

## DEVELOPING MOVEMENT IN THE CHORAL ENSEMBLE

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"I learned to be in motion when I was singing rather than being very static and rigid"

James McCracken, American Opera Singer

Emphasizing the physical, while simulating bowling and golfing, his instructor used "anything" that would keep him in motion in order to improve sound and artistry (Hines, 1982, p.175). His resourceful vocal coach wasn't just assisting him in technique, but making connections with psychological strategies and brain functions that naturally suit learning, especially in males.

## MOVEMENT AND BRAIN RESEARCH

Experiences have greater impact on what we learn than what we are told. In *Making Connections*, (1994) Caine and Caine use the following musical comparison, "a student can learn to sing on key and learn to hate singing at the same time" (p.92). They argue that teaching should be designed to maximize unconscious processing. Non-verbal gesture, movement, and shaping combined with rehearsal instruction are very effective in unconscious processing.

- Brain research shows effective learning takes place when there is alternation in states of arousal. Important determining factors are elements of timing, anticipation, drama, and excitement (Caine and Caine, 1994, p. 34). Retention is greater when facts and skills become part of natural physical and spatial memory or "local memory" (O'Keef & Nade, 1978, et al).
- Movement encourages "natural memory" and kinesthetic association that retains memory (Caine and Caine, 1994, p. 41-43).
- When engaging in tasks, physical memory is enhanced with cognitive memory known as "active processing" (Caine and Caine, 1994, p. 7-8).
- "Metacognitive teaching" advocated by Sam Crowel seeks to avoid "down-shifting" (Caine and Caine, 1994, p.180) by relating the action to the experience.
- Less verbal instruction and more effective non-verbal gesture and movement may elevate and augment musical processing in choral rehearsals.

## MOVEMENT AND BRAIN RESEARCH MALE SPECIFIC

Steve Biddulph, in *Raising Boys*, (1998) reasons: "The passivity required by school contradicts everything we know about kids, especially adolescents. Adolescence is the age of passion. Boys crave an engaged and intense learning experience" both intellectually and physically (p.153).

- Male brains are more spatially focused and respond more acutely to physical activity (Gurian, 1998, p.99). Physical gesturing, outside conversational gesture, is greater in boys than girls.
- Girls' verbal abilities mature faster than boys' do, and boys tend to be more physically active. Boys move faster and are in motion longer (Kindlon and Thompson, 1999, p.12).
- Males, from adolescence to early adulthood, exhibit more physical activity both in initiating gesture and in response to gesture (Gurian, 1998, p.99).
- The use of physical movement aids boys in creating, interpreting artistic expression, and realizing a sense of artistic connection (Pollack, 2000, p. 370).
- Properly channeling male or physical learning into "boy energy" (Kindlon and Thompson, 1999, p.49-50) increases interest and motivation for that activity.

## MALE EDUCATIONAL MYTHS

Boys are not better than girls in academic or social atmospheres within educational institutions.

- Boys have the majority of academic problems and are twice as likely to be diagnosed as learning disabled. Males are more likely to be diagnosed with emotional and learning disorders (Gurian, 1998, p.12- 13). Only one out of six adolescents diagnosed with ADHD is female.
- Boys have four times the dropout rate than girls, 90% of discipline problems are male and, contrary to the popular myth, boys lag behind girls in math (Gurian, 1998, p. 14- 15).

Social and emotional pressures boys endure are enormous, leading to increased and very serious self-esteem issues. These pressures have manifested themselves in startling statistics.

- In the United States, male adolescent suicide has tripled since 1970. Far more boys die from suicide than homicide. In fact, among boys ages 10-14, statistics for suicide accounts for 75% of these deaths while in 15-19 year olds, it is 83% (Pollack, 2000, p.145).

Schools in general put boys in settings of inactivity that are unnatural to their learning traits. Because of this, adolescent boys are more likely to exhibit disruptive behaviors. Too many boys are trapped in educational systems designed against their natural learning traits. When they are unable to perform, learn, cope and thus, begin to misbehave, they are diagnosed and drugged.

