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Choral Warm-Ups for Changing Adolescent Voices

By Patrick K. Freer

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Using research-supported techniques for warming up adolescent choral groups can help enhance students' vocal skills, their musicality, and their confidence.

How did you start your last choral rehearsal? Did you begin with the same warm-up procedures you used the day before (and the day before that)? Did you carefully choose the pitches of the vocalises so that each student could be successful, regardless of their current stage of vocal development? Did you design vocalises that addressed specific vocal issues found in the repertoire to be rehearsed that day?

During two decades of observing and leading middle school choral rehearsals, I've discovered that teachers frequently repeat *exactly* the warm-ups they present to their young adolescent choirs at every rehearsal. If we know one thing about middle school students, we know that they are constantly changing—physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Why is it that our warm-ups usually don't reflect these changes?

Think about this: If we start our warm-ups with a unison descending five-note stepwise vocalise (*sol, fa, mi, re, do*) and then ascend sequentially by half steps for multiple repetitions, who have we left out? Everyone who can't sing that pattern on those specific notes. We might say, "Well, that kid can't match pitch, or he or she can't do X, Y, or Z." What if we were wrong? What if we simply hadn't selected an instructional task that was achievable by everyone in the ensemble? Over time, the effects on the musical self-confidence of those "marginalized singers" would be devastating, and there would also be deleterious effects on the ensemble's performance. We would have failed to take advantage of what these young singers *could do*, instead focusing on what they physically *couldn't do*.

Consider how young children learn to speak: They begin by babbling combinations of vowels and consonants, gradually refining and combining them to form words. We encourage young children to experiment with vocal sounds on the path toward speech, and we need to similarly encourage young adolescents to explore their new vocal capabilities made possible by the maturation process.

The vocal warm-up processes used in choirs with changing adolescent voices must, in some ways, be different than the warm-up processes used in choirs of either early elementary children or older high school students. This article is an exploration of principles that need to underlie the development of warm-ups that meet the needs of changing voices, encourage even the most reluctant singer, and build toward ever-greater levels of choral success. In a *Music Supervisors' Journal* article printed more than eighty years ago, well-regarded pedagogue Charles Farnsworth wrote about the development of vocal technique:

[INDENTED BLOCK QUOTE:]

The question is not whether we shall do or not such technical things, but whether if in doing them we constantly keep in mind the ultimate purposes they are to serve, and not let them become ends in themselves; not just breathing exercises to see how long we can keep our lungs filled, and how

long it takes to empty them; not dull vocal exercises, harping on the vowel “oo,” and hoping that by some hokus-pokus its intractable vowel sisters will be rightly produced; not exercises that often induce the very thing we don’t want . . . If my experience is right, where we fail most is not in that we seek to give separate technical drills, but in that we do not unite the drills with their purpose— beautiful expression. We give the pupils the technical drill, but leave the most difficult part of the problem—its practical application—almost unpracticed.¹

[END QUOTE]

If we want our students to sing with efficiency and ease, we must teach them how to achieve those results. Young adolescents come to our classrooms with a variety of vocal habits, some that are helpful and some that are less so. Still others enter our rehearsals lacking the confidence to sing or believing that they cannot sing at all. The choral warm-up process is one of the greatest tools that teachers can possess for leading young adolescents toward singing that is healthful, age-appropriate, and musically satisfying.

Adolescent Changing Voices

Choral teachers in middle schools are champions of the “music for every child and every child for music” mantra that has guided music education for the past century. Middle school teachers find their choral classes filled with students who represent various stages of vocal change, are experiencing rapid physical and cognitive changes, and, to be honest, are sometimes enrolled in choral classes to fulfill an academic requirement rather than because of choice. Still, our goal is to accommodate all of their voices within the choral experience so that each student can participate, learn, and experience musical growth. During the middle school years, both boys and girls will experience a gradual process of voice change, with the male pitch range getting lower and the female vocal timbre becoming more full and rich. Along the way, boys may experience sudden transitions between stages of vocal development, while girls may find their voices are breathy from time to time. Those who teach young adolescent singers need to be familiar with research-based resources about the adolescent voice so that they can incorporate this information in their instruction.²

One of the most important pedagogical implications for teachers of middle school choirs concerns the composite unison range of a choir—the pitches that all singers can sing in unison (as opposed to the unique range of each individual singer). The composite unison range of an adolescent vocal ensemble will be about a sixth, roughly from a G up to an E, with students singing in different octaves as appropriate. So, the extended vocalises we learned in college won’t work for these ensembles, especially with multiple repetitions each a half step higher than the one before. Three potential solutions to this dilemma are presented in this article:

- Develop vocalises that are not pitch-specific,
- Derive vocalise material directly from the repertoire being prepared, and
- Construct improvisatory activities that teach vocal skills yet leave pitch choice to the students.

