

*Is Your Chanting/Choir Voice the **BEST** It Can Be?*
Directors are you giving your Singers the tools they need?

By

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This class is designed to make you recognize and identify a multitude of possible problems that could be keeping you from being the best singer/chanter/director you can be. We are going to examine different solutions, visions, ideas and exercises to help you identify the potential of your voice and determine the best course of action for your particular situation.

Good Vocal Health and Posture:

This may be the most important issue for every successful singer. Without being taught to sing with good vocal habits, the healthy life of a Chanter or Singer could be compromised.

Your bodies must be aligned, standing straight with your shoulders slightly back. The use of the diaphragm for good breath support and a free and relaxed jaw to promote good vowel placement are also imperative.

Here are a few warm-ups to start each day with:

1. Stand up straight with your hands on your waist and your feet planted firmly on the floor, about shoulder width apart. Your fingers should be able to locate your ribs in both the front and in the lower back with your thumbs.

Take a slow, low deep breath, in through your nose and then slowly, on a “SSSSS”, exhale back out through the mouth.

Try to keep the rib cage spread out, allowing the lungs to stay inflated as long as possible. A great analogy is the image of pushing the walls of the room outward with your ribs.

When you take in the breath or inhale, you should be reminded that it is like filling up a balloon with air. Your ribs expand, while the diaphragm lowers and the abdomen relaxes, allowing the lungs to

fill to their potential. Make sure to take full, deep breaths and to keep your shoulders relaxed at all times.

The chest or Sternum should already be in a raised position and should stay “up” not allowing the chest to “heave” when a full breath is taken.

2. Now with a relaxed jaw and mouth make a “vee” in the lowest pitch possible and begin moving up as high as possible. Keep the sound constant, almost like a siren. Then start at your top pitch and come back down to the lowest.

3. Exercises that Create a Healthy Vocal Sound:

- (1) do, mi, sol, mi, do. (These are the degrees of the musical scale)
ah, oh, oo, oh, ah.

You may start on any pitch that is comfortable for you.

- (2) do, mi, sol, sol, do, sol, mi, do.

a- - - - le-- lu- -oo- - - - - -ia.

As you move the voice to the top note of the exercise (high “do”), bend your knees to add support to the lower part of the body and remove tension from the throat. Make sure to keep the back straight.

- (3) sol, sol, sol, sol, sol, fa, mi, re, do
ma - may- me- moe - moo- - - - -

You can change the consonants to whatever you like.

- (4) do-re (kiss breath)-do- - - - do - - 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1
ya-ya (kiss breath)-oo - - - -oo - - - - -

Rock back and forth from “do” to “re” about 5 times, take a quick “kiss breath” then beginning again from “do” carefully glide up to high “do”. Once at the top, without a new breath move back down to low “do” with a very legato, light sound. This exercise works well for blending the head voice into chest or mixed voice. This is called the “Cupertto.”

(5) This is called the “NG Sniff”

do- - mi - - ---mi- sol- - - ----sol- - do(do) sol, mi, do
ng- --- (sniff), ng- ---- (sniff), ng----ng -ah, -ah, ah, ah

Wonderful for opening the upper registers of your sopranos

(6) do- - - sol- -fa- - mi- - re- - do

hing- - ah- - - - - - - - - -

*As you sing the first “Hing” allow it to ring for a moment
before you go down the scale*

All of the vocal exercises that I have shared with you are tried and true. I use them with my choirs, both high school and church, and with my private voice students. These warm-ups are courtesy of David L. Jones, my voice coach whose studio is in Manhattan, NY. He also is known internationally and holds master classes throughout the US and Europe. If you would like to read more on the voice and healthful singing practices, please visit his web site at <http://www.voiceteacher.com/>

Tone Quality

A chanter or choir member that sings with a beautiful tone quality will win the heart of their listeners forever. However getting any number of people to agree on what the correct tone quality should be is sometimes a difficult task. What is tone quality? Well, according to Dr. Archibald Davidson of the Harvard School of Music he says:

“An overall quality and homogeneity of tone is achieved when everyone says the same word at the same time”

*“Pronunciation is the key to impressive choral singing,
the root from which all choral virtues spring”*

Regardless of what tone quality you are looking for, sometimes we are blessed by having one or two singers with big strong voices that can overpower the whole group causing an imbalance to occur. Although we rely on these voices as leaders, they can also cause severe balance problems and tone issues. Be careful to never discourage their efforts, but instead have them become leaders and to act as helpers to the other members.

Make sure that all of the singers, regardless of power of sound or voice quality, make their vowels the same way. Insist that words be pronounced properly with clear articulation and good enunciation. Consonants must always be together!

Singing in Tune

Don't assume that everyone knows that the term "flat" means below the pitch. Always explain what it is you are trying to remedy.

