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Movement Skills Accelerate Rhythmic Development in Youth Choirs

by Rhonda J. Edge

Cultures around the world use rhythm to influence people.

Even today, primitive societies rely on rhythmic drum patterns for basic communication across great distances; while contemporary Americans do not even realize the extent to which their lives are unconsciously influenced in their shopping places or elsewhere by the type of rhythm patterns heard in music. Western languages themselves are highly rhythmic, and today's young persons in grades 7-12 enjoy the "rap," based upon complex rhythmic patterns.

Rhythm is an important part of the lives of our youth, just as it is a part of the lives of persons of all ages in all cultures. In choirs, body movement can be a link to help young people understand the rhythms that are such an important part of their culture. Through movement, youth can internalize the feeling of

rhythm and eventually relate this understanding to the printed score.

Important twentieth-century music educators such as Kodály, Orff, and Dalcroze all believed that movement was fundamental in understanding rhythm. Dalcroze's philosophy especially emphasized movement *in place* (within a confined area) and *in space* (using large motor skills in a larger room area) to gain an understanding of all elements of music.¹

Movement is a natural response to rhythmic patterns heard and is often used with children's choirs. Even babies move in response to rhythms that they hear, including speaking voices. Some evangelical churches, however, have discouraged the use of movement with youth choirs (grades 7-12) because of its secular connotations.

Many of today's youth love music even though they do not come from musically

stimulating home environments or have not been musically active in preschool nor children's choirs. Such youth often attend choir primarily for social reasons but also enjoy learning about music. Other youth choir members have already had strong musical home environments and church choir backgrounds. Besides the musical differences found among church choir members in this age group, they are strongly influenced by peer approval. Youth are more different psychologically, socially, emotionally, spiritually, and physiologically than they were as older children. Because of the rapid changes in all areas of their development, one of their greatest fears is "everyone else is looking at me." These changes influence youths' desire to participate in movement activities for fear of ridicule by the group. The challenge facing youth choir directors is to plan movement activities that will effectively

involve the youth in learning about rhythm at different levels of aptitude and developmental stages.

Begin with Activities in Place

If youth are unaccustomed to movement activities, they will be hesitant to participate in movements out of or away from their own choral chair for fear of being perceived as "different" by other choir members or because they are unaccustomed to movement activities at church. Some choir members may be in what Edwin Gordon calls the "rhythm babble stage," in which they cannot perceive the difference in meters or cannot move in those meters, resulting in fear of group movement activities.² However, by combining simple movements in place with neutral syllable rhythmic chanting early in the choir year, one can move the choir from Gordon's "rhythm

babble” stage to the beginning stages of audiating rhythm, or learning to internalize rhythmic patterns, and can help individuals feel comfortable in future learning experiences.³

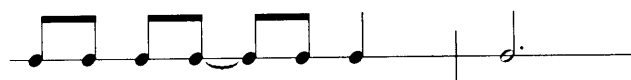
Following are some movement ideas used with the youth choir at Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, that motivated the choir to sing with greater rhythmic understanding and musicality. The suggested activities may be used with these anthems:

BOUGHT WITH A PRICE. Natalie Sleeth, two-part or SATB, Hinshaw Music, Inc., HMC-542; GOD IS OUR REFUGE. Allen Pote. SATB, Hope Publishing Company, A 583; IN THIS VERY ROOM, Ron and Carol Harris. SATB. Alexandria House, R-H0202; and SOAR LIKE AN EAGLE, Jay Althouse, SATB. GlorySound, A-6478.

Feeling the Underlying Pulse

In order to sing properly the highly complex and syncopated rhythms characteristic of many youth choir anthems, choir members must be able to feel the underlying pulse of the music. This underlying pulse should always feel steady to the singer; however, the *quality* of the pulse (i.e., light, heavy, legato, marcato) will vary with the style of the anthem being performed.

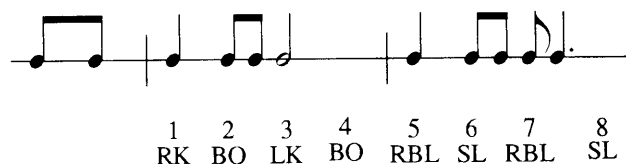
Because of the thick accompaniment texture and the type of syncopated patterns used in “God Is Our Refuge,” youth must feel the underlying *heavy*, steady pulse and use crisp consonants to keep the anthem from sounding sluggish. Isolating several rhythmic motives such as the following allows the choir to echo chant the rhythm using a neutral syllable such as “bah,” “dah,” or “daht.” Echo chanting of several motives can be repeated while performing steady beat movement activities. Movements may begin in place or in individual choral chairs by using body instruments and gradually moving away from the chairs as young people feel more comfortable with moving.



