

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS

CHORAL SINGER'S HANDBOOK

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(Revised 2022)

“We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC)

“We can do no great things,
only small things with great love.”

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Please keep this handbook with your music and bring it to every rehearsal.

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Introduction

Welcome and CONGRATULATIONS on being selected to participate in the University of Missouri-St. Louis choral program. This should be a joyous time of great musical and personal growth for you. You have demonstrated the required talent and skills to be a member of the ensemble, but now the real work begins. There is nothing easy about taking people with different backgrounds, different life experiences, different places of origin, different sensibilities, different personalities, and different vocal timbres and bringing these disparate people together to form a cohesive unit that sings as *one*, thinks as *one*, breathes as *one*, feels as *one*, emotes as *one*, communicates as *one*, creates art as *one*. We do not achieve this by luck or desire alone. It takes constant, tireless WORK, DISCIPLINE, and INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY. It also requires a willingness on your part to unify your voice and personality with the overall sound and personality of the ensemble. What follows are some philosophies and techniques that will help you (and, by extension, the entire choir) to be successful. No sports team can hope to win if the players aren't using the same playbook. This is our playbook. Please internalize it. You are required to know and be able to demonstrate everything in it.ⁱ

Rehearsal Expectations and Etiquette

Teamwork

To paraphrase a quote by R. Meredith Belbin, “We don’t need a collection of outstanding singers, we need an outstanding collection of singers.” Each of you is different, both personally and vocally. It is important that you bring your unique qualities to the ensemble all the time. So, when we talk about teamwork, we are not implying that you should completely change your tone or otherwise squelch your uniqueness in order to “blend.” On the contrary, I hope your unique tone color and musical personality becomes richer as a result of being in choir. At the same time, I hope your ability to listen keenly and sensitively to the other singers, and to the ensemble as a whole, deepens through your experience in choir. Focused listening helps you to mold your unique qualities in such a way as to serve the ensemble. Many of the methods by which we can do this musically are listed below, but this is also a calling to bring only the noblest aspects of your personality to the ensemble. When people are working together to create Art they cannot help but feel a bond one with another. A great choral community is built on mutual trust and respect. We trust that the director and all the singers are committed to doing everything in our power to create a stunning ensemble, and we respect the unique qualities that each of us brings to the table. As members of this ensemble, you and I are expected to behave in such a way as to instill trust and respect among one another. Some of the behaviors that will help us realize this are:

1. Attend all rehearsals and performances. Excused absences are granted only for true emergencies, a death in the family, or illness that is contagious and/or requires a doctor’s care. When possible, you must notify the instructor at least 48 hours in advance of an absence. Work-related absences are not excused. Whether excused or unexcused, an absence is an absence, and it means you have missed vital work. An absence from a dress rehearsal or performance unless there are *extreme* and *verifiable* circumstances (as determined by the director) will result in a semester grade of F. For more information about attendance expectations, please refer to the syllabus.
2. Be in your place ready to sing at the required time for all rehearsals and performances. You will be marked tardy if you arrive at any point after the rehearsal has begun or leave before rehearsal has ended. Rehearsals will end on time.
3. Practice and perfect individual parts outside of class time.
4. Be disciplined and observe the Ten Second Rule. When the music stops wait with silent attention for ten seconds for the director to say something. Do not talk, hum, or engage in a

- little rehearsal with the people around you. If the director hasn't begun talking in ten seconds you may talk to your neighbor as you wish.
5. Hold your music high enough to see the director without having to move your head and angled in such a way that your mouth isn't covered.
 6. Use your personal voice recording app for self-evaluation and evaluation by your section leader or the instructor.
 7. Always stand so that you can see between two people in the row in front of you (we call this your window). Never stand directly behind another person.
 8. Tell your section leader if you or your section is having problems with a passage of music. Be sure to observe the Ten Second Rule, however, and talk with your section leader at an appropriate time.
 9. Be friendly, gracious, empathetic, and honest in your dealings with one another.
 10. Contribute to the unity and morale of the ensemble by maintaining a cheerful, enthusiastic, optimistic, and professional attitude.

When the above musical and interpersonal criteria are met we will achieve something truly magical: SYNERGY. People often sum up synergy as a phenomenon whereby the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That's fine, but I have an old American Heritage Dictionary at home that describes it so much better. Synergy, it reads, is a biological term meaning, "the action of two or more substances, organs, or organisms to achieve an effect of which each is individually *incapable*."ⁱⁱ Now that's got it! No one of us can hope to do alone what all of us can do TOGETHER.

The Warmup/Craft Session

The warmup or craft session is likely the most important part of our rehearsal. We use this time to warm up our voices, our bodies, and our minds. We also use it to develop our craft and deal with specific concerns of our repertoire. Most importantly it helps us to shed the cares of the day and come together as a unified ensemble. Appendix A includes the music to some of our more complicated warm up exercises. Please learn them quickly and thoroughly.

Sight Reading

Imagine being cast in a play and having to learn your lines by repeating them after the director over and over again until you know them. It would be frustrating, and your chances of learning all the lines before opening night would be slim. This is analogous to what would happen if we relied solely on rote learning to memorize our notes. For us to move at the pace demanded of a select ensemble we must each become musically literate. Therefore, we will spend a little time at almost every rehearsal working on our sight singing skills. You are also strongly encouraged to use online sight singing training sites such as Sight Reading Factory. Now imagine yourself looking at a piece of music and being able to read it almost perfectly the first time. It really is possible and not as difficult as some of you may think if you will dedicate yourself to prolonged, consistent practice.

Marking Your Score

Through the course of the semester there will be hundreds of directions given about each song. Art is in the details, and the choir that masters the most details is the one that will bring an audience to its feet. Unfortunately, details can bog us down if we don't master them quickly. For that reason, it behooves you to keep a pencil handy (behind the ear or in your hand) so that you can mark *everything* that is said about each passage of music during rehearsal. You must develop a system of marking the music that will ensure that you sing the passage properly every time you come to it, even if it is weeks later.

