The Principles and Practical Guide of Warm-ups in Music Lesson and Choir Rehearsal

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to state the rationale and necessity of the vocal warm-up before music lesson or choir rehearsal. Practical guide and suggested exercises will be given in order to let the teachers establish proper way in the training of voice.

A. The Principles of Warm-ups

A well-planned and efficiently executed warm-up is essential for developing a good singing habit and creating an attentive atmosphere in music lesson or 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 activity. Because the vocal cord is an extremely sensitive organ, it needs special care and training in order to have good voice production.

The warm-up before and music lesson or choir rehearsal has often been neglected by music teachers and choral conductors. It is regarded as boring vocal exercises and wasting of the precious lesson or rehearsal time. Warm-up should not be treated as a time for pitch drilling and rhythm drilling. Drilling is a passive act and it requires no active participation and thinking. An efficiently executed warm-up not only enhance the students’ motivation in singing, but also let them actively involve in the process of music making.

Principles of vocal warm-ups:

1. Do not rely too much on the piano in giving pitches. In fact, choral warm-up may start on any comfortable note i.e. between middle C to high C. The teacher or conductor can start on any pitch in the above range by himself or make use of the pitch pipe.

2. Limit the range of the vocalizes in one octave (middle C to C) at the beginning of the warm-up. The main purpose of warm-up is to exercise the voice and loosen up the pharynx and larynx. High tessitura and strong dynamics will create unnecessary tension in the vocal cord at the initial stage.

3. Warm-up exercises should be creative and imaginative. Exercises which is too mechanical, routine or too much drilling

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will simply lose the concentration of the choir and thus creates boredom and fatigue.

4. Correct breathing, singing posture, good habit of articulating vowels and consonants should be cultivated during the warm-up period (warm up the voice).

5. The basic musicianship of the singers should be improved in this period (warm up the mind).

6. The time for vocal warm-up should be limited from ten to fifteen minutes except that more time can be devoted in voice training once in a while or approaching the performance.

7. Some physical exercises should be adopted so as to relax the body and prepare for intense concentration (warm up the body). Due to limitation of the size of the classroom or rehearsal room, the physical exercises should be designed in a small scale and suitable to do in a less spacious room.

8. Try to incorporate some rhythmic, harmonic or melodic elements of a certain pieces of music into the exercises and design warm-ups for specific choral works, this saves much rehearsal time and enhances efficiency.

9. A comfortable range (low and middle range) should be used and gradually go up as the members are ready for the high tension of vocal cords later on.

B. Warming up the body

Physical exercises for relaxation and refreshing the body:
1. Turn to your neighbor, massage and slap the shoulders, neck and back.

2. Slightly slap the face, hands and foot so as to increase the blood flow and thus refresh the body with more oxygen.

3. Members group into pairs and slightly push each other with hands.

4. Rotate the head to both sides, but never to the back.

5. Stretch the hands upward and downward on tiptoe.

6. Make a wide open mouth and close mouth with emphasis on exercising muscles on the face.

7. Move the mouth in circular motion as if it is chewing something.

8. Make a long tongue and use your tongue as a tooth brush to brush your teeth.

9. Lift up your shoulders and freeze for ten seconds, pretend your ears are touched by your shoulders, relax and drop the shoulders suddenly as if it is being cut off.

10. Rotate your shoulders in circular motion.
11. Make a yawn with “fa” and “du”, glide from low chest tone to high falsetto of indefinite pitch and vice versa. Remember to drop the jaw, relax and with flat tongue in making yawn.

C. Warming up the voice

1. Correct posture in breathing and singing
   1.1 Lift up your body and rib cage by pulling a clump of air on the top of your head and maintain this posture throughout singing. Imagine that your body is being lifted up and rise up to the sky.
   1.2 Place your back against the wall with head, back, and hip slightly touching the wall in order to stretch the entire spinal column.
   1.3 Inhale and Exhale deeply for a few times slowly with your mouth and nose.
   1.4 Without using the mouth or nose, relax the diaphragm down and abdominal wall outward with mouth opened, air will be automatically forced into the lung simply because the increase in volume. Exhale with the movement of the diaphragm and abdominal wall, try not to use the mouth and nose at the moment.
   1.5 Imagine you are carrying a big bucket on the waist when breathing, the size of the waist (front, back and sides) should increase, not just the front abdominal wall.
   1.6 Exhale completely with “sh” and “s” as quickly as possible, be sure to use the abdominal muscle.
   1.7 Exhale with “s” of ten counts loudly.
   1.8 Speak from one to ten loudly with the abdominal muscle and high register.
   1.9 Exhale with “s” softly as long as possible, maintain a steady air flow throughout and think as if a burning candle is placed just before the mouth.
   1.10 Sing “ha, ha, ha” on indefinite pitch with exaggeration on the movement on the abdominal wall.