Our knowledge of how adolescents learn provides a foundation for the planning of warm-ups for middle-schoolers. For instance, we need to invite students to sing rather than demand that they sing. Vocalises need to be pitched so that they can be sung by students. In some cases,

students who are inexperienced singers or who are having difficulty with phonation will need vocalises that lead toward pitch matching rather than begin with predetermined pitches. In all of these, students need to have some autonomy over the learning process, have opportunities to process information through brief, purposeful conversation with their friends, and feel that their contributions are the focus of the warm-up process rather than just “going through the motions.”³

Successful choral warm-up sessions for young adolescents have several key components that reflect these foundations. The first component is a *logical sequence* that remains constant from day to day. Adolescents need to know that their teachers have structured their learning experiences, but they also want to have some freedom within that structure. The second component, therefore, is the allowance for some *student choice and experimentation* with the tasks of the warm-up session. For example, students might begin on the pitch of their choice, be invited to choose vowel and consonant combinations, or they might be asked to contribute a sports-related or current-events-related image that will be incorporated into the session.

The third key component of a successful warm-up session is the *pedagogical relationship* between the session and the repertoire to be rehearsed that day. Whenever possible, the warm-up session should be designed to address musical issues that will arise later in the rehearsal, including specific melodic intervals and vowel/consonant combinations found in the repertoire. Students can be asked to identify those items within the rehearsal, emphasizing that everyone can learn the skills and knowledge required for choral singing.

Finally, choral warm-up sessions for young adolescents should involve a *variety of activities and groupings* within the classroom space. One strategy might be to have “warm-up stations” to which students are assigned. These could be spaced throughout the room with a set of instructions at each station describing what the opening activity might be. For example, the opening activity might be “Jazz Circles” (see sidebar). As students enter the classroom, they proceed directly to their stations and begin the designated warm-up activity. This allows for the teacher to discreetly take attendance, provides a gentle transition from the busy hallway to the rehearsal setting, and gives students the chance to interact in a learning-focused activity.

[SIDEBAR Jazz Circles ABOUT HERE]

Optimal Warm-Up Sessions

Choral teachers can think of the opening moments of rehearsals as opportunities for group voice building. Group voice building, also called group vocal technique (GVT), was strongly advocated by the late Frauke Haasemann, a contralto and voice teacher who developed hundreds of strategies for enhancing the choral skills of amateur singers within large ensembles.⁴ Many of the ideas in this article are consistent with her work. Group voice building is a philosophical approach that guides the enhancement of choristers’ vocal skills in an ensemble setting; it provides a rationale for the pedagogical sequence of the specific warm-up. The development of vocal skills is a long-term process encompassing many warm-up sessions, with each session containing multiple activities and vocalises.

A warm-up is a sequence of activities focused on the coordination of vocal skills in preparation for the requirements of a specific rehearsal. Large-ensemble warm-ups can present a challenge for teachers, because any given group of young adolescents will contain multiple vocal ranges and tessituras corresponding to different stages of vocal development. The composite

unison range of the choir (roughly G to E in octaves) represents only those pitches every student will be able to sing, but very few students will be adequately warmed-up if the session is confined to these few pitches. Conversely, forcing all students to sing in unison beyond this limited range will cause discomfort and frustration in some, if not all, of the students.

For these reasons, I advocate the development of nonpitched or non-pitch-specific vocalization exercises. Several examples are described below, but it's best when the exercises are drawn from the daily experiences of the choir, coupled with your own creativity. You will want to monitor the contributions of your students to these exercises, adjusting the suggested pitch level and vowel/consonant combinations to most accurately meet their needs. You might, for instance, provide instruction about how to sing high pitches but not specify the exact pitches to be sung in the exercises. Instead, ask students to sing "any high, comfortable pitch of your choosing using the techniques we've just learned." I know of many teachers who model activities such as these at the beginning of the year, and then gradually allow students to "compose" their own versions. The main goal of this approach is to draw the students into the choral experience by helping them achieve success from the very first moments of the rehearsal.

