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Elizabeth Jensen Shepley is director of the House of Hope Presbyterian Church Choir School in St. Paul, Minnesota, an after-school extended music program for children ages three through high school (treble voices).

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# En route to Musical Excellence

## Part III

### The Rehearsal: A Look at the Whole

by Elizabeth Jensen Shepley

*Below the age of 15 everybody is more talented than above it; only exceptional geniuses continue to develop. It is a crime to miss that talented age. If we do not organize children's choirs properly, our adult choir will increase neither in number nor in quality. A grown-up person will in any case sing differently if (s/he) has had the opportunity to preserve the fervent enthusiasm of singing from (his/her) childhood. And the child will remember and understand that without conscientious work there are no results. (Zoltan Kodaly, 1929)*

There is no joy like hearing the beautiful sounds that can be produced by a well trained children's choir. The unique purity and clarity of their voices cannot be duplicated by any other instrument.

All choir directors must help children produce a unified sound that is inspiring and of which they can be proud; a sound that they are incapable of producing alone. Such a teaching opportunity is unmatched in any other area.

All of this can be accomplished through thoughtful preparation and the

belief that as a choir director, you are capable of achieving the success you can imagine.

#### Goals

Effective planning of the rehearsal will help insure success of the choir whereas ineffective planning may weaken any possibility of building the program. In setting goals for rehearsals, keep in mind the advice of Jean Ashworth Bartle:

*"Progress must be experienced in every rehearsal, satisfaction must be experienced in every rehearsal, new challenges must be experienced in every rehearsal."*

Decide what you want to accomplish in the time scheduled; which sections of which pieces you will cover, how you will approach them, and approximately how much time will be spent on each task.

Be sure to stay somewhat flexible in moving through the lesson plan. If you need less or more time with any particular element of the plan, adjust the time accordingly. You might be surprised how close you come to being "on schedule" without being constantly aware of it. If you know precisely what you would like to cover, you will cover it. If not, you will not and valuable time is wasted.

#### Budgeting Time

It is crucial to keep things moving in rehearsal. Lack of continuity from one activity to the next will result in an unfocused, undisciplined group. Avoid this by giving the rehearsal careful thought and writing down your plans. Alternating a high concentration activity with a lighter one helps provide the balance necessary for the student to learn most effectively.

Now that warm-ups are becoming a regular and important element of the rehearsal scheme, keep up the expectations throughout rehearsals this year! Though its importance is crucial, the warm-up need not take much time out of rehearsal, perhaps ten minutes in a fifty minute session.

A very successful children's community chorus director writes the exact amount of time she would like to rehearse each piece, and displays this plan on the board for her choir to see. The children are aware of her expectations, enjoy the challenge of accomplishing the tasks, and are calm from activity to activity. She stays remarkably on schedule, accomplishes a great deal, and wastes little precious time.



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## The Building Blocks of Musical Excellence

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### A Sense of Beat

A competent sense of steady beat from each singer is an absolute requirement for any successful musical ensemble. Without singing along or conducting them, listen to your singers. Are they capable of staying together as a group without your help? Do they get sloshy and drag or do they continually accelerate? Awareness of steady beat while singing may sound like an obvious task but it is one that needs to be brought to the attention of the choir.



*Beat with percussion.*

There are exercises and games of varying complexity for beginning and for more advanced groups which can be appropriately challenging and fun.

Let the children clap four beats in a different place in space from left to right (I prefer the children to hold one hand palm up as though they are "catching raindrops" and use fingertips of the other hand to sound the beat. This method encourages musical sensitivity and volume control). Keep a steady beat going with them initially.

Now keep the hands moving, but sound only the first beat.

Variations: When the group has a pure unison on beat one, play with the four beats in other ways. You (or a student) may call out the next beat(s) to

be sounded, perhaps beat 4, or a combination of beats 2 and 3.

Further challenges:

- Try a triple meter pattern and play with it in the same way.
- Let half the group clap one of three while the other half claps one of four.
- When the choir becomes accomplished at this game, add measures of five beats.
- After practicing with this meter, let a third of the group clap one of four, a third clap one of three, and a third clap one of five.
- For a further challenge, have them stop when they all reach beat one together (a terrific challenge!).

Note: You may choose to vary the sounds with additional body percussion (clapping, finger snapping . . .), and/or percussion instruments. One or more person in each group could play a sound that differs in timbre from the instrument of the neighboring group (i.e. woodblock, triangle and hand drum), while the others use body percussion.

The children will become comfortable with this game as their competency strengthens.

