UPDATED!

HELPFUL HINTS FOR RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL CHOIR (R-7)

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WHAT CAN CHOIRS OFFER STUDENTS?

Singing in a choir can
- ♫ show students that music can be fun
- ♫ give students the opportunity to experience the joys of singing together as a part of a group
- ♫ give students a chance to work together as a team
- ♫ further develop students' musical knowledge and awareness, introducing and developing their knowledge of concepts such as
  - musical notation / note values
  - dynamic markings
  - breathing and phrasing
  - music on staves / pitch
  - following and reading a score

WARM UPS

They take up valuable rehearsal time, so why do we do warm ups?

Physical warm ups can be used to
- ♫ help the singer relax and loosen up the muscles in the body – tight muscles could cause the singer to use their voice incorrectly
- ♫ introduce a new song by doing an aerobic type warm up to a recording or accompaniment of the song
- ♫ ease any tension in the room and increase community – puts everyone on the same level

Vocal warm ups can be used to
- ♫ stretch / increase the vocal range
- ♫ tune up the ears
- ♫ practice the correct posture, head/chin position, vocal production
- ♫ familiarise choristers' ears with the sound of particular modes and scales
- ♫ familiarise choristers with particular interval jumps

SOME WARMS UPS THAT I USE....

Sirens

- ♫ Press your tongue to the roof of your mouth to make a "ng" sound.
- ♫ Explore the range of your voice going higher and lower, just like a siren.
- ♫ You can get students to make their siren follow the pitch of your finger,
  eg.   when your finger moves higher, their voice needs to go higher

1 2 1

- ♫ This warm up uses a different number to represent each note of the scale.
- ♫ Explain the concept by drawing numbered stairs on the board
- ♫ Sing through slowly using the stairs as a visual cue
- ♫ Sing through without pointing to the stairs
- ♫ Try a little faster
- ♫ Try in 2 (or more) parts – in a round

1
1 2 1
1 2 3 2 1
1 2 3 4 3 2 1
1 2 3 4 5 4 3 2 1
1 2 3 4 5 6 5 4 3 2 1
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
8
8 7 8
8 7 6 7 8
8 7 6 5 6 7 8
8 7 6 5 4 5 6 7 8
8 7 6 5 4 3 4 5 6 7 8
8 7 6 5 4 3 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Shine

♫ Teach 4 ostinato separately then put them together (depending on the age and ability of your students, you may wish to leave out the third part – the rhythm is quite tricky)

Kristie Fudge

Ev-ery bo-dy has a gift___ to give no ma-tter who you are or where___ you live

To your - self you must be true

We all look diff - 'rent yet the same but on the in - side we're u -

Just be your - self, be your - self, just be you you go-tta

Each of us has a part___ to play so make a dif-ference to - day

Shine the light that lives with - in you

nique with gifts to share to make the world a be - tter place

just be your - self, be your - self just be you

SONG SELECTION

Song selection is important, as it plays a big role in gaining/keeping students interested and involved.

I believe that it's important to teach a "balanced diet" of songs, using a range of different music styles and tempos to broaden the musical understanding and experience of your choristers. This can sometimes be difficult, as students are more eager to sing boppy, more popular songs. I often use the more up tempo songs to get them interested and then introduce other styles and tempos further down the track, once they are enjoying choir.

It's also important to look at the lyrics of songs and the message that they send to the choristers.

♫ Are they age appropriate?
♫ Does it have a positive message?

I like to choose songs that have a Program Achieve message/theme, as I believe that when students sing these songs, the message is absorbed without them even realising it.

TEACHING A SONG

Preparation

Before you stand in front of a choir to begin teaching a song, it is important to be properly prepared.

- ♫ Ensure that you are familiar and comfortable with the notes.
- ♫ Work out the breathing that you will expect from your choristers (this is generally with older choristers and more difficult songs).
- ♫ Highlight any areas that you think may be difficult for your choristers and teach these a little more thoroughly (although often, they have no problems with the things that you thought they would struggle with). You may even be able to use a warm up at the beginning of the session that will assist with any difficult interval jumps.
- ♫ Know what the song is about and what emotion you want to come through in their singing.