There are many reasons that singers/chanters sing under-pitched or "flat".

1. Tired
2. Poor posture
4. Lack of interest
5. Tessitura too high (Choice of starting pitch)
6. Shallow breathing
7. Series of repeated notes being sung
8. Descending vocal line
9. Forced chest voice
10. Long, sustained tones
11. Lack of support

Here are a couple of tricks for keeping pitches from flattening.

1. Modification of vowels, especially sopranos in the upper register
2. Have the soprano and tenor lighten up as they sing ascending lines
3. Never let the alto carry the chest voice above an "f" on the staff
4. Keep the bass lighter, first so they can hear what they are singing, but also so they don't get that "whoofy" sound
5. Teach staggered breathing. This will keep the sound vibrant
6. Keep larger voices softer to be able to listen to those around them
7. Place weaker pitched voices near stronger singers
8. Work with pitch problems one on one so as not to embarrass
9. **Think the pitch before you sing it**
10. Change the key of the song up or down by a half step
11. Aim for the note by landing gently on top, not reaching for it from the bottom

Expressive Singing

Every Singer/Chanter should always ask themselves a very important question..."What am I singing about?" As Orthodox Christians our text is the most important part of anything we sing. If the congregation cannot understand what we are singing about then we have failed at our calling.

We must also be able to understand what is happening in any given song and be able to relate it to the particular feast that is occurring.

You must produce the most pleasant, prayerful and inspiring sound possible so the congregation is aided in their prayers through your rendition of the chant you are singing.

Remember that your Sacred Music Department is always here to help you. Contact your Regional Representative and ask them to organize a workshop for your chanters/choir and those in the area. Contact other directors; they are always ready to give encouragement.

So whether you be a chanter, singer in the choir or the director... be compassionate, a good listener, willing to try new things, obedient, spiritual, strong and most of all, **Never Give Up...you can do it!**

Song Associations for Intervals

In my experience one of the best ways to train your ear to hear various intervals is to associate them with the beginning of a song—or another prominent section, if it works better for you. Trying to memorize the connection between two notes without a point of reference is extremely hard and won't work at all for many people.

Let's introduce the intervals, with their associated songs, but first...

Tonic or Root

This isn't an interval to learn, but it is an important bit of terminology. The root note or tonic is the first note of the key you're working in. For instance, playing in the key of C, the root is C. You work out the other intervals using the Tonic as an anchor.

The Minor Second

The minor second is one half step above or below the Tonic note. From C, this would be C# ascending or B descending.

Probably the most common song associated with the minor second is the theme song from *Jaws*. *Jaws* is an *ascending* minor second, so going from C to C#. It's the shortest possible distance between two notes, at least using standard Western tones.

The descending minor second is *Für Elise*. You might notice that the opening notes sound like *Jaws* in reverse. In this case, we'd be going from C to B (the actual song goes from E to D# but we'll stick with the key of C for these examples).

The Major Second (Do-Re)

The major second is one whole step above the root and a half step above the minor second. It's the second note in the major scale, which is one way to memorize it. Alternatively, you can think of *Silent Night* or *Frère Jacques*

Descending, we have *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and—yet another Christmas Carol—*The First Noel*.

The Minor Third (Do-May)

For most people, the minor and major second are relatively easy to pick up and then they get to the minor third and seem to have great difficulty. Be prepared to spend a bit of extra time learning this one. The minor third is three half steps from the root note.

For an ascending minor third we can use *Smoke on the Water* often a young guitarists first real song. Descending, the options are *Hey Jude* by the Beatles and *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

The Major Third (Do-Mi)

The major third is four half steps, three steps, away from the root note. It's also the second note in a major triad, in case these songs fail you. More corny classics: ascending, the major third can be associated with *When the Saints Go Marching In* and *Kumbaya*.

Descending, we've got *Beethoven's 5th*. You could also use *Summertime* or *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot...ask your parents!*

The Perfect Fourth (Do-Fa)

The perfect fourth is five half steps from the root note and is one of the easiest intervals to grasp. It's also one of the most common intervals in popular music (does the I, IV, V chord progression look familiar to you?). Ascending we can use *Amazing Grace*, as well as *Here Comes the Bride*. Descending, the perfect fourth is represented by the Christmas Carol *O Come All Ye Faithful* or the theme song from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

The Tritone (Do- Fee)

The Devil's Interval, they called it and rightfully so, it's hard to sing in tune, Six half steps from the root, C-to-F#, this interval is found in a lot of heavier music.

The ascending tritone, otherwise known as the flat fifth, can be associated with *The Simpsons* (The *Simpsons* - I've italicized the syllable where the tritone is sung). Descending, the tritone can be associated with Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze* or *YYZ* by Rush (if you can listen without getting distracted by their odd rhythm and timings).