Time is precious in a rehearsal, so the director will rarely remind you to write things down nor will he wait for you to do it. You must take it upon yourself to quickly mark everything that is said without being told to do so. Many times, things said to another section will concern your section as well, so listen for things to mark even when I am working with another section.

ALWAYS have a pencil within reach at every rehearsal. Your music will be collected periodically, and your markings will be checked as part of your grade.

Recordings

Each singer must supply a personal recording device (typically a voice recording app on your phone). It is recommended that this device be used at every rehearsal to record yourself for the purposes of practice and self-evaluation. Additionally, we may periodically sing through a song while each singer records him/herself for evaluation. These evaluations will be a part of the student grade, and singers must demonstrate an acceptable performance level (as determined by the instructor) in order to perform at one or more subsequent concerts. Section leaders or the instructor will be available to help you prepare as their time allows.

What follows are concepts of singing that will guide us in our quest for musical synergy. Some of these categories are too broad to adequately cover in a simple handbook, so I've tried to highlight the basic concepts for you. We will develop these skills further in rehearsal.

Choral Tone

Our goal is first and foremost the vocal development and health of the individual. As the individual improves in technique so will the ensemble. We are working to achieve an individual and group tone that is natural, clear, freely produced, well supported, and, above all, BEAUTIFUL. We want a mature vibrant sound, but never one that is forced, weighty, or injurious to the singers. Our mantra for resonance can be summed up in three words "Spacious, High, Forward" (SHF.)

Resonance

Resonance has to do with the intensity of sound. A resonator is a hollow chamber inside of which sound waves bounce around and are reinforced. Flutes, trumpets, violins, snare drums, etc. all sound different from one another because they differ in size, shape, material and method of sound production. As singers we are fortunate because we can manipulate most of our resonators to vary our sounds and sound intensities. In our mouth we have hard surfaces (hard palate, teeth) and soft surfaces (soft palate, tongue, lips). Hard surfaces bring out higher frequencies, thus make the sound brighter while soft surfaces have the opposite effect (imagine the difference in tone when you sing into a pillow and then at a wall). We can direct our sound waves as they come up from the vocal folds in such a way as to enhance or diminish the effects of these surfaces. Further, we are able to add or subtract richness. The larger the chamber the more resonant the tone. A piccolo can never out-blast a tuba; an upright piano cannot hope to match the sound quality of a nine-foot Steinway. You can add space to your internal resonator in several ways, for example:

1. You can lift the soft palate
2. You can drop the jaw
3. You can relax your tongue
4. You can lower your larynx
5. You can lift the lips off the teeth

A change in any one of these areas will result in an immediate and substantial change of timbre and intensity. As a rule of thumb, we will sing with all these functions activated—being careful not to overextend them, which would result in tension—so that we may achieve a maximum enhancement of our individual sound quality.

Head Voice, Chest Voice, and Mixed Voice

Most people recognize at least two primary vocal registrations. If you hoot like an owl you experience the feeling of head voice. If you imitate the low sound of a big car engine trying to start in winter you are using a lot of chest voice. These designations have to do with how your voice seems to vibrate in one of those two areas. In simplistic terms, your head voice helps to give your voice lift and beauty and your chest voice helps to give your voice power. We will never sing exclusively in one voice or the other. Both will always be present when we sing, but in varying degrees. Lower and/or louder passages will require more chest voice, and higher and/or softer passages will require more head voice. But there will always be a mixture of both. *So we could say that we really only have one voice that is an ever changing mixture of two registrations.* It is a good idea every day to practice gently gliding from your highest note to your lowest and back and from your softest volume to your loudest and back. This will help build the coordination needed to transition back and forth from more head voice to more chest voice.

Variations in Choral Tone

One mark of an accomplished singer is flexibility. This does not just mean that you can sing a string of pitches quickly and accurately. Flexibility also refers to your ability to change your tone color and to control your vibrato. Different vocal music genres demand different choral tones, and you should be able to accommodate those demands. We will use three basic tones:ⁱⁱⁱ

1. A “soloistic” sound – full vibrato
2. An “ensemble voice” – vibrato limited and controlled
3. A “cathedral tone” – very little vibrato

A Few Observations about Vibrato

1. We will never sing a pure straight tone. Though the cathedral tone may sound like a straight tone to the uneducated ear, it must always have just enough vibrato to give it warmth and shimmer.
2. Even when singing a piece for which a good amount of vibrato is appropriate, the amount of vibrato will coincide with the dynamic level—the softer the dynamic the less the vibrato.

Mental Alertness

Successful singing is as much a mental process as a physical one. In many ways the mental aspect of singing is even more important. When you walk into the choir room you must clear your mind of all the cares of the day and focus your complete attention on the rehearsal. I have heard Maestro Donald Neuen say, “Sing with your intelligence, not your talent.” How astute that is! It isn’t enough to be able to sing pretty; you must sing *intelligently* and be mentally “present” at all times. Several times this semester I will ask two questions. The first is, “Where are you?” to which you should answer, “Here!” The second is, “What time is it?” to which you should answer “Now!” Think about it: what is the cause of most automobile accidents? Not having your focus 100% on your driving—not being in the *Here and Now*. If it happens on the road we have a car crash. If it happens in rehearsal we have a choir crash.