Introducing the Song

There are many different ways that you can introduce new songs to your choir. You could;

- ♫ Play the song for them to listen to. This gives them a feel for the song and a basic idea of the melody. If the song has a chorus, they can hear it a few times and become familiar with it making it easier to teach.
- ♫ Talk about what the song is about, who wrote it, why it was written and what the emotion/feeling is behind the song.
- ♫ Just begin teaching the notes – it's best to start with a fairly simple section of the song!

Teaching the Song

- ♫ Teach it exactly the way that you want the choristers to sing it! (this means that you need to know what you want before you start)
- ♫ Teach a short phrase at a time – you sing it to the students and then the students echo it straight back. If students have difficulty with the phrase, sing it again and then get them to echo again. Or you could break it down into even smaller sections. Once students have successfully echoed 4-6 phrases, join those phrases together and sing them through.
- ♫ Break it into small, bite-sized chunks – don't overdo the song in one session – students can become bored and switch off.
- ♫ If there are two similar sections, make sure that one is very secure before teaching the other – it's probably best not to do both sections in the same rehearsal.
- ♫ Get it right the first time – it's easier to fix problems when you fist notice them, rather than leaving it to fix next time. Once something is learned one way, it's harder to relearn it.

PLANNING A CHOIR SESSION

The way that you structure your choir sessions will depend on the age of the choristers, the number of students involved and the length of the session. Below, I will outline helpful hints and the way that I try to structure rehearsals, depending on the age of the students.

Junior Primary Choir

The JP choir I taught a few years ago was made up of all 4 JP classes in the school, totalling around 100 students. Choir sessions were once a fortnight for 45mins with the support of all 4 JP teachers (this was not a NIT lesson). The aim of these sessions was to introduce the students to the joys of singing and making music as a part of a group. I didn't do any serious focus on technique or insist on absolute correct rhythms, cut-offs, or breathing, instead choosing to focus on having fun.

With this age group, I always begin the sessions with a song that the students know and can sing confidently. I follow this with a newer song. I do all of my teaching at this level through echo and repetition, not giving students any words or music to follow. It's then time for a game – some good ones are True & False or Water & Ice (for how to play these games, go to the section on Games). We then do another two or three songs before finishing up. I always try to finish with a song that the students know and enjoy – ensuring that we finish on a high.

It can work well to have two student observers for each class who sit at the side on chairs for the whole session, joining in as well as watching their classmates for people who are doing the right thing and trying their best. At the end of each session, the observers come to the front of the group and name a student that they saw who was trying their best. They state exactly what the student was doing well and the named students receive a sticker for their efforts. These students are then the observers next session.

Middle Primary Choir & Senior Choir

My MP choir is made up of around 60 students in years 2 - 4 who meet weekly for a 40 minute session. The aim of these sessions is to begin to introduce students to correct vocal technique, breathing and posture and begin simple part singing. I'm lucky enough to have an interactive whiteboard in my Music Room, so I don't tend to give students the words or music for our songs. Instead I type the words into a PowerPoint to project up for the students to follow (you don't need an interactive whiteboard to do this – a simple data projector would do). This enables me to add pictures to my PowerPoint which stimulates the students interest and assists in teaching the message of the song. An example of this is the song Sadako from Hiroshima. I was able to find pictures and photos that illustrate the story told in the song. This made the story of the song much more real for the students, causing them to connect to the song emotionally.

My Senior Choir is made up of 20 – 30 students in years 5 – 7 who meet weekly for a 45 minute session. The aim of these sessions is to continue to develop and refine students' vocal technique, breathing and posture, as well as using more difficult repertoire and demanding more from students in regard to correct rhythms, cut-offs, dynamics and diction. My Senior Choir repertoire is the Festival of Music songbook, so the difficulty of the pieces and the rate at which they need to be learned is prescribed by the songbook and assessment schedule.

When planning my sessions for both of these choirs, I try to follow a basic plan/recipe (originally introduced to me by Deb Munro);

- ♫ Warm ups (physical and vocal)
- ♫ A song that students are familiar with, so that they can just relax and sing it through. If it needs work, do this after a good sing through. This helps them prepare both mentally and vocally for the rehearsal ahead.
- ♫ A new or difficult song. Do the harder song at this point in the rehearsal when the students are more alert and ready to work. Just remember not to spend too long on it, or students will switch off.
- ♫ Another familiar song. You can do some new teaching/learning and work on this particular song, but it should be a lighter workload for the choristers.
- ♫ "Housekeeping" spot to bring information to the attention of choristers and give them a short break from singing.
- ♫ A short game or fun song to give the students a quick break.