2. Vocal technique: registration, flexibility, range, diction and resonance.

I used to divide the registers into five categories: head voice, normal speaking voice, low deep chest voice, front and back voice. Try to sing and experiment with different registrations. If you speak with head voice, the tone is like ghost speaking in the horrifying movies, volume is increased in the mouth and the sound is hollow. When you speak or sing with the front register, the tone is bright and flat. The sound is dark when speaking with back
registration. For instance, the style of singing the Cantonese opera is head voice plus front registration.

Try to shape the mouth according to the above five categories on “ma” without uttering any sound, and let the members guess which registers you are using. This will enhance the awareness of the members in using different registrations with the shape of the mouth. It is not a matter of right or wrong in singing with different registrations, it is a matter of which kind of registrations should be used in accordance with different styles. The awareness of using different registration will increase the flexibility in singing.

2.1 Choose a familiar short song i.e. Happy Birthday, and experiment in singing with different registration on “du”.

2.2 Stretch the vocal cord and increase its flexibility:
(a) Sing the octave on “ma” in ascending and descending alternately on separate tone:
(b) Sing the octave on “ma” in glissando:
(c) Sing the octave on “ma” in legato (without glissando):

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\begin{align*}
\text{(a)} & : & \text{ma, ma, ma} & \text{ma-a-a} & \text{ma-a-a} \\
\text{(b)} & : & \text{ma} & \text{ma-a-a} \\
\text{(c)} & : & \text{ma-a-a} & \text{ma-a-a} \\
\text{(d)} & : & \text{ma} & \text{ma-a-a} \\
\end{align*}
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(d) Sing the leap of intervals in legato i.e. d - d’, d - r’, d - m’ or on numbers (1 - 8, 1 - 9, 1 - 10).

2.3 Try to articulate and exercise in using different parts of the lips and tongue in producing consonants:

Consonants are articulated by the lips, teeth, tongue, soft and hard palates. Each consonant is being produced by one or combinations of the above organs. Teacher should be aware of which part of the organ is being used in articulating the consonants and get the students acquainted with the use of these organs. For instance, m and n are typical nasal consonants; b, p, m and w are formed by lips, f and v are formed by teeth and lips; t, d, l, s and z are formed by tongue and gum ridge; r and j are formed by tongue and hard palate; c, k, g and n are formed by tongue and soft palate.

It is the vowels (a, e, i, o, and u) that carry the communicative and emotional impact. The formation of each vowel has particular resonance, shape, pitch and volume within the mouth, larynx and pharynx. Vowels can be described as dark, bright, open and closed vowels. Teacher should be familiar
with the quality, formation and resonance of each vowel so as to teach the students to take special notice on these vowels formation.

3. **Choral technique: blending, dynamics, tone color, staggered breathing and vibrato.**

3.1 **Blending:** Ask the members to sing a short familiar melodic phrase or just one note on any non-sense syllable with:

(a) 80% of air and 20% of sound,
(b) 50% of air and 50% of sound,
(c) 20% of air and 80% of sound,
(d) 0% of air and 100% of sound.

The third option is said to be a healthy way in singing, it allows a small amount of air sneaking out with considerable relaxation on the larynx. The first and second options are considered to be too breathy. The fourth option would be too tense in the larynx and fatigue will result. Through concentrating on the amount of air flow in singing, members would be miraculously listen to each other and result in good blending.

3.2 **Tone color:** Ask the members to sing a short melodic phrase on bright and dark color without changing the dynamics. Let them cultivate the concepts that choral tones can have infinite varieties.

3.3 **Staggered Breathing and dynamics:** Staggered breathing is an essential technique in choral singing especially in long phrase, legato singing, long crescendo and diminuendo.

(a) Teacher assigns each member a number i.e. 1, 2, 3, and 4. Teacher counts from one to twenty (one two three four, two two three four . . . five two three four) and ask the member to sing a long note on twenty counts, if they are out of breath, they can only take breath on the assigned number. Thus a long a seamless melodic line will be accomplished.

(b) By the same token, teacher can ask the members to sing a twenty-beats long crescendo or diminuendo on staggered breathing.

3.4 **Vibrato:** it is a pulsation in pitch and a necessary feature of good singing. Conductors or teachers often require members to sing in straight tone because of the blending purpose, but a voice with straight tone has little flexibility and little emotional quality. To sing a piece by Renaissance Period or composers specified this need should straight tone be used. Vibrato is often mixed up with tremolo or wobble, thus
vibrato is forbidden in choral singing. A good and healthy vibrato not only let the voice be more flexible, but also enhance emotional impact.

Vibrato is measured in terms of rate and interval. The range of vibrato can be as little as a quarter tone and as wide as a second (or even wider) apart. Vibrato less than a quarter tone creates no bad feeling to our ears. For the well-trained voice the rate of vibrato is about five to six times per second. It is considered healthy and pleasant.

