Importance of vocal warm-ups in children's choir rehearsals in Hungarian Music Primary Schools

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper was to examine and describe children's choir directors belief about warm-ups and their practices in conducting warm-ups, and to state rationale and necessity of the vocal warm-up before children's choir rehearsal. Subjects were 32 children's choir directors, who conduct children's choir in Music Primary School in Hungary. Research methods were observations, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires. Data were analyzed using qualitative analysis. Results: A well-planned and efficiently executed warm-up is essential for developing a good singing habit and creating an attentive atmosphese in children's choir rehearsal. Choral singing is just like any other warm-up exercise before vigorous physical activity: to tune up the body and stretch the muscles so as to prepare for the high tension in the activiy. Bescause the vocal cord is an extremely sensitive organ, it needs special care and trainig in order to have good voice production.

Keywords. Children's choir, children's voice building, choral conductor, vocal/choral warm-ups

1 Introduction

Children's choirs gained recognition during the twentieth century as an acclaimed category in Western choral music. Its subsequent dynamic evolvement has brought to the fore the need to broaden the knowledge of specialised rehearsal and conducting techniques, especially in view of its internationally competitive nature. As part of the growing body of knowledge in the field, conductors have contributed to the development of the instrument through the design of didactic methods generating specific artistic results.

Choral warm-up

In examining choral warm-up practices, it is important to comprehend the basic premise of a physiological warm-up and its benefits. The time devoted to physical warm ups typically contains three major components. First, as Young and Behm (2002) describe, it has a relatively low-intensity aerobic workout, like jogging before a run, that is not intense from the start. Research shows this type of exercising increases muscle

temperature, which increases the chances for the improvement of neuromuscular function (Norris, 1999; Stewart & Sleivert, 1998, Olesen, 2010). Second, Young and Behm state that warm-ups also contain some stretching of the specific muscles involved in the up coming related activity. This effect can result either through static stretching or dynamic stretching methods. As the terms suggest, static stretching evolves from a non-moving position and involves stretching of groups of muscles that are held for a relatively long time. Dynamic stretching would be the opposite approach. That is, all the stretching would be designed around movement of body parts and muscles without sustained durations and without resistance beyond the weight of one's body. Finally, the third component of warm-ups involves the „rehearsal of the skill about to be performed" (Young & Behm, 2002, p. 33). McCardle et al. (1991) agree that activation of specific muscle fibers as well as neural pathways utilized for achievement of maximum neuromuscular performance occur during this type of warm-up. Choral warm-ups involve a series of instructor-led actions at the beginning of a class, rehearsal or before a performance. Sometimes these actions involve meditation, stretching, breathing, lip-buzzing, vocalizing on ascending and descending scales, or even introducing conceptual ideas of music they are about to rehearse or perform. It is widely believed (Phillips, 2004; Hylton, 1995; Collins, 1999, Olesen 2010) that warming-up a choir is critical, and often a first step when directors take the podium.

The goal of choral warm-ups is bring together the individual singing voices in order to create a choral group sound (Smith & Sataloff, 2006). The director should address body alignment, breathing mechanisms, phonation of the vocal chords, and resonance while cultivating healthy singing mechanisms through a variety of warm-up exercises. The training of singers requires a choral director who understands how to communicate proper vocal health techniques to their choir. These directors should be taught how to plan warm-ups that cultivate healthy singing and aid in developing a choral sound. They also have a variety of music teaching styles that influence how they actually conduct. Their background, training, beliefs, practices and their music teaching style should contribute to a director's warm-up success.

Vocal pedagogy

Every child has the ability to sing; the voice is the most accessible musical instrument. Regardless of social background , race, or musical ability, the voice is the one instrument that is available to all children. Singing has a significant impact on a child's intellectual developemnt. Singing facilitates language development through the performance of beat and rhythm in music. Singing helps children learn and articulate the text of a song; it facilitates memory, as wel as the development of vocabulary. Our knowledge of child voice is still more limited than for the adult voice.

Children differ both in body proportions and in the specific anatomy of the respiratory system and the larynx. Vocal health experts have devoted a lifetime to aiding singers and teachers of singers with research on specific vocal problem-solving activities. Vocal training, like physical conditioning, has been promoted as the major factor for enhancing the singing voice (Mendes, Rothman, Sapienza, & Brown, 2003). We know from literature that current classical vocal training involves the following: (1)