After the break, do a few more songs that might require some light work/learning, before finishing with a well known song that the students can relax and sing, hopefully sending them out on a positive note.

The exact timing of your housekeeping and games break should depend on the length of your rehearsal. Basically, do the harder songs towards the beginning of your rehearsal, but don't do them all straight after each other. Alternate them with more familiar songs so that the rehearsal become too intense for the students.

Other things to remember when planning a session;

♫ I generally try not to spend longer than 10 minutes on any particular song in a rehearsal. This keeps the rehearsal moving and keeps the students interested.

♫ Switch between standing and sitting – I often let the students sit while they are learning and then stand to sing it through.

♫ Include a range of different styles of songs in a rehearsal and try not to do slower songs following on from each other.

♫ I try to write the basic rehearsal plan on the board where students can see it and track where we're up to. This shows them what's happening next, when they'll get a break, and how much we still need to get through.

Of course, these suggestions are all in an ideal situation. Currently, my Senior Choir rehearsal is not long enough to include a game, but I try to play around a bit with a song, maybe adding some silly actions while we sing it so that it's a mental break for the students.

Finally, know what you need to have learned by when and work back from there. My Senior Choir is my Festival of Music choir, so there are particular songs that need to be learned by certain times to match up with the assessment grid. I try to write up a term overview of what I aim to cover in each rehearsal in the term, taking into account absences for camps, excursions, etc. I also put the homework I will set for students in this plan. Giving them a few bars, or a chorus of a few songs to learn each week makes things far more manageable and achievable for the students.

CONDUCTING

While I am aware of traditional conducting gestures, I believe that it's important to do what you're comfortable with and what helps the students – after all, that's why we're there!

I tend to use a mixture of the traditional gestures with other signals to support the students with their:

♫ pitch – draw the pitch with your hands

♫ words – mime gestures that can be a clue to the words they are singing

♫ rhythms/rests – clap difficult rhythms or put a clap in to ensure a sharp cut-off

♫ phrasing/breathing – drawing an arc in the air with your hand

…….as well as jumping around to keep students energised and entertained!

Remember that the aim is to assist your students – put yourself in their shoes and think about what might help you.
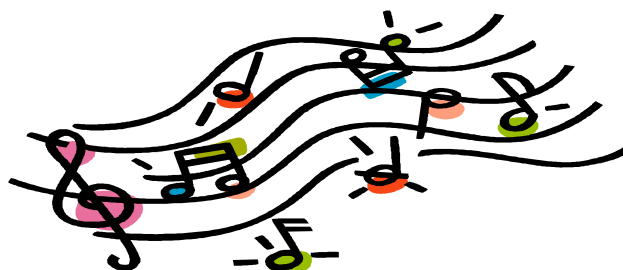
GAMES

Ram Sam Sam

♫ Teach students the song

A ram sam sam, a ram sam sam, gu-li gu-li gu-li gu-li gu-li ram sam sam. A ram sam sam, a ram sam sam, gu-li gu-li gu-li gu-li gu-li ram sam sam. A ra-fi, a ra-fi, gu-li gu-li gu-li gu-li gu-li ram sam sam. A ra-fi, a ra-fi, gu-li gu-li gu-li gu-li gu-li ram sam sam.

♫ Get students to form a circle, turn and face clockwise in the circle (so that everyone is facing someone else's back) and then sit down. Move the circle in so that everyone can reach the shoulders of the person in front.

♫ Teach actions to the song (the same words always use the same action)

        Ram = pat both hands on the floor

        Sam = clap own hands together

        Gooli gooli gooli etc = roly poly hands

        A rafi = put hands on the shoulders of the person in front and rock forward then back

♫ So overall, the actions are;

        Pat, clap, clap, pat, clap, clap

        Roly poly, roly poly, pat, clap, clap

        (REPEAT)

        Hands on person in front's shoulders and rock forward, back, forward, back

        Roly poly, roly poly, pat, clap, clap

        (REPEAT)

♫ The song can also be used as a round, with two circles/lines starting at different times, using the actions.

