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# En route to Musical Excellence

Part VII

## In-Tune Singing



by Elizabeth Jensen Shepley

*“Our emphasis must be on the child, not the subject. Great music has no value itself; only when it penetrates the personality and has its influence there does it really live.”*

*Ruth Krehbiel Jacobs*

### An “Awareness” Approach to Intonation and Other Matters

**A**ddressing intonation problems can leave both director and students uninspired, frustrated or indifferent about their choral experience. Most of us teach as we have been taught, focusing on “do it this way” instructions and expecting the students to achieve certain results which they may not feel they can produce. “Awareness teaching” or teaching which empowers students to take equal responsibility with the teacher, on the other hand, will promote an environment in which all will be free from undue tension so they can explore, experiment, observe, grow, accomplish, and enjoy!

It was not in the rehearsal room that I remembered the value of “awareness instruction.” A long time golf enthusiast and competitor, I agreed to accept a teaching position with a local park and recreation. My job was to instruct beginning golfers who were anxious to learn every-

thing they could about the sport. Needless to say, there was a lot of teaching and learning that had to go on before these students could take their clubs to a golf course. Each lesson started with a lecture on aspects of the golf swing, ending with individual practice at the driving range. I tried to describe the sequence of events in words, but translating a quick but graceful motion into a series of step-by-step instructions proved difficult and once enthusiastic students became increasingly frustrated.

In an effort to help my students, I invited a professional golfer with an impressively fluid swing to demonstrate his technique. The class watched in amazement as he could seemingly hit any target at any distance, effortlessly.

In our own practice session that evening, it was delightful to see many straight flying golf balls! I had tried to teach them that type of swing. And

yet, once they’d seen an effective hand grip, watched the relationship of the arms to the body and absorbed some of the pro’s confidence, their own swings became more relaxed, efficient, and concise. They had learned in a couple of hours what I had tried to teach them in several lessons. I learned again an important lesson about teaching—that detailed verbal instructions are seldom as effective as experience.

This type of instruction is different than the “do this” approach familiar to most of us in music education. Rather than hearing “your words aren’t clear enough, spit out the consonants,” the singers in an “awareness” environment are more likely to respond to questions that encourage observation, “Listen to the sounds of the consonants, can you hear the words clearly?” This allows the students to make necessary improvements without being told exactly what to do.

Teaching and learning with this approach de-emphasizes "instruction" and emphasizes "experience." It encourages students to be their own teachers, resulting in an efficient learning situation promoting independence and self-directed mastery.

"Do this" instructions are problematic for a number of reasons. There is a danger of potential inability or fear of an inability to translate the verbal direction into physical action. When a conscientious teacher, concerned about correct posture, asks the choir to *"stand tall, roll shoulders back, put one foot in front of the other, keep weight forward on the balls of your feet, don't lift your chin, look straight ahead, hands at your side, tuck in your hind end, remember to hold that rib cage high, then shape the vowel for the first word, now take a big breath and don't raise the shoulders . . . and relax,"* the singers may react in a number of ways:

- Students may not understand the request. "I don't understand what I should do with my chin. How do I hold my rib cage high?"
- Students may understand what is meant but are confused by the multiple instructions. "I forgot—what do I do with my feet again?"
- Students may have a difficult time coordinating the instructions physically. "I know I'm supposed to keep shoulders back and down and weight forward, but it's really uncomfortable."
- The instruction may be inaccurate or contradict a previous experience. "That's not right. We were told to do it a different way last year."
- Students may simply disagree with the instructions. They may lose interest and start to daydream about something else, or they may think of an alternative way to approach the instruction (which

may actually lead to some productive experiential learning, but will come in the way of the given commands).

- They may even remember all the directions, but forget them by the next rehearsal.

Awareness instructions, on the other hand, invite participation from the students. They are based on the students' experience and allow students the opportunity to notice what's happening and not judge things as "right" or "wrong." They never demand from the students more than they are capable of comprehending mentally or handling physically, and they do not invoke fear or doubt. Students, then, are free from frustration, discouragement, anxiety, skepticism, and confusion.

Observing the language one typically uses with the students, the director can quickly determine which words and phrases evoke the most productive response from the singers. Rather than using language which tends to produce anxiety, causes the children to become tense from "trying too hard," or makes them fail at tasks they may otherwise accomplish without any problem, "do this" instructions can be rephrased as "awareness" instructions. The following may cause the very problems they're intended to avoid: "I want you to . . .," "don't . . .," "you must . . .," "why can't you . . .," "try," "work harder . . .," "this is difficult, but . . .," "let's get it right this time . . .," "be careful . . ."

Instead, the following language might encourage a healthy, positive response. "Let's experiment . . .," "notice whether or not . . .," "I'm curious . . .," "observelfocus on . . .," "imagine . . ."


