

The Choir Director as the Voice Teacher

A practical guide to healthy vocal development, efficient rehearsals, and informed repertoire choices

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Every rehearsal teaches singers how to use their voices

The conductor shapes vocal habits through warm-ups, repertoire, modeling, feedback, pacing, and the expectations established in every musical decision.

Three responsibilities of the choral voice teacher

Vocal Technique	Rehearsal Strategy	Literature
Build coordinated, sustainable singing - Breath management - Easy onset and release - Resonance and vowel clarity - Range and register flexibility	Turn every exercise into instruction - Engage voice, ear, and mind - Connect warm-ups to repertoire - Use modeling with purpose - Build independent musicians	Choose music that teaches the singers - Match range and tessitura - Evaluate text and context - Plan for changing voices - Name the intended growth

Quick self-audit

[] TECHNIQUE Warm-ups have a clear vocal objective, not only a familiar routine.	[] TECHNIQUE My language encourages release and coordination rather than force.
[] REHEARSAL Warm-ups connect directly to the musical demands of the repertoire.	[] REHEARSAL Singers are learning to hear, think, and solve - not only imitate.
[] LITERATURE Range, tessitura, text, and voicing fit the singers in front of me.	[] LITERATURE Each piece has a clear musical, vocal, and human purpose.

Core principle

Healthy singing, musical independence, and expressive artistry are not competing goals. Strong pedagogy develops all three together.

Build the Vocal Foundation

Breath, coordination, resonance, and release

Think breath management - not breath control

Language matters. Invite efficient coordination and steady energy rather than muscular force, overfilling, or gripping.

A four-stage vocal process

1. Prepare Release unnecessary tension; establish posture that allows movement and breath.	2. Coordinate Use easy onset, lip buzz, tongue trill, humming, or voiced consonants to organize airflow and tone.
3. Sustain Shape steady airflow, vowel consistency, dynamic change, and phrase length without pressing.	4. Release Finish the sound without collapse, squeezing, or holding. Let the next breath reset the body.

Shift the language, shift the response

Instead of...	Try language that invites coordination
"Sing from the diaphragm."	Let the ribs and torso expand, then release the air steadily through the phrase.
"Take a huge breath."	Take the breath this phrase needs, without lifting or tightening the shoulders.
"Support more."	Keep the airflow energized while the jaw, tongue, and throat stay free.
"Open your mouth."	Create space while keeping the vowel clear and the jaw flexible.
"Sing louder."	Increase energy and resonance without adding pressure or losing the vowel.

Useful tools

Lip buzzes, tongue trills, humming, gentle sirens, airflow games, and messa di voce can build coordination, stamina, tone, musicianship, and kinesthetic awareness when used without strain.

Listen for the process

Which singers show freedom, steady airflow, and clear vowels? Where do you hear pressing, breathiness, jaw tension, delayed onset, or loss of resonance?

Scope of practice: A choir director teaches healthy habits but does not diagnose vocal disorders. Stop activities that cause pain, dizziness, or increased tension, and seek qualified voice or medical support when concerns persist.

Warm-Ups That Teach

Engage the voice, engage the ear, engage the mind

A warm-up is the first lesson of rehearsal

Select exercises because they prepare a specific vocal and musical demand. Tell singers what the exercise is teaching, then transfer the skill into the score.

Engage the Voice	Engage the Ear	Engage the Mind
Coordinate healthy sound • Lip buzz or tongue trill across a comfortable range • Five-note vowel pattern for easy onset • "Pwee" descending pattern for release and clarity • AE-to-AW exploration for resonance and vowel shape	Strengthen internal listening • Descending solfege for vowel unification • Ascending cumulative patterns for interval accuracy • Listen for balance, tuning, and consistent weight • Ask singers to name what changed between repetitions	Build independence • Audiation: hear before singing • Bop-minus or silent-measure challenges • Predict the next pitch, vowel, or phrase shape • Transfer the exercise immediately into repertoire

A connected 10-minute sequence

Time	Purpose	Possible activity	Listen / look for
1 min	Release + align	Gentle movement, buoyant posture, silent breath	Freedom and readiness
2 min	Coordinate airflow	Lip buzz, tongue trill, hum, or voiced fricative	Easy onset; no pushing
2 min	Move through range	Five-note pattern, "pwee," or light register connection	Even tone through transitions
2 min	Tune the ear	Descending solfege or cumulative "bop" pattern	Vowel unity and interval integrity
2 min	Engage audiation	Silent repetitions, missing notes, or mental rehearsal	Independent listening
1 min	Transfer	Apply the same skill to a phrase from today's repertoire	Immediate musical relevance

Design tomorrow's warm-up

Name one vocal objective, one aural objective, and one thinking objective. Where will each skill appear in the repertoire?

Keep the sequence flexible

A warm-up can diagnose the room. Adjust range, tempo, pattern, vowel, or complexity in response to the singers you hear today - not the routine you planned yesterday.