A Te-ta-ta

♫ Form a standing circle joining hands

♫ Make sure that the students know the song 'London Bridge is Falling Down' (or you can use 'Singing in the Rain', or any other short, simple song)

♫ Explain to the students that each time you sing the song, you are going to walk around the circle (still holding hands)

♫ Each time you reach the end of the song, the leader/teacher calls out 'hold it', and the students echo

♫ The leader then calls out an instruction and the students echo and follow the instruction

♫ Everyone then sings together 'a tee ta ta, a tee tat a, a tee ta ta ta' (x2) whilst wiggling hips from side to side

♫ Everyone joins hands and sings 'London Bridge' again, followed by 'hold it' and the first instruction. An extra instruction is added each time before the 'tee tat a' section, so that eventually, the students end up tied in a knot, singing 'a tee ta ta'

♫ An example for a possible order of instructions is;
> Thumbs up
> Arms out
> Wrists together
> Elbows bent
> Knees bent
> Legs crossed
> Bottoms out
> Tongues out

I Like People Who
- ♫ Students are in a circle – sitting on chairs or standing on a marker of some sort.
- ♫ One student starts in the middle and says "I like people who _____ (eg. likes chocolate, is wearing red, watches Sesame Street)"
- ♫ Any student who fits the description has to run and change to a different seat/marker (they can't change to the one next to them). While the students are running, the student in the middle also runs to find a seta/marker, leaving a new student without a seat/marker. This student then becomes the new student in the middle.

True & False
- ♫ All students stand up and close their eyes.
- ♫ The teacher calls out a statement and the students need to think about the statement and decide whether it is true or false. If they think it's true, they put both hands on their head; if they think it's false, they put both hands on their hips.
- ♫ Once all students have made a decision, the teacher says whether the statement is true or false and the students who were incorrect sit down.
- ♫ The winner is the last student left standing.

This game can be used to support the learning that is happening in the classroom, reinforce musical concepts, or even to test word knowledge.

Water & Ice
- ♫ This game is played just like musical statues, except when the music stops the teacher calls out "Water" or "Ice".
  > water = bobbing down on the floor
  > ice = freeze as you are
- ♫ You can also add your own other clue words,
  > eg.   stork = stand still on one leg
 > snail = squat down and hug your knees

VOICE PRODUCTION

I find that many students produce their voice incorrectly, as a result of trying to imitate their favourite singers. Instead of supporting the voice with their whole body, they seem to sing from the throat, making a thinner, more nasal sound. This is not good for the voice and can lead to bad habits and voice problems.

Ways that I use to help students to work on producing their voice correctly (without getting too technical);
- ♫ Make sure that the student is standing correctly – feet shoulder width apart, shoulders back, arms by sides.
- ♫ Ensure that the student's head is anchored – top of the head being pulled toward the ceiling (lengthening the vertebrae) and neck straight/chin back.

♫ Get the student to do some big yawns to open up the back of their throat. Draw their attention to the feeling of the openness when they yawn and then get them to try to keep some of that openness when they are singing.

♫ Make sure that the student is opening their mouth when singing (position 4 jaw = mouth open two fingers high).

♫ Draw students' attention to the work that their diaphragm does to support their singing – it should feel tight when singing.

♫ Get students to imagine that they are drawing the sound up through the bottom of their feet and up through their body before it comes out of their mouth.
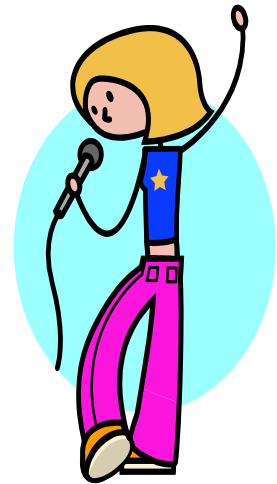
SOME SONGS I'VE USED SUCCESSFULLY

Following is a list of some of the students' favourite songs that I have used with choirs of varying ages. This is by no means an ideal list of songs for school choirs, but my suggestions might help you to get started. I don't go out and buy choral arrangements, rather I use the resources that I have access to. Each song listed is available on CD as a backing track / karaoke version. I find these very useful, as I don't have access to an accompanist with my school choirs.