creative as writing a new exercise. When using this approach, there are several simple guidelines to follow:

- 1) Keep the exercise short and simple; if it cannot be done by rote, you might as well open the music and start rehearsing.
- 2) Begin and end on the tonic and dominant; this allows the exercise to modulate easily up and down the scale.
- 3) Treat the warmups as actual music with articulation, dynamics, and shape.
- 4) If at all possible, conduct the exercises; doing so clarifies the musical characteristics of the exercise and provides the choir practice in watching the conductor.

Figure 6. Breath exercise based on a theme from the Pinkham "Christmas Cantata," movement one

a. Sweelinck "Hodie"

b. Barber "Anthony O'Daly" from *Reincarnations*

c. Handel "And the Glory of the Lord" from *Messiah*

Figure 7. Warmup exercises designed to reflect specific musical challenges

Choral techniques are creative tools that are used in rehearsal to address particular challenges in a piece of music. Because rehearsal time is so limited, these same tools can be incorporated into warmup exercises that not only warm up the voice, but musicianship as well.

- 2 For more information on preparing the choral tone appropriate for different styles, see Wilhelm Ehmann and Frauke Haasemann, *Voice Building for Choirs*, translated by B. Smith (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1982).

NOTES

¹ I must acknowledge Frauke's influence on my approach to warmups; she was a wonderful teacher and a valued colleague.

—CJ—