Males who have a strong sense of empathy and emotional awareness are less likely to be violent to themselves or others and demonstrate more resilience in dealing with outside pressures (Kindlon and Thompson, 1999, p.87). It may be reasonable to assume that boys, who are involved in music, where they experience emotional and physical release, are more likely to have an opportunity to reinforce empathy and resist negative or self-destructive pressures.

#### TRANSACTIVE MEMORY

“As we work together in a group experience we have access to more information (and skills) because we take advantage of what each person in the interaction knows and remembers. That way the interaction between members in the group (or between the director and the singers) is stronger through the communication for the participants than it would be individually or isolation.” (Dr. Brett Nolker, 2006, February 11, email communication).

#### SHARED CONDUCTOR-SINGER GESTURE AND MOVEMENT

“If the essence of conducting is in the gesture and if the essence of gesture is in the value of the information communicated nonverbally, it is by freeing the body with an enhanced perception of the power of nonverbal behaviors that musical intention can be effectively communicated to members of music ensembles”.

A.C. McClung (2005,p.27)

Over the past quarter century there has been a concerted effort among choral directors to examine the relationship of the nonverbal direction on choral sound. Rodney Eichenberger, of Florida State University, observed that that kinesthetic and kinetics exert great influence on sound and memory while shared conductor-singer gesture has a direct effect on tone, pitch, diction, phrasing, and other aspects of musical articulation. He advocates examining shared conductor-singer gesture as a means of improvement and rehearsal efficiency (Con, 2002, et al).

The following is a personal collection/summary of Eichenberger’s techniques based on experience at workshops, educational videos, and research of his work by others.

1. Movement and gesture indirectly affect most choral sound and its quality (Con, 2002, p. 88-89). Gesture and movement may provide nonverbal alternatives to most aspects of choral rehearsal and performance.
2. Movement and gesture may enhance or negate verbal instruction. Gesture that compliments instruction of choral concepts will result in greater efficiency and retention in learning. Gesture and instruction that are at odds with each other send mixed signals and create confusion. An example of negating instruction by sending mixed messages may be a conductor that shows large motions while verbally asking for a pianissimo (Con, 2002, p. 48-49).
3. Combining physical movement and singing in the rehearsal may aid in achieving similar responses in sound. Singers should be able to see, hear, and feel the differences that movement and gesture create (Eichenberger and Thomas, 1994, 26:50) and build similar sensations.
4. Singer motion and use of gesture is valuable for improved performance (Eichenberger, 2001, 45:50). Shared movement experiences with the conductor, during rehearsal, may result in enhanced performance by natural physical recall of the singers.
5. Movement and gesture give singers shared ownership in the product (Eichenberger, 2001, 34:00). Movement and gesture, in tandem with the conductor, allow for greater value in the product produced as a group effort. It further emphasizes understanding of choral technique and heightens the individual singer’s response to personal choices for improvement.
6. Movement draws singer’s attention to musical subtlety (Eichenberger, 2001, 11:58). Visualizing phrasing, intonation, color, blend, and various other aspects of choral music through movement and gesture heighten musical sensitivity. Movement and gesture may be used to articulate phrasing and forward movement (42:35). [Shared movement and gesture help build a singer repertoire of gesture and performance shaping.]
7. Gesture is a means of moving singers out of “auto-pilot” (Eichenberger, 2001, 10:00). Shared gesture and movement help to create a rehearsal environment that enhances pacing, activates natural physical learning traits, and focuses singer attention on subtle details with a variety of unpredictable sequences through rehearsal instruction. Movement and gesture provide a “nonconfrontational” way to avoid “downshifting” (auto-pilot) by engaging singers mentally and physically in ways that facilitate musical intentions and perceptions (Con, 2002, p.44).

8. Gesture and movement are strongest and exert greater control on sound when hand and arm activity are closer to the “power center”. (Con, 2002, p. 86). The “power center” comprises an area that includes the lower abdominal region to just below the sternum and width of the body. Conducting gesture within this area encourages breath support, tone color, and musical sensitivity.