P	P	P	P	P
C	C	C	C	C
M	M	M	M	M
W	W	W	W	W

P = *Patschen*
 C = Clap
 M = March in place
 W = Walk around the room

In contrast, youth should feel a *light* underlying pulse when singing “Bought with a Price.” Because this anthem is in a minor modality and has a folk song or ethnic melodic sound, the style of the anthem may be less familiar to the youth. A folk circle dance may be used to introduce the anthem. An accompanist might play the A section of the anthem as the director sings the unison melody. Positioned in a circle with plenty of space for movement, the youth lock arms across shoulders. The choir takes light steps as they move in the following repeated eight-count sequence:



RK = Right foot kicks across body to left
 BO = Foot back to original position
 LK = Left foot kicks across body to right
 RBL = Right foot is placed behind left foot
 SL = Left foot slides to the left

Subdivision of the Beat

Youth feel the difference between legato and marcato subdivided beats by using a movement activity while learning “In This Very Room.”



As the leader sings the melodic line for the choir, youth try several different movements to help them feel legato and sing using consonant linkage: (1) sway on the steady beat; (2) “paint” carefully, using arms and hands as giant paintbrushes, like pulling an arm through the water in a swimming pool.

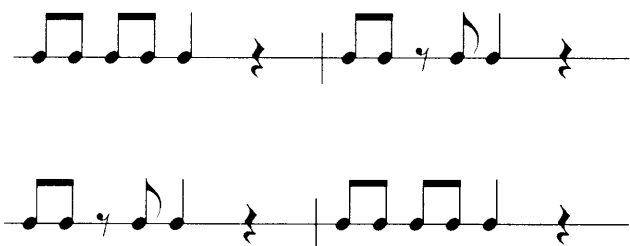
In contrast, marcato subdivided beats need to be reinforced with crisp, sharp movement activities. In measures 80-82 of “Soar Like an Eagle” to help the tenors and basses feel the rhythmic dialogue with the altos and sopranos, have them pretend to punch a punching bag lightly on each subdivision while chanting the text. Other options include clapping the subdivided beats or tapping index fingers as if the fingers were rhythm sticks.

Syncopation

The youth can learn how to make syncopated rhythmic patterns part of their musical vocabularies by using "rap" with biblically-based lyrics in the rehearsal. As members of an earlier youth generation, some directors may still not be comfortable including rap as a legitimate musical genre; however, the youth choir at Gambrell Street enjoys hearing the intricate rhythmic motives of three young men in the choir, whose rap group name is "Oreo."

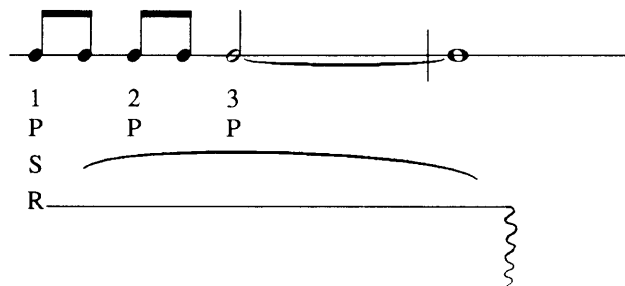
The author has become increasingly fascinated with the complex rhythm patterns used not only in the texts selected but also in the background sounds. Using a portion of an idea gleaned from a minister of music in another church, the choir was told the week prior to the "rap rehearsal" that something different would be happening in choir rehearsal the next Sunday. The youth arrived that next week with curious questions about the rehearsal. After body energizer exercises and vocal warm-up time including practicing echo chanting, the overhead lights were switched off, and several black lights were switched on. "Oreo," dressed in black shirts, pants, and socks and white gloves appeared. They performed their rap routine in black lights, including coordinated movements, while the choir echo clapped syncopated rhythms with the author, matching "Oreo's" tempo. "Oreo" taught some of the simpler movements to the choir, and the rehearsal continued with echo chanting on syncopated rhythms while moving.

An eight- or sixteen-beat rhythmic sequence could be echo clapped or chanted successfully with the rap selected:



Tied Notes

"In This Very Room" is the type of piece that can help develop legato singing skills and proper phrasing and breath support in youth choirs. Keeping the intensity through the tied notes in the final phrase is crucial to the success of this and similar anthems. The following activities help the choir concentrate on supporting the tone through the phrase:



P = pretend to pull a piece of taffy on counts 1, 2, and 3; continue pulling slowly through the tied note.

S = make a rainbow-shaped arch with one hand that slowly develops through the entire phrase, including the tied note.

R = use the familiar children's choir teaching aid of unrolling a roll of ribbon through the phrase, including the tied note, to illustrate the intensity needed for the long phrase. Drop the end of the ribbon at the end of the tied note.