The Perfect Fifth (Do-Sol)

The perfect fifth is seven half steps from the root (C-to-G) and forms the third note of a major triad. The perfect fifth can usually be picked up more easily than other intervals.

Ascending, you might associate the fifth with *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, or the *Star Wars* theme song.

Descending, the best popular example is the theme song from *The Flintstones*, though if you know the melody from *The Way You Look Tonight* that'll work too.

The Minor Sixth (Do-Lay)

The minor sixth is eight half steps away from the root note (C-to-G#).

Ascending, you can associate the Beatles song *She's a Woman* or the first two notes from the theme song of *Love Story*.

The minor sixth's descending options are the *Recado Bossa Nova* and *Chega de Saudade*, which luckily can be found on YouTube.

The Major Sixth (Do-La)

After the difficulty of the minor sixth, we have the relative ease of the major sixth. This one can usually be picked up pretty easily. It is nine half steps away from the root note, C-to-A.

Perhaps the most popular option for the ascending sixth is *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean*. If that doesn't do it for you, Sinatra's classic *My Way* or the TV station call melody, *NBC*

Descending, the options are *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* and *The Music of the Night*, which is one of the more popular tunes from *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The Minor Seventh (Do-Tay)

The minor seventh is ten half steps away from the root note, which is C-to-A#. There are twelve half steps in an octave, so we're almost there!

The ascending minor seventh is used in the theme from the original *Star Trek*, and the song *Somewhere* from the musical *West Side Story*.

The descending minor seventh is usually Herbie Hancock's *Watermelon Man*, or the symphonic composition, *An American in Paris*.

The Major Seventh (Do-Ti)

Ah, the major seventh, one half step away from the octave at eleven half steps from the root. This jump is from C-to-B.

The ascending major seventh can be found in A-ha's (a Norwegian band that had terrible American 80's haircuts) *Take on Me*, or the theme song from *Fantasy Island*.

Descending, the major seventh can be associated with *I Love You*, by Cole Porter, but better known as popularized by Bing Crosby.

The Octave (Do-Do)

The octave is the same note as the root note, with a higher or lower pitch. It's twelve half steps from the key tonic. This is, of course, a jump from C-to-C in either direction.

An ascending octave can be associated with the old Judy Garland song from *The Wizard of Oz*, called *Over the Rainbow* (*somewhere over the rainbow*- italics represents the interval).

The descending octave can be associated with the jazz standard *Willow Weep for Me*, that was written by Ann Ronell in the 30's and recorded by such notables as Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra.

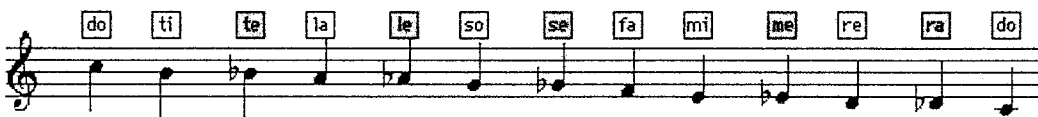
Chromatic Tones in Solfege

What about the "in-between" notes? There are various traditions of altering the standard syllables to name the notes that fall between Do and Re, etc. this is one system:

Raised tones: The sharpened Do becomes Di, the sharpened Re is Ri, Fa becomes Fi, Sol rises to Si, La to Li.

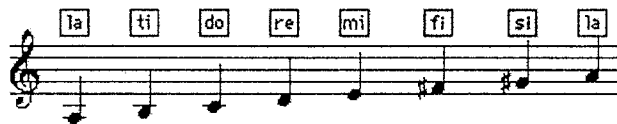


Lowered tones: The flatted Re is Ra, flatted Mi is Me, flatted Sol is Se, La becomes Le, Ti becomes Te.



In the key of C therefore, C would be Do, C# Di, Db would be Ra and D natural would be Re, and so on.

You would use the sharpened tones when singing the ascending melodic minor, like this:



Curwen Hand Signs

do



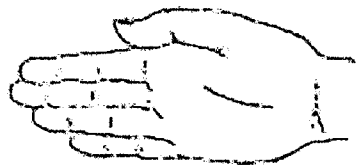
ti



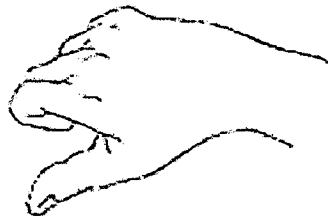
la



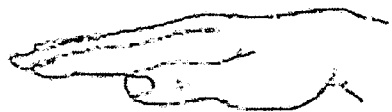
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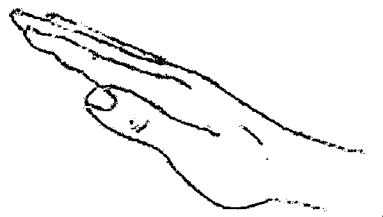
fa



mi



re



do



Conducting for Orthodox Choirs

or

Can you get results without uttering a word?