Other thoughts:

- Eph Ehly believes that the physical with the expressive build a feeling of togetherness and sense of ensemble (Clarke, 1997, p.63).
- Donald Neuen suggests using dance and movement to deal with rhythms or feel phrases in rehearsal (2002g, 18:30).
- Weston Noble argues that the rehearsal kinesthetic is fundamental to enhanced performance quality and in creating a sense that “All music must dance” (March 26, 2004).
- Bartle notes that phrasing is internalized by the use of the kinesthetic (1993, p.42).
- Ingram and Rice say, “ physical response to music-moving a portion or all of the body...provides another step in music training”. Using movement and gesture, the singers will become “increasingly aware of differences in pitch, rhythm, melody, and mood” (1962, p.19).

#### SHARED SINGER GESTURE AND MOVEMENT IN PERFORMANCE (at SMIS)

The student body is very small (250 in the High School) and most students are involved in numerous activities creating constant rehearsal conflicts. Students are very transient due to the nature of “international schools” and building consistency across the program is difficult. Rehearsal time is short (20 minutes for Varsity Ensemble and 45 minutes twice a week for Men’s Choir). Use of shared conductor-singer gesture increased rehearsal efficiency, retention of rehearsal information, and aided in the overall consistency of program.

- Experimenting with gesture and “shaping” improved intonation, placement, tone, phrasing, sensitivity and freedom for singer self-expression.
- Using alternate seating arrangements and rehearsing in the round enhanced visual and auditory responses through shared conductor-singer gesture.

Reasons for including gesture and movement in performance:

- Gesture and movement helped to improve musical qualities during rehearsal and performance. However, since performance was given in a “traditional” manner, personal conductor gesture didn’t always initiate response to the same degree as in rehearsal.
- The singers sensed frustration in not being able to perform at the same expressive and technical level during performance as in rehearsals and felt the absence of their own movement and gesture during performance was stifling.
- The choral community through workshops and clinics sponsored by the ACDA, IFCM, and comments by adjudicators reinforced both the visual and physical as a means for enhancing overall expression.

Research concerning the physical and learning, especially in males, suggested they respond more to emotive and expressive communication if psychological and physical elements are present.

Prior to an upcoming concert the choir agreed to use rehearsal gesture and movement during the performance. Singers were encouraged to express themselves using “shaping” gestures with which they were comfortable and aided them in being individually expressive. Movement was kept on a lower plain (near the “power center” or within the “shaping area”).

- Students felt less stifled, more comfortable on stage, allowed for better communication between the singers, musical expressiveness was easier, and rehearsal-performance sensations were similar.

Creating “Shaping” Area, experiment with movement and gesture on a low plain:

- Start with the lowest natural extension of the arms where they comfortably rest at the sides in appropriate posture.
- The area continues across out in front of the abdomen from the natural lowest hand extension to no higher than the bottom of the ribcage.
- Encourage the singers to define a self-perception of what McClung refers to as singing social space (2005, p.27).
- Apply movement as it may help them to create enhanced musical sensitivity, expression, or to overcome personal vocal difficulties.

Give the choir enough physical space as to create an environment of little tension:

- Spacing singers a few feet apart will acoustically assist listening, aural production, and prevent straining over sight lines (Clark, 1997, p. 86). Try rehearsing in the round using one or two perimeter rows (if the choir is large).
- Circular rehearsal improve sight lines and provide freer director-student access.
- Singing in the round achieves purer vowel unification and blend quickly while reducing “over singing”.
- It greatly enhances communication between the singers and director while building a subliminal sense of equality as no one is left at the end of a row.

Members tend to assume greater responsibility and aid in building a cohesive spirit and singer ownership.

### Activating the Head Voice:

Developing a strong head voice in middle and high school male singers is an important factor in building beautiful male voices. Proper instruction and use of the head voice will aid in breath support awareness, placement, tone color, accurate pitch differentiation, phrasing concepts, and overall natural control of the chest voice.