proper posture and body alignment (Verdolini, 1998), (2) breathing exercises to strengthen core muscles (Boone, 1988) (Ringel, Daniloff & Horii, 1987), (3) vocal exercises (Verdolini, 1998), and (4) “articulatory precision exercises” (Mendes et al. 2003, p. 538).
Further research confirms the use of articulartory precision exercises (Alderson, 1979). All of these points of vocal training typically are incorporated in a standard warm-up or training procedure when beginning to work with singers on a pedagogical basis.Smith and Sataloff (2006) add: The purposes of any warm-up period are the same, namely: (1) to adjust the voice from speaking to singing, (2) to align the body and free the breathing mechanism for the act of singing, (3) to create a physical awareness of the vocal mechanism being used correctly, and (4) to stretch gently and exercise the skeletal muscles used in phonation. Kodály was convinced that singing is the most direct means to a musical education. Singing requires the rapid internalization of sound and provides immediate participation in the musical experience. Kodály's intent was to lead students to a deep appreciation of art music. Since the human voice is the most intimate of all instruments and the inner ear is more easily developed through this personal medium, the voice is the most logical starting point (Houlahan, Tacka, 2008). Unfortunatelly, many choral teachers frequently find themselves too busy to plane adequately for a focused, productive warm-up period that prepares the way for music making and music learning. The purpose of this article is to provide a structure for designing meaningful warm-up activities, present examples of effective warm-up exercises, and offer methods and resources for future use.

2 Aimes

The aim of the study was to examine children's choir directors belief about warm-ups and their practices in conducting warm-ups, and to state rationale and necessity of the vocal warm-up before children's choir rehearsals.

Research questions

1. What kind of warm-up exercises use the choral conductors before children's choir rehearsals?
2. How use children's choir conductors the warm-up exercises?
3. How can conductors develop the children's singing skill, singing accuracy?

3 Method

In the context of the present study it should be noted that where it had been possible to observe conductors at work with their choirs and interview them personally, the method of qualitative research provided a flexible, iterative style of eliciting responses through the use of semi-structured data collection. Research methods were observations, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires.

4 Results

The body needs to be balanced for students to project a beautiful singing tone. Balance the head: To accomplish this, the face should look straight a head. Try several exercises, such as moving the head up and down and sideways to relax the head and neck muscles.
Shoulders should be relaxed and rotated towards the back; hands should be relaxed at the sides; knees should be relaxed and very slightly bent; feet should be firmly placed on the ground and roughly about 10 to 12 inches apart. If students are sitting when singing, they should be at the edge of their chairs.

Preparing Children to Sing

The following exercises are suggestions to help develop children's singing voices.

1. Body Warm-Up Exercises

Begin the class by allowing students to stretch and bend to relax their bodies. Focus the singers' attention on the body and the breath. In the first part (Body), include gentle stretching exercises (no jumping-jacks). These exercises, which I call „muscle movers", should stretch the torso and relieve tension in the neck, shoulders, arms, and legs. Students can do the muscle movers on their own as they arrive in the rehearsal room; they will learn what stretches work best for them and can take more time prepare slowly. The next part flows from the stretching exercises and focuses on an element of good posture-for example, foot positioning / weight distribution, relaxed knees, hips rolled under, elevated sternum / spine, shoulders back and down, head high and ears over the shoulders, or hands at the sides.
Choral singers rarely energize their posture, but if you mention it at every rehearsal and practice the elements regularly with them, they will understand how important posture is.
The result will be a better looking group of energized singers.