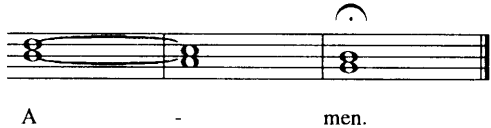


Awareness instructions ask the conscious mind only to *pay attention* to what's happening rather than to what is "right/wrong," "worse/better," "correct/incorrect," or "proper/improper." That is how we learn to ride a bike, and that is how we learn most efficiently.

Practice, patience and imagination are required to rephrase "do this" to "awareness" instructions consistently. It may seem quicker and more effective to tell students what to do instead of involving them in the discovery. It is possible, however, to give specific suggestions in "awareness" terms. The chart presents possible causes for intonation problems, and offers instruction choices to think about.

### **Insure Good Intonation: Avoid Problems from the Start!**

It is always easiest to steer clear from trouble by preparing for it in advance. The least amount of remedial work required, the quicker you will achieve the desired results. The following list offers suggestions for problem prevention.

- Observe yourself at work (video and audio taping rehearsals is revealing!) Are you free of physical and vocal tension? Are your eyes alert and alive? Is your speaking voice encouraging and confident? Are you a positive musical model? (Do *you* sing in tune?!)
- Consider the rehearsal space. It is well ventilated? Not too warm? Is there plenty of room between chairs? Room to move about?
- Expect your singers to have alert minds and bodies. Have you effectively explored efficient posture and encouraged its consistent use?
- Select games and exercises which will aid in discovering "down and out" breathing; relaxed lips, jaw and tongue; and inner hearing (See the September 1990 *LETTERS*).
- Play games with half and whole steps. Children's ability to hear and feel the difference between these two intervals will greatly help their overall pitch (see the October *LETTERS*).

Potential Problem Area	“Do This” Instruction	“Awareness” Instruction	Musical Example
Repeated tone	“Be careful not to let the repeated note flat.”	“Notice whether or not the pitch remains the same on the repeated tone.”	<p><i>We Know That Christ Is Raised</i> measures 7 &amp; 8, (also 11-12, 16-17, 20-21)</p> 
Lack of vowel uniformity and brightness	“Why can’t you remember to shape your lips to form an oo vowel?”	“I wonder how much of an oo you can sing on ‘Ju’.”	<p><b>Ju</b> <i>bilate Deo</i><sup>2</sup></p>
Sustained tone	“Please don’t lower the pitch as you hold this note.”	“Observe what is happening with your breath as you hold ‘men’.”	<p><i>For the Beauty of the Earth</i><sup>3</sup> Final measure</p> 
Upward leap	“You’ve got to work harder to reach those high notes.”	“Let’s experiment. What would happen if you gesture downwards as if bouncing a ball on the second note of ‘joy’?”	<p><i>We Know That Christ Is Raised</i><sup>4</sup> measure 15</p> 
Forcing heavy mechanism (sometimes called chest voice) into light mechanism (head voice) range	“I know it’s difficult, but you must be sure to use your head voice on this phrase.”	“I’m curious. What would it feel like to sigh into this phrase (‘Against all defiance thus shall I stand fast’) on the syllable ‘fah’?”	<p><i>Rejoice, O My Spirit</i><sup>5</sup> measures 20-23</p> 

- Sing with an inner smile to lift palate and relax jaw.
- Use gesture to energize singing and relieve singers of tension and inhibition (see the November 1990 *LETTERS*).
- Consider the *tessitura* of the pieces. (What you consider to be comfortable may be too low for the children to develop beautiful "head tone.")
- Vary musical styles and tempo in rehearsal (too much slow music may result in flat singing).
- Minimize use of the piano. Sing *a capella!*
- Work individually with developing singers.

### **Purposeful Feedback Is Essential**

Response to the students' performance is important and merits consideration. The quality of the feedback given the singers is extremely significant and influences their vocal development. In order for the experience to be successful, the feedback must be meaningful.

The task of the choir director is to establish a rehearsal environment which fosters efficient singing development, and in which the director and students learn from one another. Here the director is not a failure when acknowledging self-ignorance or uncertainty. The director realizes that learning is a lifelong process, and enjoys shared exploration, experimentation and observation with the students.

<sup>1</sup>*We Know That Christ is Raised.* Ronald A. Nelson. Augsburg 11-0318

<sup>2</sup>*Jubilate Deo.* Michael Praetorius. B & H OCUB6350

<sup>3</sup>*For the Beauty of the Earth.* Hopson. Augsburg 11-2062

<sup>4</sup>*We Know That Christ Is Raised.* Nelson.

<sup>5</sup>*Rejoice, O My Spirit.* J. S. Bach. G. Schirmer 10319