There are five stages of a sequential warm-up session; these are:

1. **Relaxation.** Students need to be welcomed into the choral rehearsal and begin the process of focusing their bodies and minds on the tasks of the rehearsal. To build a sense of shared purpose while incorporating young adolescents' need for physical activity, teachers can lead students through series of physical motions as suggested by current events, sports activities (tossing a football, ice skating, weight-lifting), or the weather (shoveling snow, raking leaves, walking to school in the rain). Carefully plan the relaxation activities so that they progress from boisterous to calm and from using large movements to using small movements that lead students directly into a healthful physical alignment for singing.
2. **Alignment.** Though many choral teachers refer to physical alignment as simply "posture," it is important to realize that individual students vary in the postures that are optimal for singing. Teachers should focus on the most favorable alignment of the skeletal structure for singing rather than relying on a list of rules and restrictions about how to sit or stand for rehearsal.⁵
3. **Breathing.** It is especially important for young adolescents to be aware that exhalation precedes inhalation. Drawing attention to inhalation without first allowing exhalation results in a buildup of residual air in the lungs, often inviting an unwanted elevation of the chest. Intentional exhalation before inhalation also relieves unnecessary air pressure on the underside of the vocal folds.
4. **Phonation.** To begin singing, exercises need to begin as pitch non-specific (such as the improvisatory exercises described below), moving toward exercises that are pitch-specific, perhaps excerpted from the repertoire. Have students think the pitch as they inhale, and then allow the sound to "melt" into the breathstream during exhalation. One technique that works well for this is to hum and chew at the same time, sliding from high to low in pitch. When transitioning to vowel sounds, students should first descend on

“ooh” from high to low. This idea should also guide the first sung exercises—they should start at a comfortable middle pitch and then descend with each repetition. Using descending repetitions is contrary to traditional practice, but remember that this is part of a multi-step process that should gradually warm-up the vocal mechanism. The goal of the phonation stage is to enable an efficient coordination of the vocal musculature so that students can sing healthfully through the vocalises and repertoire to follow.

5. ***Vocalization and Sung Exercises.*** A vocalise is a complete, miniature musical composition with an implied V–I cadence. The singing of vocalises should gradually involve higher and higher pitches, lead toward louder and louder volumes, incorporate faster and faster laryngeal movements (faster changes of pitches and wider intervals), and conclude with the singing of the lowest four or five producible pitches.⁶ Given the limited unison range of most middle school choirs, choral teachers may need to incorporate a greater number of improvisational vocal activities where the pitches are not predetermined but where the teacher’s choice of instructions and pedagogical sequence still results in a full warm-up before repertoire is rehearsed.

Middle school choral teachers should consider the warm-up sequence as one of their greatest teaching opportunities. If the warm-up sequence is carefully constructed with the goals of the rehearsal in mind, teachers and students will be able to refer back to the warm-ups for reminders about how to negotiate a difficult vocal passage or sing a melodically challenging phrase. Choral teachers can also place vocalises and physical warm-up activities throughout the rehearsal when they’ll be most effective at preparing for a particular challenge rather than only doing them at the very beginning of the rehearsal.⁷

Improvisation as Vocalization

When a typical middle-schooler is asked to define “improvisation,” he or she will probably respond with something like, “to make music up as you go.” But, that’s only partially true. Improvisation occurs within a context—a harmonic context that also has some kind of organizational element, often duration. One way to create non-pitch-specific vocal activities is to consider the element of improvisation. Why? For the simple reason that students are highly unlikely to vocally improvise on pitches they cannot sing. Our job as choral teachers, then, is to provide the harmonic and durational context wherein students can feel comfortable improvising on pitches that are easily accessible to them.

For non-pitch-specific warm-up exercises, it is simplest to begin with activities similar to those used when very young children are “finding” their singing voice. These might initially take the form of speech, experimenting with the elongation of vowels and the improvisation of different pitches on individual syllables of words. A straightforward way to begin the process of vocal exploration is to ask students to choose their favorite food, sports team, or color. Then, while gently tossing a beach ball to different students, have students speak their word as the ball comes to them. Gradual modification of the instructions could lead students to elongate the vowels, use high/medium/low pitches, or explore different dynamics. It will help if student identify the words they will use before the activity begins so that they don’t “freeze” when their turn comes. Students can also note the word’s vowels and consonants ahead of time so they can plan what vowels will be sustained during their sung improvisation. A variation is to sing the

pitches G-B-D (*do, mi, sol*) in octaves as necessary, with different beach balls signifying the different pitches. Students sing the corresponding pitch when they are passed the appropriate ball, sustaining that pitch until a new ball comes their way. Variations are virtually limitless, and they should be guided by your assessment of what students need to experience vocally during the warm-up activity.