Rule: *When the director is working with another section you should keep your ears open and your eyes fixed on the music, silently rehearsing your part, even to the point of forming the words.*

Physical Readiness

To be physically ready means to stand with a singer's alignment and an attitude of confidence and purpose. When you aren't singing you may relax your body (but not your mind). When the time comes for you to sing, however, you must waste no time in getting physically ready to do so. Your body is your musical instrument. How would an organ sound if you folded its pipes in half? Likewise, you can't possibly produce your best sound with a collapsed body. Here's a checklist from the ground up to help you find proper body alignment for singing:

1. Feet—keep your feet shoulder-width apart with your outside foot (the foot closest to the outside of the risers) slightly forward. This gives you balance and stability.
2. Knees—keep your knees slightly flexed. Never lock your knees.
3. Pelvis—roll your pelvis under your body slightly as an aid in lengthening your spine.
4. Sternum—keep your sternum (the bone in the center of your chest that protects your heart) relatively high and never let it collapse.
5. Shoulders—keep your shoulders comfortably down and back (about a four o'clock position).
6. Hands—keep your hands tension-free and at your sides.
7. Head—keep your head evenly balanced over your frame.
8. Eyes—keep your eyes “alive.” Raise the eyebrows slightly and look completely engaged in the message of the music.

Another, perhaps better, way to align your body is to work from the top down. Feel as if a string is lifting your head slightly near the crown. Now let the rest of your body just “hang” where it feels the most comfortable. Be sure to release the neck and let your shoulders release and widen. Simply put, your entire body should always feel “open” when you prepare to sing.

Breath Support

Proper breath support is the biggest key to wonderful, healthy singing, but it is also the most complicated. We will spend a lot of time on good breathing habits, but the group setting of a choir doesn't allow the kind of individual attention that is most conducive to discovering the intricacies of your particular breathing mechanism. It is a good idea to practice your breathing one-on-one with a private voice teacher.

By way overview, we will explore Heather J. Buchanan's notion of “Balanced Breathing,” which comprises eight basic functions of the breathing cycle: four for the inhale and four for the exhale, as follows:^{iv}

Inhalation

1. The ribs swing up and out.
2. The diaphragm descends from its highly domed position to a less domed position.
3. The abdominal and pelvic viscera are moved outward and downward by the powerful descending diaphragm.
4. The pelvic floor is pushed downward by the pressure of the displaced viscera.

Exhalation

1. The ribs swing down and in.
2. The diaphragm ascends back to its highly domed position.
3. The abdominal and pelvic viscera flow inward and upward as the diaphragm ascends, and the cylinder of abdominal musculature springs back inward as pressure from viscera is gradually reduced.
4. The pelvic floor muscles likewise spring back to rest.

The Inhale

While sitting with both feet on the floor, lean forward and rest your elbows on your knees. Breathe in and out allowing air to pass through both your mouth and nose. Be careful to remove all tension in your lips, tongue, and throat that might restrict the flow of air. Just stay relaxed and open. Notice how the area around your mid- to lower back expands as you inhale, especially your lower ribs and abdomen area. This is the effect of your diaphragm descending to create space in your lungs into which oxygen is brought in. Your chest hardly moves at all, and there is no sound of gasping as you take in the air. Now come up to an upright position while maintaining the same feeling. Keep your chest lifted and your mouth and throat free of muscular constrictions. Don't force air in, but rather create expansion in your lower ribs, diaphragm, and the muscles around your abdomen and lower back, and air will come in naturally and quietly (just like the action of a fireplace bellow). Congratulations, you're executing a perfect singer's inhale.

Many singers have developed a habit of closing the throat to hold the air back after they've inhaled. This practice lacks efficiency and usually results in a glottal attack at the point of phonation. Try inhaling and then holding your breath at the abdomen level, while leaving the throat completely open. This is a great exercise for learning to use the right muscles for breathing.

Rule: *As you inhale you must always do the following four things:*

1. *Reset your mechanism. This can be accomplished by focusing on the cave that forms directly in front of your ears. If you imagine inhaling through those caves your resonators will tend automatically to go to the "Spacious, High, Forward" position.*
2. *Audiate (hear in your mind) the next pitch*
3. *Form the first vowel sound with every resonator*
4. *Inhale in the tempo of the line you are about to sing.*

Initiating the Tone

After you've brought in air you may begin the process of phonation (producing a tone). You bring your vocal folds into a position where they can vibrate as you pass air through them. It is important that these two actions happen simultaneously. Setting your vocal folds before you start the breath will likely result in a hard, glottal entrance. Starting the breath before you set the vocal folds will result in an aspirate entrance (as if starting a word with an *h* sound). Work to coordinate the beginning of your exhale with the adduction (bringing toward one another) of your vocal folds. This is particularly tricky when the first word begins with a vowel sound, as in *old*. Practice singing this word with neither a glottal nor an aspirate entrance. A glottal entrance will have a little grunt at the beginning. An aspirate entrance will make the word sound like *hold*. We want neither of these. We're looking for an entrance that is both cleanly articulated AND gentle. Some describe the effect as if beginning with a "silent *h*." For this reason, the term "initiate the tone" is preferred over the more commonly used word *attack*. "Initiate the tone" has much more gentle and non-glottal connotations.

Rule: *All entrances should come from above. Many singers have developed a habit of scooping up to notes. Most popular singers do this. Please practice entering with the feeling that you are coming down to the pitch from a higher position.*

Sustaining the Tone

After the tone is initiated, it must be sustained through the phrase. When you inhaled, your ribs swung up and out and your diaphragm descended, extending your abdominal wall. That action is reversed when you sing a phrase. The diaphragm controls the amount of air that comes through

your vocal folds by resisting the desire of the abdominals to go back where they started. Your job is to develop coordination such that the diaphragm only allows as much air as is required to sing a particular phrase at a particular volume. If the diaphragm resists too much, your tone will be pinched and harsh. If it resists too little, your voice will become breathy. Often singers try to compensate for poor diaphragmatic resistance by controlling the air with the muscles in their neck. This creates a throat tension that can seriously damage your voice. Always center your support in the abdominal area. To maintain diaphragmatic resistance, some people might imagine they are inhaling while they sing. This helps you to retain the expansion that happens when you inhale and not let the ribs and diaphragm give way too quickly.