- It is the range with which males have had the longest experience and where they developed their first sound identities and can be a very effective tool in dealing with uncertain pitch.
- When boys see other boys confidently using head voice, it will serve to remove psychological barriers and expand their musical experience as well as their range.
- The most effective vocal modeling is done without piano because it aids the listener in isolating tonal effects without interference from instruments.

### Diction:

At St. Mary's International School, we try to maximize the vowel sounds of "ah", "ee", "oo", "eh", "oh" (which are the only vowel sounds in Japanese) with that of "a", "ih", and "aw" in English.

- We do not allow "r" or "l" to be phonated in ways that create hard or muscular sounds in the back of the tongue and throat.
- Consonant "r" and "l", in the middle or at the end of word are minimized. In fact, by simplifying vowel consonant sounds to a few, it encourages purer vowels without chewing and slight "r" sounds are not omitted.
- Allow the color of the vowels to be determined by the music.

### EXERCISES AND WARM-UPS

Warm-ups that use physical gesture are more likely to be retained or internalized through muscle memory and auditory-motor sensations (Con, 2002, p.50).

Rodney Eichenberger and others use the following exercises to activate intended responses through nonverbal movement and gesture. These exercises were adapted by SMIS choirs to assist with movement for performance and shaping.

9.1. Performance energy level, dynamic contrast, tone production, and pitch are all affected by gesture. Use small and large circles while singing phrases to demonstrate loud and soft energized singing. Circling from the lower abdominal area out, up, around, and then inward assist a breath support cycle. Hands must come up from the center and not in the opposite direction (Eichenberger, 2001, 5:25)--contrary direction will be counterproductive to good breath support. The motion of circling up in a beat pattern will aid in support and sustaining a line of music through continuous motion.

a) As a means of building awareness for non-verbal responses in the sounds of the singers, instruction may begin by physically identifying the "power center" for breath support. Sing various phrases or vocalise while using the hands (slightly cupped) and forearms from the elbow with minimal upper arm movement to outline a continuous circling motion within the power center. Circles may be by beat, two beats, measures, or phrases.

b) Change volume with the size of the circle. Use large circular motions for forte and smaller circles for piano note the effect of energy and control of the tone and the effect on breath support with and without circling. Circling with both hands, in front of the lower abdominal area helps to put energy into the tone and aids in breath support (Eichenberger and Thomas, 1994, p. 18). Dynamics dictate the size of the beat (Neuen, 2002b, 3:50).

Adapt for performance shaping by minimizing the circle gesture and having the singers experiment with circling phrases within the shaping area. Performance shaping should be kept low, centered, or close to the body on either side.

9.2. Singers may imitate gesture in order to connect smaller movement relationships of desired sounds. Experiment with hand heights, shapes, and placements in and out of the power center. In observing Eichenberger's hand gesture, Con notes that physical placement of the palms of the hands have a direct correlation to the sound that is produced (2002, p.81). Palms up produce bright tones while palms down tend to produce darker tones.

a) While sustaining an "aw" or any other vowel, place flat hands horizontal to the floor with the fingers together. Slowly bring the hands to a cupped position and note the difference in tonal qualities. Generally the cupped position leans towards a rounder sound. In the same position, spread the fingers apart and notice any tonal changes. Use the same hand positions on various planes in and out of the power center and note any tonal differences.

b) Turning hands and forearms in and out at the power center affects color. Arms out to the sides with palms raised tend to create a brighter, less blended, and spread tonality. Cupped hands with forearms parallel at the power center create a more mixed, focused, and controlled tonality (Eichenberger, 2001, 3:20)

c) While sustaining an "aw" or other vowel sounds, hold the hands and forearms outward and to the side (outside the power center) and gradually bring the hands into a parallel position with cupped hands in the center of the power center. Note any change in support or tone color. The "aw" will generally change to a fuller and more supported sound when hands are rounded in the center of the body or lower abdominal region (Eichenberger and Thomas, 1994, 18:25).