[SIDEBAR Introductory Vocal Improvisation Exercises for Changing Voices ABOUT HERE]

Students often need reminders or jump-starts of what kinds of choices they can make when improvising. It is much more inviting for students to hear “sing any combination of *do, mi, and sol*” than “sing whatever pitches you want.” When expanding musical options for students, teachers might consider making posters for their classroom walls with reminders such as “rhythm, consonants, vowels, high/low, and long/short.” I also use graphic notation to help students decide what they can do, an idea triggered by reading Michael Colgrass’ *MEJ* article about how he uses graphics when working with middle school band students.⁸ I post four or five graphics on the wall, discuss them with students, vocally model a corresponding response, and then let students improvise using the graphics as guides.

The harmonic and durational context of improvisation needs to be shared with students so that they know what choices they can make during their vocal explorations. I have found that it helps to introduce the concept of improvisational structure with a demonstration of how individual parts need to interact. I begin by having a group of four or five students create a “silent sculpture” with their bodies, with no pieces of the sculpture connecting (students may not touch one another). Then, from that silent sculpture, they create a “silent machine” by adding some repetitive motion. A “sound machine” results when students add a vocalization of their own choosing. The teacher can finally provide an ostinato around which students can improvise brief musical phrases to create a “music machine.” After several experiences with this process, students will be ready to create “Jazz Circles” (see sidebar) where individually improvised phrases interact within a specific harmonic and durational context.

Since vocal improvisation is most clearly identified with jazz, encouraging student vocal exploration can involve instruction in scat singing. Students need structured vocal exploration to begin exploring scat syllables. Teachers can begin by giving students a line of text, perhaps from a poem, a newspaper article, or from the choral repertoire. Have students read aloud the voiced consonants, vowels, or fricatives, for example, and experiment with elongation of sounds, dynamics, tempi, and so forth. Recording the class examples and then playing them back for comment and analysis can start discussions about how vowels and consonants work together during vocal improvisation. The number of resources for teaching scat singing is rapidly expanding, and middle school choral teachers should consider using methods that employ high-quality recordings with fine vocal models that are pitched appropriately for changing adolescent voices. Many improvisational resources for band students include echo-singing recordings that are excellent for this purpose.

A Choral Future

The vocal improvisation ideas presented in this article are examples of teaching activities that grew from understanding how middle school students learn, what they need during the voice change process, and correlating that information with foundations of vocal pedagogy. To

effectively work with young adolescents and their changing voices, we need to consider the ABC's of developing optimal rehearsal experiences: *Adapt* to their changing needs, *Build* on what they know and toward what they need to know, and *Challenge* them in ways that match their skill levels.⁹ Middle school choral teachers can meet the vocal and developmental needs of young adolescents by adapting traditional choral warm-up techniques to build on student strengths in ways that are challenging and musically satisfying for all involved.

In closing, let's return to Charles Farnsworth's 1924 article in which he inquired about the relationship between technical skill and musical satisfaction:

[INDENTED BLOCK QUOTE:]

Is it, may I ask, the business of the music teacher to merely act as a starter at the race; to blow his pitch pipe, and let the students go in a contest to see who can get through the tune and sing all the time and pitch intervals correctly? On the contrary, does not the most musical part of the teacher's work commence after a song can be perfectly sung so far as these mechanical elements go? It is then that training in beautiful expression commences.¹⁰

[END QUOTE]

The sound of a choir filled with adolescent changing voices is thrilling to hear, because it is the sound of limitless musical and artistic potential. When carefully planned to meet the needs of adolescent singers, the choral warm-up process presents unique opportunities to extend this potential toward a lifetime of choral singing for each young person.

NOTES

1. Charles H. Farnsworth, "A Golden Mean in School Music Education," *Music Supervisors' Journal* 10, no. 3 (1924): 59–60.

2. Patrick K. Freer, *Success for Adolescent Singers: Unlocking the Potential in Middle School Choirs* (DVD series; Waitsfield, VT: Choral Excellence, 2005); John Cooksey, *Working with Adolescent Voices* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999); Leon Thurman and Graham Welch (eds.), *Bodymind & Voice: Foundations of Voice Education* (The VoiceCare Network et al., 2000).