Pretend to hold a lit candle about eight inches in front of your mouth. Gently blow on the imaginary flame in such a way that it would bend but not flicker. Sustain this for several seconds. That steady stream of air is a great foundation for sustaining the tone. Turn your silent blowing into a *shh* sound and then a gentle but clear pitch. Try to keep the stream of air steady. You're on your way to great phrase singing. Speaking of which...

Phrase Singing

I have noticed that more singers than not sing music in an overly note-intensive way. They give little puffs of air for each note, and their chin raises and lowers to follow the contour of the pitches. As a result, their tone is inconsistent (their high notes sound as if they're coming out of a different person than the one that sings their low notes), their words are choppy and disconnected, and they often cannot sustain long phrases without running out of air. Go back to the candle exercise above. Try to keep the same steady stream of air while pronouncing words (the ABC's will do) and/or changing notes. If you can learn to do this consistently at any range or volume your vocal acumen will become levels better. Also, don't think of notes that live higher or lower on the staff as being higher or lower in your voice. All your notes come out of the same mouth. When a cellist wants to play a higher note on one string, which direction does his hand go? DOWN! Sing more like a cellist.

Releasing the Tone

When you end a phrase, gently abduct (separate) your vocal folds while decreasing the flow of air. Avoid the glottal release, which, like the glottal entrance, creates a grunt in your voice at the point of closure. Prolonged, forceful use of glottal initiations and releases may have serious negative ramifications for your vocal health. Note that I am asking you to "release the tone," which is much more descriptive of what we're trying to do than the more common (but often glottal-inspiring) term "cut off."

Intonation

Great importance will be placed on our ability to sing in tune with one another and to the tonal center. It is this all-too-rare quality that separates the great choirs from the merely good ones. To be great we must sing in tune both vertically (that is, with the other sections) and horizontally (that is, with the tonal center, the key we are in). The first step toward accomplishing this task is mastering the elements of posture, breath support, and phonation outlined above. But that isn't the whole secret. Excellent tuning is also a function of the following:

1. Internalizing the tonal center while you sing. Try to develop a sense of where *do* is at all times. It is all too common for choirs to flat a song. The moment that occurs all energy is sapped from the performance and any hope they had of fully connecting with the audience is lost. It will not happen in this choir. The tonal center will never leave our inner ear.
2. Never hum the pitch when it is given to you. It just tightens you up and keeps you and your colleagues from being able to properly audiate the pitch with the "inner ear."

3. Hearing and performing gradations of pitch *between* the keys of the piano. You are not a piano. The half step is not the smallest interval you can sing. Like a violin or trombone you can slide from one note to another, sounding countless incremental pitches along the way. Singing “in the cracks” is an important skill to develop. We have all become accustomed to singing with the piano. The trouble is, the piano uses a tuning system called equal temperament, which allows it to play in any key, but also renders it slightly out of tune. We will tend to use just intonation, whose intervals are made up of simpler ratios, and therefore more consonant (and thus more in tune) than most equally tempered intervals.
4. Hearing the “lock” of a perfectly tuned chord. When a chord is perfectly tuned, you will hear several overtones above the chord. The more in tune you are the more overtones you will achieve. When the overtones are strongly present you will get a palpable sense that the chord has completely gelled or locked. This is what we are striving for at all times.
5. Matching vowels with one another. What makes one vowel sound different than another? When you sing a note, you are not only singing that fundamental pitch, but also countless frequencies — called *partials* — above that pitch. Some you might be able to hear, but many will extend above your range of hearing. The way you shape the various parts of your throat and mouth inhibits some of these frequencies and brings out others. Each of these patterns of partials results in a different vowel sound. For that reason, two people can sing the same fundamental pitch, but if their vowels aren’t matched (that is, if the partials that create those vowels aren’t lined up) they will be out of tune with one another. If that is true of only two people, imagine the damage that an entire choir can do if they aren’t matching vowels. On the good side, however, when the entire choir *is* matching vowels, the partials will be so dramatically reinforced that the overtones will be screaming.
6. Balancing the chords properly. In general, our sound will be balanced like a pyramid, with the bass as the strongest voice and the soprano as the lightest. This, too, will reinforce the partials and help us to tune.
7. Harmonizing with the other sections. Many unskilled chorus singers learn their part and sing it without any regard as to how it harmonizes with the other parts. To really tune you must always be globally aware. Keep your ears open and slot your notes into the ensemble sound.
8. Approaching pitches from above. NEVER scoop up to a note unless it is for a particular musical effect. This is not only true of entrances (see “Initiating the Tone” above) but also ascending and descending notes within the phrase. Developing this habit (and it takes a good deal of conscious effort to do so) will keep the spin in your voice and help you to stay on the high side of every note.
9. Avoiding flat traps:
 - Repeated notes — each successive note must be sung an onion skin higher. (Onion skins are extremely thin, to the point that you can almost see through them.)
 - Returning to a note — again each time you sing it, you should do so an onion skin higher.
 - Scale degrees 3, and 6. Show me a choir than can sing scale degrees 3, and 6 in tune and I’ll show you a great choir.
10. Being “anti-gravity” in everything we do. Gravity will pull our pitch down, along with everything else – our cheekbones, our eyes, our soft palate, our upper lip, our body alignment, etc. It is the enemy, and we will fight it. We will stand tall, lift our sternum, lift our cheekbones, lift our soft palate, lift our lips off our teeth, and even lift our eyebrows slightly when we sing. We will never let our voices get heavy. Instead, we will place our voices spacious, high, and forward, and spin the notes out on a steady column

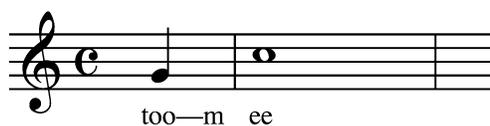
of warm air. The piano's note won't be good enough for us. We will strive to make it sound slightly dull to our tonal center.

