

Choral Rehearsal Ideas: Katherine Ruhle

As conductors of children's choirs, we have the privilege of being able to introduce young people to the joy, the beauty, and the fun of singing in a choir. With that privilege also comes the responsibility of actively engaging each child in a meaningful way so that they don't just become good choral singers but also become well rounded musicians who are passionate about choral singing. To do this, I strongly believe that conductors need to be constantly preparing and using different choral rehearsal strategies that not only connect with the different personalities in their choir, but also inspire every child during the learning and creative process of rehearsals.

Here are some different rehearsal strategies that I regularly use to engage and inspire children, when introducing new pieces:

Guided Listening: Encourage children to close their eyes and listen to an instrumental version of a new piece. Before the listening activity begins, give children questions to guide their listening, such as:

- How does this music make you feel?
- What colours would you paint to this music?
- What would the weather be like in this music?

After listening to the music, allow children time to share their ideas with a friend or with the group. This activity may be repeated using different guided questions.

Hand Gestures: Encourage children to use hand gestures (not actions) that reflect the mood, the phrasing, the melodic line, or rhythm of a piece of music. Children may come up with their own ideas or might use teacher-led movements.

Music Detectives: Encourage children to be 'Music Detectives' by silently looking at a new score for two minutes to discover musical clues about the words, the rhythm, the melody and the feel of the piece. Children then share their musical discoveries with a friend and with the whole group. This works especially well if the conductor dresses up as a detective and uses a magnifying glass to demonstrate how to find musical clues.

Be the Conductor: When learning simpler pieces, allow children to experiment with being the conductor. This engages children in the creative process, encourages the choir to watch the conductor and also makes repetitive learning fun!

Individual Challenge: Give children a challenge, based on a section of a new piece, which they need to master by themselves, either during rehearsal time or at home. Challenges could include: saying lyrics as quickly and clearly as possible, using body percussion on a tricky rhythm, singing in solfege or singing/tapping in canon.

Interactive Activities: Encourage children to actively participate in partner, small group and circle activities that help them learn words, melody and/or rhythmic elements from a new piece.

Move to the Music: Encourage children to either improvise their own movements to a new piece of music or follow your movements. Explain to the children that they aren't doing actions based on the words, rather they are expressively moving to the music. This may also be done with props such as scarves and paintbrushes.

Visual Singing: Use pictures, on a screen or printed, to help students connect with a new song, learn new melodies or learn song words.

Different Location/Seating arrangement: Move students to a different location (under a tree, in a public place, in a dark place) to set the scene for a new song or connect with lyrics. Or change the seating arrangement –no chairs/sit in a circle, sopranos and altos facing each other.

Do as I'm Doing: Encourage children to echo your singing (solfege, words, sounds) or copy your actions. Add some silly versions to keep the children's attention.

Set the Scene: Set the scene for a new piece of music by getting into character through costumes, acting, mood lighting, props etc.

Bin it! Prepare a list of what you want the choir to achieve with a new piece. Write each goal on a separate piece of paper and once the goal has been achieved, dramatically throw the paper into the bin (Bin it!)

1,2,3, Eyes on me: Encourage the children to watch and listen attentively as you perform a section of a new piece. Children then have to come up with three observations about the actions, words, dynamics etc. You can also try 1, 2, Eyes on you -the choir sings and the conductor observes two things about their singing.

Creative Expression: Before children have started learning a new piece, give them the lyrics to use as stimuli for an art creation –painting, drawing, clay statue etc.

What Conducting works best? Ask the choir to repeat a problem phrase (sound quality, rests, high notes, phrase control etc) a number of times changing the way you conduct. What conducting style works best to improve the phrase? Actively involve the students in listening and choosing what helps them the most.

Eyes closed: Listen to the choir sing with your eyes closed. The choir will automatically improve what they are doing because they know you are listening but you can also focus in on the sound without visual distractions. Invite students to be listeners as well.

Game Show: Host a Game Show rehearsal with costumes, props and prizes. Have a series of different games such as What a Phrase!, D is for Diction, The face of the Week etc. Have competitions between sopranos/altos, boys/girls, year 5/year 6's or different rows. This is a great way to keep students motivated before a performance/competition.