The singer is encouraged to use the above hand gestures, and their variations, within the shaping area to create color changes when determining performance shaping. Singers should make note of how each slight hand position shape personal tonal differences and create preferences they may wish to use for performance shaping.

9.3. Examine the power of hand movement alone. Using the same gesture position as in the above example, hold the lower hand in position while moving the hand above slowly upward in the power center area as the choir sustains a chord or unison vowel. Note any uniformity of the crescendo and the ability of the choir to affect a crescendo with little overall movement. Should the movement for crescendo move outside the power center, the tonality will begin to spread and sound strained (Eichenberger, 2001, 36:12).

a) Reverse the motion to create a decrescendo. Listen carefully for any loss of intensity with a gradual movement. Try stabilizing the upper hand at the top of the power zone while bringing the lower hand gradually upward during the decrescendo. Singers should make note of any differences in support and control of the decrescendo.

b) Singers may experiment with similar gesture as the exercise, using the hands low at either side of the body or within the shaping area. They should make note of which movements or gesture aid them in sustaining a gradual supported crescendo or decrescendo.

9.4. Up and over gestures may help lift the soft palate, aid pitch and tone, and assist in neck muscle relaxation (Eichenberger, 2001, 32:35).

a) Use a cupped hand near the ear then flick the wrist forward while at the same time lifting the forearm upward. This may be used to deal with phrase attacks in the upper registers, give definition to the phrase, or note onsets in any register. The movement adds energy to the attack of the note, improves breath support for the phrase, reduces neck-shoulder tension, reduces scooping or reaching, and visually aids in sensations of lifting the soft palate.

b) Point across the room or throw the tone forward for projection. This lends energy to the tone and lifts the pitch with support (Eichenberger, 2001, 7:00). The flicking or pointing action may be used at the side or low front of the body within the shaping zone for performance shaping.

9.5. Contained round gestures help support tone (Eichenberger, 2001, 33:00). When dealing with overall phrasing concepts, gesture shapes a visual relationship with sound. Within micro or macro patterns, experiment with quieter rounder sounds by using cupped hands with relaxed forearms in small, minimized areas within the power center. Slightly lift, lower, or turn hands and note differences. Transfer the same gesture and line movement to the full area of the shaping zone. Ask singers to differentiate which line or beat action is most helpful in easing tension and supporting micro and macro phrasing.

9.6. Movement or implied movement may be helpful as a tool in visualizing note direction and uncertain pitch.

a) Use a vocal sirening technique while the director rotates his hands as if winding a crank forward and backward to move the pitch up or down. Forward motion is up while backward motion is down. The uncertain singer follows the direction, in a glissando or siren fashion, until the correct pitch attained and stabilized (Eichenberger, 22:50). Singers may use the same movement.

b) A variation for this is to have the whole choir begin on a set a pitch and practice winding up or down from the given pitch. Sustain various pitches above or below the original note. Eventually bring the choir back to the original pitch. Singers may copy the director's movement to increase sensitivity for the activity. This exercise may also give the uncertain singer an opportunity to have prior experience with the exercise and the comfort zone of a group.

c) Repeat the same activity, but after the choir has sustained a pitch, the director may have to individual sections or singers move in different directions to create harmony or dissonance. In this way the director may also address the uncertain singer in a less intrusive manner and on an individual basis within the activity of the whole choir rather than singling them out.

9.7. Physical Eurhythmics result in better pitch and more vibrant tone. Walking to music may assist in creating sensations of energy and phrase support (Eichenberger, 2001, 19:20).

a) If a large room is available, form the choir in a circle with the director in the center. From this position, begin a piece of music. Then, while continuing to sing, individual choir members may move forward in any direction of their choosing. Each step should be in time to the rhythm of each note. When held notes of two or more beats are encountered, the singer should remain stationary while raising an outstretched hand (from the low plain of the power center) upward for the appropriate amount of beats before continuing in a forward direction on the next note.