Singlish

Every word we sing is actually a collection of individual sounds. The word *love*, for example is made up of three discreet sounds: the *l* sound, the *uh* sound, and the *v* sound. Great choral singers must be experts at identifying word sounds and performing each one properly. There are specific techniques for singing different kinds of consonants, various vowel sounds, diphthongs, etc. and the singers in a choir must do them the same way at the same time. If they don't the choir will suffer in terms of synchronization, vitality of tone, and intelligibility of the text. If you unthinkingly just sing the words like you would talk or read a book, you will undoubtedly neglect the subtleties needed to properly form all the word sounds. Thus, you should sing not from word to word, but from word *sound* to word *sound*. If you see the word *love* on the page, don't blithely sing *love*. Sing *l-uh-v*. The audience will perceive it as *love* but only because you've performed a perfect *l* followed by a perfect *uh* followed by a perfect *v*. We never sing words; we sing word *sounds*. It's not English; it's *SINGLISH!*

Target Vowels

The beginning of good Singlish is learning the vowel sounds. Usually, we sustain notes on a vowel sound, so everyone must match that vowel if the choir is to blend and tune. (See number 5 under "Intonation" above.) I call the vowels we sustain "Target Vowels" because you have to hit a bull's eye every time you sing them. The vowel must be the exact sound the choir has agreed on and it must be sung at exactly the right moment. That moment is always the very point at which the note is to occur (the "point" of the note). So, if the target vowel is preceded by a consonant, the consonant must precede the point of the note by a slight bit. If, for example, the word *Me* is to be sung on the downbeat, the initial *m* would sound just *before* the downbeat so that the target vowel *ee* will sound *on* the downbeat. If the word occurs on a note change, the *m* would sound on the previous pitch and the *ee* would start the new note. The phrase, "to me," for example, would be sung like this:



Singlish vowels are sung with a lifting of the soft palate, with the sound forward-focused toward the teeth, with lips tucked slightly at the corners and lifted off the front teeth, and with the tongue relaxed and the tip of the tongue placed gently on the gum line of your lower teeth. The vowel should sound neither "spread" nor "hooty."

A target vowel should be sustained in its pure form, never allowing an upcoming diphthong or consonant to be shaded into it. Syllables that end in *l* or *r*, for example, are especially problematic in this regard. Sustain the word *well* on a single pitch. Unless you're specifically thinking about it, you will likely notice the *l* sound start to creep in on the EH target. Now sing the word *wet*. It is easy to hold on to the target because the *t* doesn't turn like the *l* did. Sing the word *wet* again, but at the last minute sing a frontal *l* instead of a *t*. This is the proper way to approach such a word.

We use 5 primary vowel sounds:

- EE [i]* (feel, see, weep)
- EH [ɛ] (let, send, when)
- AH [ɑ] (father, hot, light, brown)
- OH [o] (go, foal, boat)
- OO [u] (soon, food, you)

* The bracketed characters are the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) spellings.

Each of us must perfect these vowels. The other vowels we sing will be gradations of these five.

Target Vowel Modification

As you get higher in your range it is usually necessary to open and round out the vowel in order to avoid shrillness. Lower notes, on the other hand, require a brighter, more forward placement in order for them to carry. Also, generally speaking, a softer volume will accompany higher notes, while lower notes should increase in volume. The irony of these techniques is that although you are changing your vowel and dynamic level, the listener will perceive that you are singing very consistently throughout your pitch and dynamic ranges—much more so than if you hadn't changed anything.

Diphthongs & Glides

The word *diphthong* literally means “with two sounds” and refers to “double vowels, sounded together as a single unit with a primary emphasis on the first of the two vowels.”^v This emphasized first vowel would be the target vowel. Here are some examples of diphthongs (boldface type = target vowel):

My = **ɑ**ɪ (AH-ih) Boy = **O**ɪ (OH-ih) Same = **ɛ**ɪ (EH-ih)
How = **ɑ**ʊ (AH-oo) Lone = **O**ʊ (OH-oo) Sure = **u**ə (OO-ə)

As you close from the taller vowel to the shorter one, a volume loss will naturally occur. You should negate this by increasing the intensity of your shorter vowel as you turn to it. This takes some practice, but it is worth the effort to maintain a constant “wall” of sound throughout the phrase.

Sometimes you will find a double vowel combination in which the shorter vowel comes before the target vowel. This is called a *glide*. You will find glides in almost every word that begins with the letters *y* or *w*, as well as a few other instances:

Yet = **ɪ**ɛ (ih-EH) We = **u**ɪ (oo-EE) Muse = **ɪ**ʊ (ih-OO)

In these cases, you should perform the shorter vowel as if it were a beginning consonant. You sound it with intensity and emotion, yes, but you also must get off of it quickly in order to get to the target by the point of the note.

Consonants

Sing the following lyric from the song “Just the Way You Look Tonight”:^{vi}

Some - day, when I'm aw - f'ly low, when the world is cold,
 I will feel a glow just think-ing of you just the way you look to night.

Now sing it without any consonant sounds. Pretty unsatisfying, isn't it? Without consonants no one would be able to understand a word we are singing.

Sing it again with loud consonants. You can understand the words now, but there's still something missing.

This time, sing with *emotional* consonants. Sing the *f* in *awfully* with the feeling of sadness that the lyric conveys. Communicate the cold loneliness on the *c* in the word *cold*. Ah, but things are about to get better—bring love to the *f* in *feel* and warmth to the *gl* in *glow*. This is the real value of consonants—they convey the emotion of the lyric. This is how you create art. There is nothing emptier than a choir with perfectly articulated but soulless consonants. It is the emotion that we pour into the consonants that communicates the message in a human and heartfelt way. Our consonants will be perfectly articulated, but meaningful.