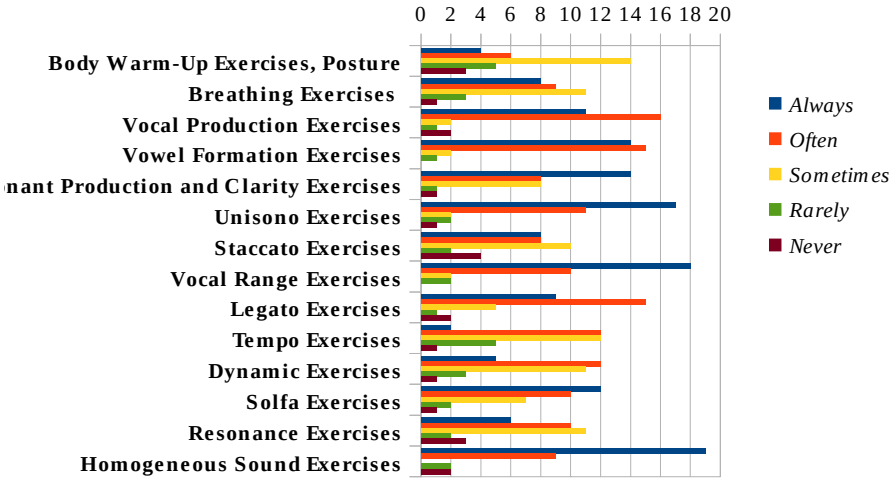
2. Breathing Exercises

Breathing exercises teach children to inhale and exhale correctly. The last part of the „Energize" section involves stimulating the breath. Help the singers focus on deep breathing with exercises that activate the muscles of inhalation (diaphragm and external intercostals) and exhalation (abdominal muscles and internal intercostals). Useful exercises include slowly inhaling and exhaling to a count; swift exhalation as if blowing out a candle; staccato exhalation on a series of five short puffs of air; staccato exhalation using airy consonants such as „p", „f", „t", „k", and „ch."
Controlled exhaling is a useful exercises: Show students how to sip through a straw correctly and expand their waist; show students how to release air using a „sss" sound; show students how to release air using a „sts" aound or using the words „ha"; guide the student to yawn, as this opens up the back of the throat and relaxes the voice; sighing is a gentle way of using a higher voice than you usually speak with; try sighing a few times, starting each sigh a little higher than the last.

3. Vocal Warm-Up Exercises and Vocalizations

Vocal warm-up exercises and vocalizations help develop beautiful singing. Encourage student to vocalize high and low sounds, as well as soft and loud sounds. Songs that contain the „oo" sound are particularly good for developing in-tune singing. Many ordinary vocal sounds are actually excellent warm-up exercises. Sing known songs with neutral syllables such as „noo", „moo", „la" and so on. Humming is a gentle (and quite) way of using the singing voice. Humming a favorite song before singing it also provides students with an opportunity to focus on the song's melody. Imitating a siren is something young students delight in. It also engages the voice in such a way that the extremes of one's vocal range can be explored without straining the voice. When imitating sirens, challenge the children to make soft and loud, high and low, long and short sirens, sirens that just go up, just come down, or do both. Copying animal sounds, such as barking like a dog, roaring like a lion, or meowing like a cat also engages the extremes of a child's vocal range. Sing a phrase of a pentatonic melody with the „nn" placement sound or the „noo" vowel sound.

TABLE 1: Children's Choir Warm-Up Exercises



DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S SINGING SKILLS

Head Voice and Chest Voice

The technical difference between „head voice" and „chest voice" has to do with how vocal cords vibrate when singing. We use the terms „head" and chest" to designate where vibrations are most strongly felt when singing. When singing in „head voice", the vibrations are felt behind your nose and your cheeks. When singing in „chest

voice", vibrations are felt in your throat and chest. When children learn to sing, they normally sing in their chest voice and need help finding their head voice.

Finding Head Voice

There are a number of initial vocal exercises th e teacher can do to find head voice: Pretend that you are talking to a baby; pretend to be an owl and make a high-pitch „whoooo" sound; pretend to be a child on a playground, taunting another child: „Nyah-nyah-nyah".

The head voice vibrates and radiates more in thei head. The head voice is helpful for leading children in singing because they are still trying to make the distinction between singing and speaking. However, as music educators we need to make students aware of the different energy and aspects of head and chest voices. Often children have a tendency to shout rather than sing in an effort to sing loudly. Model appropriate singing for your students whether singing in head or chest voice.

Steps to Finding the Singing Voice

Voice modulation: Select songs and rhymes that can be used to develop a child's singing voice. As young children say chants, they may be guided to speak using a „baby bird voice" (high) or a „grandfather's voice" (low). Chanting using these different voice types will teach a young learner to explore their vocal ranges. Song with narrow range; descending melodic patterns; call and response singing; providing a model for singing; singing softly; movement; singing names to simple melodic motifs; recognizing different timbres; vowels and consonants.

The correct pronunciation of vowels is critical for the development of good intonation. Practice singing vowels using the words „no", „nu", „naw", „ni", and „nah" on descending pentachord scales. Consonants help define the rhythmic character of singing. Vocalizations that include „n" and „m" consonants encourage good singing and proper pronunciation.

The reason students do not sing in tune in many music classrooms is because teachers are afraid to tell students they are „out of tune". Gentle and specific simple corrections are completely acceptable. A simple. „a little higher" and then lavish praise when they perform the task correctly will not damage self-esteem. The entire class starts to listen and ask themselves whether they sing in tune.

5 Conclusions

Chorus students don't have private voice teachers, they often forget the mechanics of creating beautiful tones, and they have a lot to learn about vowel and consonant production. A thoughtfully planned warm-up period can help singers enhance their singing, listening, and learning skills. A warm-up period structured to prepare chorus members to sing, listen, and learn is time well spent. The outcomes relative to vocal and musical development are well worth the necessary time and planning. My hope is that this article provides music teachers with some initial ideas for establishing a well-

planned and effective warm-up period. Once the structure and processes are established, the possibilities for furthering musical learning and growth within the warm-up period and endless. The warm-up period becomes more meaningful and creative when musical development and learning are the focus points.

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