

En route to Musical Excellence



Exploring Rhythm and Beat Through Movement and Gesture: Involving the whole body.

Part IV

by Elizabeth Jensen Shepley

*"Many are born with a sense of rhythm, but the power of expression is lacking."
... Emile Jaques - Dalcroze*

Effective educators subscribing to a number of methodologies in music concur that movement is an indispensable aid for developing skills and concepts with children. The use of the whole body assures a vivid realization of rhythmic experience, more so than just hand clapping and finger snapping. The body, mind and emotion are integrated in rhythmic expression, and habits of listening are developed by children in the process of identifying what they hear with what they do.

All motor skills, whether in work or play, are dependent on well-developed rhythms such as swinging a golf club or tennis racket, pounding a nail, or working on a conveyor belt. Memory is also rhythmic. We store in our minds the patterns of things seen and heard, like faces, artwork, phone numbers and a friend's footsteps.

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Children find rhythm to be a great source of pleasure not only in the choir setting but in their daily lives. As Elsa Findlay (see supplemental resources at end of article) states in her book *Rhythm and Movement: Applications of Dalcroze Eurhythmics*:

"The satisfaction a child feels in rhythmic movement is a real aesthetic experience, for aesthetic pleasure and motor efficiency go hand in hand."

Movement in your own choir setting can be used effectively to energize singing and relieve singers of tension and inhibition. It can help to stimulate breath energy, a difficult task with many young people. It can encourage your shy, inhibited singers to "come out of their shells" while providing

experiences that will encourage expressiveness for all of your singers.

Motor movements such as clapping, patsching, snapping, walking or skipping are wonderful for demonstrating children's ability to hear, feel or imitate and perform the beat and rhythm pattern.

At this point a word of caution is in order inasmuch as movement activities can potentially create negative effects. It is important that the activity not demand so much breath energy that singing becomes difficult, or that the activity requires so much attention that the concentration is no longer on the song or on the singing. Furthermore, the movements can become counterproductive when they are not performed

Add a frisbee throw on the first word of each phrase.





Use your own imagination to explore simple movement which will enhance expressiveness.

expressively. A loss of musical shape and flow may also occur when teachers overemphasize these movements in an effort to “help” the students hear and experience the beat or rhythm.

As dedicated, informed choir directors, we understand the importance of teaching the basics of choral singing: posture, breath, tone, music literacy and so on. We discuss with our students the fact that expressive singing requires involvement of our entire body. How often then, do we include activities in our choir rehearsal which truly encourage this total body involvement?

The following are suggestions to help you explore the advantage of movement and gesture with your students, using selections from the music list at the beginning of this series appearing on page 5 of the August LETTERS.

*Let All Things Now Living*¹ requires adequate breath energy to produce flowing phrases. Allow the singers extra time initially to breathe between phrases. It is important with this song that your young students have enough breath to sustain the phrase so that it is not cut off abruptly in order to catch a breath for the next phrase.

Choose a style of walking that will complement the phrasing you desire (slow and smooth, fast and choppy, march-like, etc.). Discover which style is most effective for this piece. Allow your voices to follow the movement and eventually add a gesture suggesting the shape of the phrase which you and your singers desire.

Gesturing in the opposite direction of a particularly challenging pitch line may help produce a tension free sound rather than the forced sound which often results when we gesture high for the upward leaps. In the descant, for example, on the ascending “ah,” try a *downward* (or outward) movement with the arms.

The use of “fa,” giving attention to the “f” consonant will help facilitate breath energy, especially useful when the line ascends, as with the “ah” in the descant, or “hosanna and praise!” at the end of the piece.

*Creator of the Stars of Night*² is a beautiful plainsong also requiring much breath energy (a terrific challenge for singers of all ages). Sing this piece without the text to focus on ongoing breath flow and line (perhaps on “loo” or “du”). Use your own imagination to explore simple movement and gesture which will enhance the expressiveness of this piece. Again, a gesture in the opposite direction (i.e. “A-men”) will help to facilitate an easily produced yet energetic line.

*Then Will I Jehovah's Praise*³ is challenging in terms of the leaps, runs and vocal range demanded of the singers. To initiate the sound and breath, substitute the neutral syllable “fa” for the text. Add a frisbee throw gesture on the first word of each phrase, i.e. “Then,” and words requiring added breath energy, i.e. “gladness.” Observe whether more breath energy is used and the sound is tension free. Gesture or

move in the opposite direction on upward and downward leaps, i.e. bend knees on “daily raise.” Does this alter focus from “reaching up to the note?” Explore a walking movement on “ever faithful” which will help with ongoing breath flow and beat.

As you observe your students exploring the above activities, ask yourself:

1. Does this activity aid in their comfort level?
2. Does the movement encourage breath energy without requiring *too* much?
3. Do specific gestures help initiate a smooth beginning of the phrase and aid the production and awareness of pitch changes?
4. Do specific gestures aid leaps to high pitches rather than suggest “reaching” for them?

Motor skills play a large part in musical performance and interpretation. Rhythm and its correlated motor expression must not be neglected by choir directors. They deserve an important place in our rehearsal plan.

¹*Let All Things Now Living*. arr. K. K. Davis. E. C. Schirmer 1819

²*Creator of the Stars of Night*. arr. John Ferguson. Choristers Guild CGA-474

³*Then Will I Jehovah's Praise*. George F. Handel. Choristers Guild CGA-220

Suggested Supplemental Material

Rhythm games for children of all ages: Abramson, Robert M. *Rhythm Games for perception & cognition*. Volkwein Bros. Inc., 1978. (Tape with piano accompaniment available.)

Movement activities for younger children:

Findlay, Elsa. *Rhythm and Movement: Applications of Dalcroze Eurhythmics*. Summy-Birchard Music; Princeton, N.J., 1971.

Movement and Folk Dance Materials for All Ages:

Phyllis Weikert Material, High/Scope Press. Division of High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. 600 N. River Street, Ypsilanti, MI 48198. □