Consonants can be categorized as either *voiced* or *unvoiced*. As their designation implies, voiced consonants require activation of the vocal folds in order to be pronounced. For example, *b, g, d, v, j,* and *zh* are all voiced consonants. In order to pronounce them, you have to vibrate your vocal folds, and you can hear your voice as you do so. Give it a try.

Now pronounce the following consonants. *P, k, t, f, ch,* and *sh*. You will notice that you can pronounce them without hearing your voice at all. Thus, we call these unvoiced consonants because you pronounce them without using your vocal folds. The two sets of consonants that I listed have an interesting relationship. Each consonant in the first set is a voiced version of its counterpart in the second set. If you put a voice on a *p*, for example, it becomes a *b*. If you put a voice on a *k* it becomes a *g*. These pairs of voiced and unvoiced consonants are called cognates. The table below shows all the cognates:

<u>UNVOICED</u>		<u>VOICED</u>
<i>p</i>	↔	<i>b</i>
<i>k</i>	↔	<i>g</i>
<i>t</i>	↔	<i>d</i>
<i>f</i>	↔	<i>v</i>
<i>ch</i>	↔	<i>j</i>
<i>sh</i>	↔	<i>zh</i>

Some consonant sounds, like *v, zh, l, m, n, ng,* and *sh* can be sustained. I call these hummable consonants. This can be extremely helpful in bringing emotion to the text, because some of them, particularly the *m, n,* and *ng* can be quite beautiful and evocative when given a little length. Sing the lyric again, and pour emotion into the *m* in *someday*, and the *n* in *when the world* and the *ng* in *thinking*. Such depth and intensity of meaning can be found in emotional consonants!

A few rules about consonants:

- Always sing emotional consonants.
- Consonants that precede a target vowel must always be sounded a split second before the point of the note so that the target vowel sounds at that point.
- Always sing a starting consonant on the correct note. Imagine doing this even with unvoiced consonants. This will help you to avoid scooping into the note.
- Like the secondary vowel of a diphthong, the singable consonants l, m, n, and ng should be given increased intensity in order to match the volume of the target vowels.
- Always keep your consonants up in front. Avoid swallowing them.
- One skill we need to develop is the ability to separate the consonant from the vowel that follows it in terms of the intensity with which we sing them. For the consonant to be heard we have to sing it a little louder than the dynamic marking indicates. However, if we carry that louder, consonant volume into the vowel that follows it, we'll get an explosion on the word. Try this: using the word *too*, sing a *forte* T, followed by a space, followed by a *piano* OO. Do this over and over again, minimizing the space between the T and the OO until the two sounds are touching each other, but the volumes of each remain distinct. Don't let the any of the T's *forte* invade the OO's *piano*. Lather, rinse, and repeat until this is second nature.

Rhythm

Singers have a terrible reputation when it comes to performing rhythm. This is probably because singers are usually terrible when it comes to performing rhythm! We will do our part to quell this stereotype by using rhythm as the foundation of much of our music making and by developing an inner metronome when we sing. I find that singers are fairly successful at coming in on a phrase; it's getting out that tends to be troublesome. For that reason, let us pay close attention to releases, and perform them with the accuracy of a finely honed percussionist.

Communicative Performance

I once heard the great Eph Ehly say, "The people in the audience don't want to hear good music; they want to *experience* something." I never forgot that statement, and it has guided my philosophy ever since. He does not mean, of course, that we shouldn't make good music. On the contrary, we must do everything in our power to create as perfect a performance as possible. But a performance without heart and soul is dead, no matter how perfectly sung it is. It is the individual expression and depth that you as a living, feeling human being communicate through your music that changes the lives of the people for whom we will sing. Katie Greenwood wrote, "Music isn't just learning notes and playing them, you learn notes to play to the music of your soul." Even that icon of Science and Mathematics Albert Einstein observed, "He who joyfully marches to music in rank and file has already earned my contempt. He has been given a large brain by mistake, since for him the spinal cord would fully suffice."^{vii}

It behooves you to dig deep and discover how each piece we perform speaks to you on a personal level (even if you don't relate to it immediately) and then you must use your voice, eyes, and body language to communicate that message. We will not bounce and sway all over the place, but we will feel the freedom to express ourselves, a little bit with our bodies and a LOT with our eyes. Our mouths are not involved, because they're too busy forming perfect vowels. The eyes are the windows to the soul, as the poet says, and it is from them that your message is best communicated. We all feel deeply, but some people are more comfortable expressing those feelings than others. A simple trick like raising the eyebrows and lifting the cheekbones can be very expressive while at the same time improving your pitch and tone. We will also use our tone

color and consonants as a tool to help us communicate meaning. These will all only be cheap, empty devices, however, if you're not expressing your true heart through them.

Section Concerns

The above items are applicable to the entire choir, but there are some peculiarities of each section that should be mentioned:

Sopranos

- You are the character of the ensemble. Because you often have the melody you must sing with the most confidence, consistency, and charisma.
- Because you often have the melody you are largely responsible for horizontal tuning.
- When singing notes above the staff, sing no louder than *mezzo forte*, unless specifically instructed to do so. More in that range will bury the rest of the ensemble.
- Also when singing above the staff, modify toward an almost pure AH vowel. Not doing so (i.e., maintaining a set vowel shape) will result in a strident tone.
- Learn to fill out the bottom of your range by adding a bit of chest resonance to it.

Altos

- One of your biggest jobs is to sound like the sopranos when your notes are near the sopranos' notes and like a tenor when your notes are near the tenors' notes. You must bridge this gap seamlessly
- Always sing with head resonance. Because their part is on the low side, many altos let too much chest voice creep in. Always sing with height and beauty.
- As harmony parts between the soprano melody and the bass foundation, it is up to you and the tenors to slot your notes into the chord. You are largely responsible for our vertical tuning. Harmonize to the melody; don't just sing your part.