3. Patrick K. Freer, "Adapt, Build & Challenge: Three Keys to Effective Choral Rehearsals for Young Adolescents." *Choral Journal* 47, no. 5 (2006): 48–55.

4. Frauke Haasemann and James M. Jordan, *Group Vocal Technique* (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1991).

5. James M. Jordan, *Evoking Sound: The Choral Warm-Up* (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications; 2005).

6. Thurman and Welch, *Bodymind & Voice*. 501–502.

7. Brenda Smith and Robert Thayer Sataloff, *Choral Pedagogy*, 2nd ed. (San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing; 2006).
8. Michael Colgrass, "Composers and Children: A Future Creative Force?" *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 1 (2004): 19–3.
9. Patrick K. Freer, "Adapt, Build & Challenge," 48–55.
10. Farnsworth, "Golden Mean," 60.

[SECOND SIDEBAR]

Introductory Vocal Improvisation Exercises for Changing Voices

ECHO CHAINS: Singing within a Harmonic and Durational Context

Begin by dividing positioning the class into at least four rows, then sing a one-measure unit of solfège to the first row (G to E range—the composite unison range of middle school choirs). The first row turns and sings it to the next row, and immediately turns back for a new, overlapping measure of solfège. To end, simply stop supplying new melodies, and the echo will eventually end with the back row. Variation: incorporate both repetition (literal echo) and variation (improvised response). [*This is a variation of an activity developed by Kristen Hansen of Columbus State University, Columbus, Georgia.*]

MODAL MANIA: Exploring Harmonic Complexity within a Durational Context

Begin by choosing a key. The major scale (starting on *do*) of that key is the Ionian mode, and the minor scale (starting on *la*) of that key is the Aeolian mode, etc. Divide the class into groups, and have each group sing a modal “scale” (up, then down, or vice versa) so that pairs or trios of modes sound simultaneously. Two of the modes that work well to begin are Phrygian and Ionian, and then Mixolydian can be added as a third mode. Take care when choosing modes for each group so that students are able to sing the mode that is selected for them. If your choir has singers who cannot sing an octave beginning on any pitch, then limit the “scale” to the range of a fifth. As a reminder, these are the typical Western modes in the key of C:

C–C	Ionian
B–B	Locrian
A–A	Aeolian
G–F	Lydian
E–E	Phrygian
D–D	Dorian
C–C	Ionian

ALEATORIC AMALGAMATION: Vocal Independence within Unfamiliar Contexts

Begin by teaching all students a familiar song with a range no more than a sixth (such as “Friendship Song,” Boosey & Hawkes, OCT6616; changing the key to fit the needs of the changing voices). Then number students from 1 to 5 (or more if desired), where students sing the melody but instead of the printed rhythm, they sing each pitch for the number of beats corresponding to their assigned number. Sing through twice on words or syllables and conclude by sustaining a hummed *do*. The overlapping pitches and unexpected harmonies make this a favorite with both students and, when performed during a concert, with audiences. [*This is a variation of an activity developed by David Price of the Music Futures Project based in Great Britain.*]

[FIRST SIDEBAR]

Jazz Circles

Introduce the activity by singing a melodic ostinato pattern within the G to E range. Ask students to suggest variations that they could perform, perhaps assisting them by providing specific scat syllables or rhythm patterns. Ask for and then practice several more variations. Choose a small group of students to maintain the ostinato pattern while others experiment with variations. Have students determine how to begin and end the “piece.”

Next, divide the class into several groups that will work together in different locations around the room for approximately five minutes. Each group will have the tasks of:

- creating a vocal improvisation around the specified ostinato,
- maintaining the ostinato part with at least one group member,
- involving all group members in a vocal, improvised performance, and
- planning and performing a beginning and an ending.

Have the groups perform for each other and follow with focused questions, such as:

- Which group changed the key?
- Which groups had a coda?
- Which group used ABA form?

Depending on your instructions to the students, this activity can be either simple or complex. I’ve had success using 12-bar blues form, but the range of the ostinato (the traditional bass line) is often not possible for young adolescents. In that case, I’ve often played the 12-bar blues chords (key of B-flat) on the piano, while students improvised around my accompaniment. I’ve even used this as a piece on a concert program. I explain the process to the audience, they watch the students perform the improvisation, and then I ask the audience to join in!