Encourage your singers physically to keep a light upward beat, (never a downward, forceful beat) and then internalize the beat. Have them walk to the beat while listening to a piece they are working on performed musically on the piano or other instrument (or a good recording of the piece by a choir you



*Beat exercise.*

respect). Increase this challenge by having them conduct while walking, or by having them keep an ostinato pattern with body percussion while walking. Musicality should always be expected during the rehearsal; exercises are no exception.

### Inner Hearing

There exists a vast difference between hearing pitch deviations and being able to reproduce them, the latter being more difficult to do. Singers must hear the pitch as it is to be produced and then match it. Rather than using the piano (a poor instrument to imitate and one that usually contributes to poor pitch) humming helps singers hear their own voices. Keeping teeth apart, singers should tightly close lips. Try singing on "ng" or "m." Pitch is given as a hummed sound.

### Voice Building

Voice building including posture, breath, lips, jaw and tongue, tone production, vowel production, intonation, and treatment of consonants, is addressed not only during warm-ups but throughout the choir rehearsal. Review the discussion found on pages 47-49 on the September 1990 LETTERS.

### Music Literacy

Music reading should be part of each rehearsal. Use simple folksongs, appropriate for the level of the choir members. There are many with simple duple-meter rhythms using groupings of quarter notes, eighth notes and rests. Review page 49 in the September LETTERS.

And, of course, draw from the music your own choir is singing. Select only certain key phrases for practice. Concentrate on the rhythm, the melody, or both.

### In-tune Singing

A part of each rehearsal, if not the majority of rehearsal, should be sung *a cappella*. The use of piano does not encourage accurate singing.

Singers need to be able to distinguish between and to sing half and whole steps. Hum a pitch and signal whether you would like the children to

sing down or up and whether you would like them to sing a whole or half step. A short time with this exercise each week will improve overall pitch sensitivity dramatically. Further challenges may involve the singing of chromatic and whole tone scales.

Have the children follow your hand signs. When they are comfortable with *sol*, *mi* and *la*, divide the group in two and have one side follow the right hand, and the other follow the left. This can be used for easy two-part work. Listen for accurate intervals.

### Memorization Work

Many find that memorization for students is a difficult aspect of song preparation. It is astonishing, however, how quickly children can memorize when the text is approached in a systematic manner. I have heard students recite *The Sermon on the Mount* after only a few weeks of work.

First of all, write or type out the words as poetry. Discuss whether there are patterns, rhyming words, or a sequence; anything that will help make sense of it all. Send the words home with the children, allowing them to use travel time in the car, or other spare moments to look at the words. Then ask them to call you (or the church office!) when their pieces are memorized. This will help you to focus on more musical matters during your rehearsal, and to hold students accountable for some work outside of choir.

### Improvisations

Children can demonstrate their musical independence through improvisation. They will draw from the skills already learned and alter some element of known material to invent something new.

Of course, avoid activities which serve no real purpose. Rather, select a format for improvisation which will lead to strengthening musicality in an independent, satisfying way.



Conducting.

A non-threatening beginning can be inventing melodic or rhythmic motives. Ask singers a question using *sol-mi-la*



How are you to day\_\_

a child might respond



I am fine, thank you

Question and answer activities may also include playing a pattern on bar and percussion instruments, recorder, or body percussion.



and allowing the child an opportunity to respond with his or her own answer



The choir then might repeat both question and answer, thereby assimilating the entire phrase and becoming actively involved in the process.

Activities like these should lead somewhere, maybe as an introduction or coda to a familiar piece (perhaps a folksong used for reading) or to create a B section to a piece. Betty Ann Ramseth's "His Mercy Endures Forever" (from *Give Praises With Joy*, Broadman Press) for example, might be extended to include a B section which would result in a ternary form. While a tremolo is kept on *g*, singers may take

turns improvising what they are thankful for. You and the choir determine the length of the B section, and repeat the song enough to include all who wish to participate.

Evaluation of choir members' musical development is easily accomplished in improvisational situations. There will be little difficulty observing the progress of the group and taking note of those who need further help. The important steps toward becoming independent musicians have occurred with the children who have listened carefully to the efforts of their peers, who have played with the elements of music, and who have learned to make musical choices.

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**Successful directors understand that children's pride in their accomplishments will inspire those who listen.**

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### Conducting

The children need to spend time learning to follow all of the conductor's gestures. Teach them simple conducting patterns, cutoffs, dynamic gestures and so forth. Children may take turns conducting in front of the group so that each has a turn sometime during the year. The children may surprise you with their interest in bringing the music home to work on this particular challenge. □