Triplets

Youth choirs tend to accent all notes in triplet patterns instead of observing where the textual accents should lie. Large motor movements with text chanting help the youth feel the proper placements of the accents in "Soar Like an Eagle" and other anthems featuring triplet patterns.

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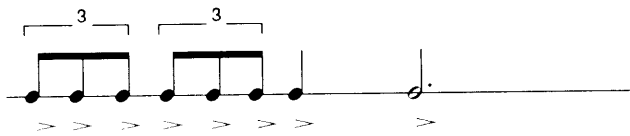
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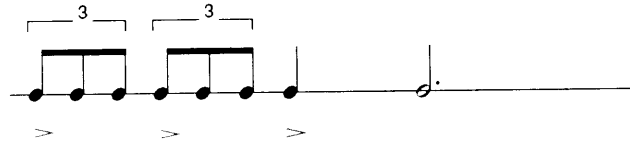
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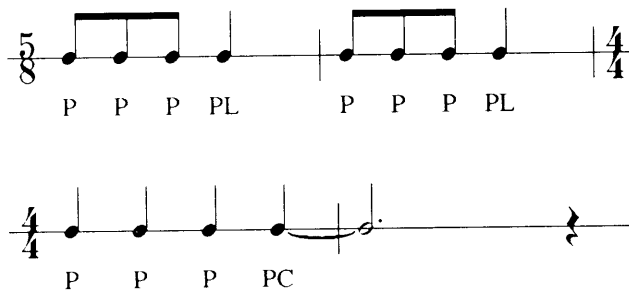


Proper Accent:



Unusual Paired Rhythms

Edwin Gordon calls a 3+2 5/8 rhythmic pattern an “unusual paired rhythm,” and that pattern is considered to be easy in the rhythmic learning sequence.⁴ “God Is Our Refuge” is a good anthem in which to introduce this unusual paired rhythm pattern. When the rhythm appears in the anthem, the choir is in unison, enabling the singers to concentrate more on rhythmic accuracy than when the choir is concentrating on singing three or four parts. To hear and feel the difference between the 5/8 and 4/4 meters in “God Is Our Refuge” and similar anthems, the choir might clap eighth notes while the leader chants the text rhythmically. The following activity can help the youth feel the 5/8 measures as asymmetrical and the 4/4 measures as symmetrical:



P = Punch
 PL = Punch and lean
 PC = Punch and continue pulling as if preparing to shoot a bow and arrow

Augmentation

Because of a lack of training in older children’s choirs, some youth lack the part singing skills necessary to sing a melodic line accurately in augmentation. Part singing skills may be developed by having one group clap phrase 1, the melodic rhythm, and the other group *patsch* phrase 2, the melodic rhythm in augmentation. Other rhythmic patterns may be devised by using augmentation, practicing the same type of clapping exercise used with the following example:



Long Note Value Crescendos

The choir should feel a crescendo through a whole measure on a long note value that is repeatedly found in the alto, tenor, and baritone parts of “Soar Like an Eagle” by using the crescendo conducting gesture with both arms.

Rhythmic Skills Needed for Part Singing

Movement can help teach part singing skills to youth choir members who did not develop them in an older children’s choir. A rhythmic ostinato may be clapped by one section while another sings. Each section takes a turn clapping the ostinato. The “Alleluia Round” is sung as a vocal warm-up.⁵ The song is performed in a round, with one group singing and the other group clapping the melodic beat. Both groups are given a chance to clap. The youth use the Kodály hand signals with the round to feel the direction and location of the pitches.

Directors who try some of these ideas with their youth will be pleased as the author was recently when her choir began learning Jester Hairston’s “Elijah Rock,” and saw choir members moving spontaneously in order to feel some of the difficult rhythmic patterns when first learning the work. Keeping a quick rehearsal pace, the leader should not be afraid to model the movement activities with great enthusiasm. The keys to understanding music are understanding rhythm and melody, and leaders may be confident that the youth choir will learn the language of rhythm through movement.

¹Further information about Dalcroze’s philosophy can be reviewed in Herbert H. Henke’s article, “Choral Musicianship Via the Dalcroze Approach” in the March 1990 *Choristers Guild LETTERS*, Volume XLI, No. 8.

²Gordon, Edwin E. *Learning Sequences in Music: Skill, Content, and Patterns*. Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, Inc., 1988, pp. 3-4.

³For further ideas about activities that can be used to help bring youth out of the “rhythm babble stage,” read “The Application of Music Learning Theory to the Teaching of Middle School General Music” by Coletta M. Wierson in *Readings in Music Learning Theory*, edited by Darrel L. Walters and Cynthia Crump Taggart, Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, Inc., 1989, pp. 154-167.

⁴Gordon, p. 160.

⁵Moore, Martha Ruth. *Teaching Children to Sing*. Nashville: Convention Press, 1989, p. 9.