Tenors

- You must bridge the gap between the basses and the altos. This means that on your lower notes you should sing a little more like basses (a slightly stronger activation of chest resonance) and on your higher notes you should sound more like altos (a slightly stronger activation of head resonance). Keep your placement always forward.
- As harmony parts between the soprano melody and the bass foundation, it is up to you and the altos to slot your notes into the chord. You are largely responsible for our vertical tuning. Harmonize to the melody; don't just sing your part.

Basses

- You are the foundation of the ensemble, and therefore must sing with constant resonance and charisma.
- At the same time, you should not let yourself get heavy or harsh. Always sing with beauty and flexibility. Spacious, high, and forward is especially important for you.
- Because you often sing the roots of chords with numerous returns to *do* (tonic) you are largely responsible for horizontal tuning.

Performance Etiquette^{viii}

1. Arrive at the performance site on time! (On time = 10 minutes early.)
2. Your concert attire should be complete, clean, pressed, and well fitted. Your hair, makeup and jewelry should be professional and conservative. If the above conditions are not met and/or not fixable in time for the concert, you will be asked not to perform and will earn an F for the semester.
3. DO wear deodorant. DO NOT wear perfume or cologne.

4. Anyone suspected of coming to a dress rehearsal or performance under the influence of alcohol or another chemical substance will not be allowed to sing and will receive an F for the semester.
5. Never sing directly behind the singer in front of you on the risers. Allow for a full “window” so that you can clearly see the director and so that your voice will project.
6. Always hold your music high enough that you can see the bottom line of the music and the conductor without moving your head! This also encourages better posture and breath support.
7. Allow as much space between singers and rows as possible; an open formation allows for a better sound. If singers are in a row on the floor, they should stand at least ten inches in front of the first risers. Other singers should stand toward the front of their respective risers.
8. Avoid all scratching, bringing hands up to the head, adjusting glasses, hair, etc. during a performance! Each time you do so, the audience is distracted. Excessive bobbing around on the risers can also be obnoxious and distracting. However, avoid rigidity and stiffness! What you do in rehearsal you will do in performance, so practice performance etiquette during rehearsal.
9. We will rehearse carefully walk-ons and walk-offs! As soon as we “hit the stage” the concert has begun. Don’t walk like you were wearing jeans and sneakers. Stand tall, walk tall, and look alive, happy, and ready to sing! An audience gains some awareness that something beautiful and special is about to happen by the manner in which the choir walks on stage!
10. If you ever feel incapacitated on the risers for any reason, don’t wait until it’s too late! Sit down in place quietly or leave the stage. If you need assistance from those on either side, give a tug! Remember; don’t lock your knees when you stand on the risers. If you develop a cough that is distracting and you cannot stop, leave the stage.
11. Be sure to turn you cell phone completely off before entering the stage. If a secure dressing area is available, please leave your phone there.
12. Maintain quiet backstage before the concert begins or when another group is performing. When we perform in a high school go directly to the concert area without distraction in the halls.
13. No smoking at any time in the bus, a school, or a church. If you must smoke in any other circumstance, please do so away from the other singers and out of sight of our audience members. Also, never smoke right before we are to sing. The smoke will linger on your clothes and hair and will negatively affect the other singers. The best answer is to quit smoking.
14. On university sponsored trips we will represent UM-St. Louis to the best of our ability at all times. There will be absolutely no alcoholic beverages or un-prescribed chemical substances on any choir function.

University Singers and Vocal Point as a Student Organization

In addition to being classes, University Singers and Vocal Point also comprise a student organization registered with the Student Activities Council. Most of our funding comes from this affiliation, so we are required to support the functions of the Student Activities Council, and otherwise participate in all events relating to our status as an organization.

Students participating in a choral ensemble as an activity will be graded by the same criteria as credit-seeking students. Though no official university grade will be issued, their grade will affect their qualification as a current and future participant in the choir.

Likewise, students taking a choral ensemble as a class are required to participate in all activities pertaining to the student organization. Not doing so will negatively impact their grade.

We have a slate of officers including a President, a Vice-President, a Treasurer, a Secretary, a Student Government Association Representative, Librarians, and a Public Relations Coordinator. Please see them about any administrative concerns you may have.

Our section leaders will be selected by the students in each section. Please see them or the director about any musical concerns you may have.

Coda

In 1513, Machiavelli wrote to a friend, describing how he found consolation from the cares of the world:

I go to the library, and as I cross the threshold I cast off my everyday clothing, covered with filth and mud, and put on the costume of the royal court.... Thus honorably clad, I enter the classical court of the Ancients. They welcome me warmly, and I feast on the nourishment for which I was born. And there I make bold to speak to them and ask the motives of their actions, and they, in their humanity reply to me. And...I forget the world, remember no vexation, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death; I pass indeed into their world.^{ix}

This is what our choral music making can be for us—not just a class or activity, but an opportunity to cast off our troubles, if only for a while, put on our royal clothing, and come face to face with our Ancients: Schütz, Bach, Mozart, Brahms—and their modern day counterparts. To listen to what they have to say to us through their music; to respond to them by magnifying their music with the music of our own souls; and then to offer this glorious new creation to others, each of whom will receive it in their own unique way, wrapping it inside their own sensibilities, and finding a place in their hearts and minds to keep it for the rest of their lives. This is our calling, and it is an awesome one.

Appendix A: Favorite Warmup Exercises

“Four-Part” Exercise^x

Musical score for “Four-Part” Exercise. The score is written for two staves, Treble and Bass clef, in 3/4 time. The melody consists of five notes: Mee, Meh, Mah, Moh, and Moo. The notes are: Mee (quarter), Meh (quarter), Mah (quarter), Moh (quarter), and Moo (half). The accompaniment consists of chords: Mee (C4, E4, G4), Meh (C4, E4, G4), Mah (C4, E4, G4), Moh (C4, E4, G4), and Moo (C4, E4, G4). The Moo note is sustained for two measures.