Careful not to let the hand-arm position of the held notes rise too high. Tone has more energy if hands do not lift above the sternum. Movement above the center of the sternum creates tension (Eichenberger, 2001, 17:00). Tension may cause sharpening.

Walking while singing helps sustain energy for support, pitch, and a freer tone quality by drawing the singer's attention away from self-conscious vocal mechanism concerns that create tension and bad sounds. This exercise enables the singer to sense the forward movement of the musical line, visualize the entirety of the piece with regard to other parts, and build a sense of the individual in relationship to the whole. The natural act of walking internalizes rhythm (Eichenberger, 2001, 22:30).

b) If there is no space available, the choir may repeat the same exercise while standing and walking in place. Another variation is to move only the knees forward and back rather than lift the feet.

Consider using the knees as a cushion for rhythmic activity and forward motion. Movement upward from the knees may help to sustain phrasing, assist breath support, while giving height and shape to the vocal line. Sustaining the held note with a similar hand gesture, hand at the side or within the shaping area may further muscle memory sensations for forward motion and phrasing.

9.8. Circling the ear may lift the soft palate (Eichenberger, 2001, 14:00). Using the pointer finger, make a small moderate circular motion a few inches away from the ear. This may assist in creating energy, encouraging singer's "spin" or forward mixed tonality, and reinforce a raised soft palate. It may be used on sustained notes, phrase endings, entire phrases within a prescribed vocalise, or whenever the quality of the note or pitch seems inadequate.

- a) Use the above exercise but move the spinning action from the ear gradually to the power center with the finger pointing away from the body. Note any differences in sound. Continue the circling motion and move from the power center to the side of the body with the finger pointing toward the floor again noting shift in sound or sensation.

Use a slower circling action with the finger at the side of the body or a non-circling action with the pointer finger in a forward motion outward from the center of the shaping area.

9.9. Opposite gesture or movements, in relation to the direction of the musical line and pattern, may lift the pitch shifting the thought process and thereby resulting in activities that excite the brain and resist "auto-pilot" (Eichenberger, 2001, 10:00).

- a) Experiment with using the hands, from a low plain in the power center, and move in an upward direction while singing a descending line. Observe any changes in pitch relationships. Repeat the example in the opposite direction.
- b) Experiment with the fingers, in a pulling action, upward or downward, one hand and two hands, opposite of the phrase direction. Note any changes in pitch, tone color, or focus.
- c) While pointing, move outward and parallel to the floor from the middle of the power center away from the body while singing crescendos and decrescendos. Try the same with directional melodic lines. Listen for differences of intensity and support.
- d) Use the hands in diagonal motions, inward, outward, upward, and downward. Note any changes in sound, and note differences.
- e) Use continuous opposite motion to the musical line and compare it to similar motion.

Encourage singers to experiment with opposite motion and observe which directions and heights affect sound for them. Movements may be minimized and used within the shaping area.

9.10. Directors often use the left hand for emphasizing extra musical information such as sforzando, legato, crescendo, etc. (Neuen, 2002b, 22:15).

- a) In order for the singer to experience similar physical sensations, have them repeat the conducting motions and gestures of the director using the left hand only.
- b) Isolate various parts the conducting apparatus (shoulder, arm, fingers, elbow, etc.) and determine the affects each may have in each measure of the music (Neuen, 2002b, 23:55).

A gesture determined to be appropriate and beneficial in enhancing the singer's auditory response may be minimized and used within the performance shaping area if it recreates similar effects.

9.11. Dramatizing songs may help the singer to be less inhibited and become more engrossed in reproducing sounds (Ingram and Rice, 1962, p.37). Use movement, gesture, facial, visual, and other nonverbal activities to emphasize the text while being careful to practice good singing technique.

9.12. Physical gesture and nonverbal movement techniques may make dramatic tonal and pitch changes easily and quickly (Barham, 2001, p. 45). (Tall vowels, think, "nose to navel") Use physical gesture to indicate vertical vowels or horizontal spread vowels by using fingers and hands in parallel, elongated, or wide positions to create sensory experiences and spatial relationships.

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