The rate and interval of the vibrato should be experimented in the group in order to have a non-verbal agreement on this matter. Excessive vibrato rate or wide vibrato could damage the overall choral tone and let the voices stick out.

Teacher can let the members sing a note or a short familiar melodic phrase in a slow and fast vibrato rate alternately, members should listen carefully to each other to adjust the rate of vibrato and establish a non-verbal comprise among them.

D. Warming up the mind

1. **Awake the aural sense of the mind**
   (a) Play any note on the piano between middle C and an octave above it, ask the members to sing that note on “la” and match the pitch as quickly as possible.
   (b) Conductors or teachers often use piano to accompany the vocalizes (i.e. C E G E C, C - C#, C# E# G# E# C#). It is more beneficial not to use piano in these vocalizes and let the members sing without accompaniment. Let them sing the complete vocalize and transition (i.e. C - C#) on their own in order to develop their pitch sense.

2. **Awake the tonal sense of the mind**
   (a) Ask the members to sing a major scale on sol-fa names first, then on numbers (1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8). The teacher calls out a few numbers and asks the members to sing those numbers corresponding to their respective pitches i.e. 1 3 5 3 1 and 151 etc.
   (b) Play a C major scale on the piano, then play any note on the scale randomly, and ask the members what scale degree is being played.
   (c) Play a C major scale on the piano, then play any note on the scale randomly, and ask the members to sing out that note on “la” as quickly as possible.
(d) Play a C major scale on the piano, then play any note on the scale randomly, and ask the members to sing out that note with the appropriate scale degree.

(e) Pick any note between middle C and high C, treat that note as *doh*, ask the members to sing *mi* and *soh* above it. Use the same note, treat that note as *mi*, and sing *soh, doh’* above it. Still use the same note, treat that note as *soh*, and then sing *doh’* and *mi’* above it. All the notes can be sung on sol-fa names or use numbers to substitute (i.e. d r m f s l t d’ sing as 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1’).

(f) Teacher asks the members to sing a C major scale first on sol-fa names and then on letter names. By using the same starting pitch, members are asked to sing a D major scales on letter names and so on. Still using the same starting pitch, members are asked to sing A natural minor, A harmonic minor and A melodic minor scales on letter names with all the accidentals being sung out.

3. Awake the rhythmic sense of the mind

(a) Teacher divides the class into four groups. By giving a steady pulse (crotchet), teacher asks the first group to articulate on ‘s’ or and non syllable in crochet, the second group in quavers, the third group in triplets and the fourth group in semiquavers. The exercise may be execute on any non-sense syllable or consonants. Those four groups can articulate these four rhythmic patterns alternately or simultaneously.

(b) Teacher claps a short rhythmic phrase and ask the members to listen carefully and clap immediately after the first time.

(c) Based on a simple vocalize, teacher can modify the rhythm at his own will so as to create some rhythmic interest and challenge to the members: i.e. d m s m d on the rhythm:

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4. Awake the harmonic sense of the mind

(a) Teacher divides the class into four groups or simply SATB sections, each group sings the same melodic patterns on crotchets (i.e. d - m r - f m - s f - l s - t l - d’ t - r’ d’ - m’ r’ - t d’ - l t - s l - f s - m f - r m - d r - t d) but enter at different places (four notes after one another), each group should hold the last note ‘d’ so as to match the pitch and train the ear. This melodic pattern may also be sung in dotted crotchet and double dotted crotchet.

(b) Sopranos sing *d’*, altos sing *mi*; tenors sing *soh* and basses sing *d*. Each section moves up or down a half step one by one or
simultaneously, they need to listen carefully in order to match the pitch harmonically. Non-sense syllable can be used instead of sol-fa names.

(c) Higher voices sing “d r m m f s s f m r d” and lower voices sing “d t d d r m m r d t d” simultaneously. It can be sung on any non-sense syllable, up or down at any intervals.

Conclusions

There is more extensive use of breath, vocal cord, larynx, pharynx, mouth and tongue in singing than in speaking, warming up the voice at the beginning of the music lesson or choir rehearsal is therefore extremely essential and necessary. The above exercises are some of the suggestions that can be used during this period. They are not meant to be used all at one music lesson or rehearsal. Teacher should carefully plan ahead of which components be included in the warm-up. A normal warm-up procedure should be composed of three main categories: physical exercises (warm-up the body), warm-up the mind and warm-up the voice.

Teacher should decide which elements should have more emphasis on one particular rehearsal. Do one thing at a time. Never try to do too many things in one rehearsal, nothing or little will be accomplished. Some of the above exercises have multi-purpose, i.e. exercise on Section D, 3(a): it trains members’ rhythmic sense, breath control as well as articulating power. The above suggested exercises could be modified and recreated at teachers’ own will. Whatever exercises are being used or created, it should be purposeful and beneficial to the members’ singing technique.

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