“Bimbo” Exercise^{xi}

Musical score for “Bimbo” Exercise. The score is written for two staves, Treble and Bass clef, in 4/4 time. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes: bim-bo bim-bo bim-bo bim-bo. The accompaniment consists of a series of eighth notes: bim-bo bim-bo bim-bo bim-bo. The exercise is repeated four times.

Musical score for “Bah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah”. The score is written for two staves, Treble and Bass clef, in 4/4 time. The melody consists of a series of notes: Bah - ah - ah - ah - ah - ah - ah - ah. The accompaniment consists of a series of notes: Bah - ah - ah - ah - ah - ah - ah - ah. The exercise is repeated four times. The score ends with the instruction: (continue at will).

“Aeolians” Exercise^{xii}

Musical score for “Aeolians” Exercise. The score is written for two staves, Treble and Bass clef, in 4/4 time. The melody consists of a series of notes: (solfège, vowels, or words). The accompaniment consists of a series of notes: (solfège, vowels, or words). The exercise is repeated four times.

To Sit In Solemn Silence

Music by W.S. Gilbert
(from "The Mikado")

Music by Jim Henry
Copyright, 2003

The musical score is written on a single treble clef staff in a 3/4 time signature with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes, with some rests. The lyrics are printed below the staff, aligned with the notes. The score is divided into four systems, with measure numbers 1, 4, 7, and 10 indicated at the beginning of each line.

To sit in sol-emn si-lence in a dull, dark dock, In a pes-ti-len-tial pris-on, with a

4
life - long lock, A - wait - ing the sen - sa - tion of a short, sharp shock, From a

7
cheap and chip - py chop - per on a big black block! A dull, dark dock! A

10
short, sharp shock, From a cheap and chip - py chop - per on a big black block!

Appendix B: The Builders

THE BUILDERS

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

ALL ARE ARCHITECTS OF FATE,
WORKING IN THESE WALLS OF TIME;
SOME WITH MASSIVE DEEDS AND GREAT,
SOME WITH ORNAMENTS OF RHYME.

NOTHING USELESS IS, OR LOW;
EACH THING IN ITS PLACE IS BEST;
AND WHAT SEEMS BUT IDLE SHOW
STRENGTHENS AND SUPPORTS THE REST.

FOR THE STRUCTURE THAT WE RAISE,
TIME IS WITH MATERIALS FILLED;
OUR TODAYS AND YESTERDAYS
ARE THE BLOCKS WITH WHICH WE BUILD.

TRULY SHAPE AND FASHION THESE;
LEAVE NO YAWNING GAPS BETWEEN;
THINK NOT, BECAUSE NO MAN SEES,
SUCH THINGS WILL REMAIN UNSEEN.

IN THE ELDER DAYS OF ART,
BUILDERS WROUGHT WITH GREATEST CARE
EACH MINUTE AND UNSEEN PART;
FOR THE GODS SEE EVERYWHERE.

LET US DO OUR WORK AS WELL,
BOTH THE UNSEEN AND THE SEEN;
MAKE THE HOUSE, WHERE GODS MAY DWELL,
BEAUTIFUL, ENTIRE, AND CLEAN.

ELSE OUR LIVES ARE INCOMPLETE,
STANDING IN THESE WALLS OF TIME,
BROKEN STAIRWAYS, WHERE THE FEET
STUMBLE AS THEY SEEK TO CLIMB.

BUILD TODAY, THEN, STRONG AND SURE,
WITH A FIRM AND AMPLE BASE;
AND ASCENDING AND SECURE
SHALL TOMORROW FIND ITS PLACE.

THUS ALONE CAN WE ATTAIN
TO THOSE TURRETS, WHERE THE EYE
SEES THE WORLD AS ONE VAST PLAIN,
AND ONE BOUNDLESS REACH OF SKY.

Notes

ⁱ Much of this handbook is inspired by or directly draws from *The Choral Singer's Manual* by Dr. Guy Webb (Former Coordinator of Choral Studies, Missouri State University) written for his choirs in August 1995. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Webb for giving me permission to draw from his work and experience in the creation of our handbook.

ⁱⁱ See William Morris, Ed. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1971).

ⁱⁱⁱ These designations are from Dr. Webb's manual.

^{iv} See Jerry Blackstone, et al. *Teaching Music through Performance in Choir*, v. 2, Heather J. Buchanan and Matthew W. Mehaffey, editors. (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2007) 124-125.

^v See Clifton Ware. *Basics of Vocal Pedagogy: The Foundations and Process of Singing* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1997) 166.

^{vi} This beautiful and moving song was written in 1936 for the movie, *Swing Time*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Music by Jerome Kern, lyrics by Dorothy Fields, published by Chappell & Co.

^{vii} Many people don't realize that Albert Einstein was an accomplished musician who almost always had his cherished violin near him.

^{viii} I have taken this almost verbatim from Dr. Webb's manual save a few minor addenda. His list is thorough and effectively written, so there was little value in starting from scratch.

^{ix} This quote incorporates two different translations, one from *The Literary Works of Machiavelli*, trans. Hale. Oxford 1961, page 139, and the other from *Temperament: The Idea that Solved Music's Greatest Riddle* by Stuart Isacoff (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), page 109.

^x From Richard D. Mathey, Bowling Green State University

^{xi} *Ibid.*

^{xii} As sung by the Aeolians of Oakwood University, conducted by Jason Max Ferdinand. A video of the Aeolians performing this warmup can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgRmevPkmxQ> (0:55). The entire video is well worth watching.