From Sound to Sight

Develop singers who can hear, read, think, and respond independently

Sound before sight

Establish sound, pulse, tonal relationships, and language before asking notation to carry the entire learning process.

A practical score-teaching sequence

1. Chant rhythm Use the class counting system without pitch.	2. Speak text in rhythm Clarify consonants, stress, and natural language flow.
3. Chant solfege in rhythm Connect notation, tonal function, and pulse.	4. Sing solfege Establish pitch relationships before adding text.
5. Count-sing Reinforce rhythm and pitch together when useful.	6. Sing the text Transfer accuracy into expressive, meaningful singing.

Choose the teaching mode that matches the goal

Method	Use it when...	Keep it pedagogical
Modeling	A singer needs an immediate aural example of tone, vowel, articulation, or style.	Model briefly, then ask singers to describe and reproduce the specific feature.
Rote / throw-catch	The pattern is short, embodied, stylistic, or notational reading is not the main goal.	Chunk carefully and return to the score so imitation becomes understanding.
Score-based study	The goal is literacy, independence, and pattern recognition.	Use rhythm, solfege, counting, marking, and partner problem-solving.
Audiation	Singers need to strengthen inner hearing and memory.	Remove selected notes, measures, or repetitions while singers continue mentally.

Literacy habits that last

Use a consistent rhythm system, movable-do solfege with a clear minor approach, updated interval references, and repeated opportunities to audiate. Ask singers to explain what they hear and how they solved the problem.

Transfer responsibility

Where am I doing work that singers could learn to do? Choose one moment to replace immediate modeling with listening, marking, solfege, partner problem-solving, or audiation.

Choose Literature That Teaches the Voice

Match the score to the singers - then adapt with intention

Four filters for pedagogically sound repertoire

1. Vocal fit Range, tessitura, passaggio demands, phrase length, dynamics, and voicing match the singers.	2. Musical readiness The rhythmic, harmonic, language, and independence demands are teachable in the available time.
3. Text + context The text is age-appropriate, responsibly contextualized, and supports an inclusive learning community.	4. Growth target You can state what singers will do better - vocally, musically, expressively, or collaboratively - after learning it.

Support developing and changing voices

Attend to every vocal change, regardless of severity. Adolescents and developing singers need flexible pathways that preserve belonging, musical responsibility, and healthy access to the score.

Adaptation	What it does	Use it intentionally
Voice pivoting	Alternate between available lines so the singer remains within a healthy, successful range.	Mark arrows in the score or prepare a separate part to reduce confusion.
Octave displacement	Move an isolated note or phrase by an octave when the written pitch is temporarily inaccessible.	Use notation so the adaptation supports pitch perception rather than becoming an unexamined habit.
Flexible voicing	Use unison, SA/two-part, TTB/TBB, or another voicing that matches the ensemble's current ranges.	Publishers may use labels differently. Check every part, not only the voicing printed on the cover.
Responsive pacing	Shorten sustained demands, redistribute phrases, or reduce repeated extremes while technique develops.	Preserve musical purpose while protecting access, confidence, and healthy coordination.

Check the score - not only the label

Unison, SA/two-part, TTB, TBB, three-part mixed, and SAB can serve different ensembles, but publisher labels are not always consistent. Examine the actual range, tessitura, spacing, and duration of every part.

Repertoire audit

For the next piece you plan to program: How will it affirm singers? How will it challenge them? What will they be better able to do afterward?

Put It Into Practice

A 30-day experiment in vocal pedagogy

Four weeks of focused action

Week	Focus	Practice	My commitment
1	Observe	Notice breath language, vocal tension, who succeeds in the written range, and where singers rely on imitation.	_____
2	Redesign	Build one 8-10 minute warm-up that connects directly to a vocal and musical demand in the repertoire.	_____
3	Transfer	Teach one passage through sound-before-sight, solfege, audiation, and purposeful modeling.	_____
4	Adapt + reflect	Revise one score, voicing, or rehearsal habit to increase healthy access and evaluate what changed.	_____

One-rehearsal planning canvas

Vocal objective	What specific coordination or habit should improve today? _____
Warm-up connection	Which exercise prepares that skill, and how will singers know its purpose? _____
Repertoire transfer	Where does the same skill appear in the score? _____
Feedback language	What concise, observable language will reinforce the process? _____
Evidence of growth	What will I hear, see, or ask singers to explain before rehearsal ends? _____

Affirmations, challenges, and questions

Affirmation	Challenge	Question
What is already helping singers use their voices freely and musically? _____	What routine, phrase, or repertoire choice should I reconsider? _____	What do I need to learn, hear, or ask before deciding what comes next? _____

Closing commitment

The choir director as voice teacher listens closely, teaches transparently, adapts responsibly, and gives singers the tools to become confident stewards of their own voices.

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