By Mareena Boosamra Ball

In the Holy Orthodox church, whether you are Greek, Romanian, Serbian, Russian or Antiochian we as conductors have our work cut out for us. We must be able to understand the structure of music in general, basic theory, pitch giving, vocal production, music terminology and of course basic conducting skills. We must also be have a knowledge of the structure of the service you are preparing, know if the music you have chosen is appropriate and have a working relationship with your priest, not to mention a choir ready and willing to follow your direction.

So here is the real question for today, assuming you have all of the above bases covered, or at least minimally, do your hands, or your gesture, convey what the music is asking? Will you choir understand what you want from them without verbalizing every request? Does your gesture dictate the quality of sound and emotion that the composer intended for his or her piece?

Throughout this session we will explore many possibilities of how to make you be the best conductor possible. We will discuss posture, hand and arm position, facial expression and general communication skills between you, as the director, and the choir you are attempting to control.

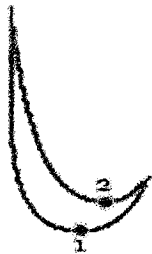
I realize that not everyone has had an opportunity to take conducting classes at a collegiate level and possibly you were elected to the position of choir director by default...many of you kicking and screaming! However, now that you find yourself in this position, it is up to you to do the very best you can to produce the most pleasant, prayerful and inspiring sound possible from your choir.

Technical Issues

The hand and body gestures that you as the director give your choir will form much of the sound they will produce. You must train your singers to watch you, especially at the beginning and end of phrases. How many times have you attempted a cut-off, only to have someone add an “S” a beat after your cut-off? Clearly, communication is the key component as a conductor. It may take some rehearsal to re-train your singers to watch you and some re-education to help them understand what it is you are trying to get them to do as a choir.

Here are some basic exercises that include most of the conducting patterns that you will come across in our music. This does not address Byzantine music, but that of a more Western style of Orthodox music. I will discuss how to deal with non-metered music, both Byzantine and Russian, later in the course.

When conducting, the right hand is used to indicate the musical pulse, or beat. The conductor should envision a box extending from the collar bone down to the navel and across the chest. This is the area in which most of our conducting should be done. The left hand should be used to emphasize an opening entrance, intricate polyphonic (multi-part) entrances or rhythms and endings.

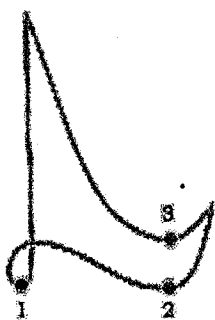


This pattern is for 2 beats. Music in 2/4 or 2/2.

Example: *The Anaphora* – Finley 2/4

Cherubic Hymn (after “Amen”) -Richard Toensing’s is in 2/2

Refrain of the 1st Antiphon – Meena 2/2, 3/2 and one bar of 4/2



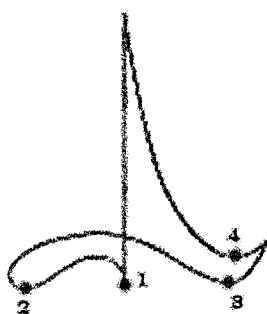
This pattern is for 3 beats. Music in 3/4 or 3/2

Examples: *Holy God* – Finley

Cherubic Hymn No. 5 - Bortniansky

Hymn to the Theotokos – Tchaikovsky in 3/2

Only Begotten Son - Starorussky



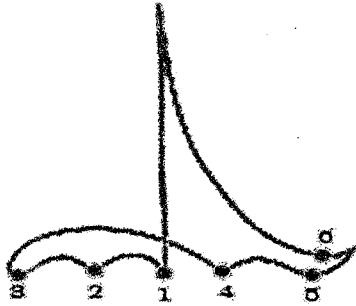
This pattern is for 4 beats. Music in 4/4

Examples: *Holy God* – Hilko, Vitoshinsky

Trisagion Hymn for Hierarchical Divine Liturgy - Meena

Cherubic Hymn – Gretchaninov, Bortniansky #7 & Voronkoff

St. Simeon's Prayer - Archangelsky



This pattern is for 6 beats. Music in 6/8

Examples: *Communion Hymn* – Sakellarides/Voronkoff

Troparion of St. George – It is not marked, but it is in 6/8

Practice the above patterns separately. Try conducting them Legato (smooth and connected), then Staccato (short and detached) and finally Marcato (march-like or accented). Conduct tiny patterns (for Piano - *p* or Pianissimo - *pp*, “soft” sound) employing only wrist action, followed by larger patterns (Forte - *f* and Fortissimo - *ff* “loud” sounds) using the forearm.

Here are a few body issues to consider while conducting:

1. Raise your elbows outward, away from your body slightly rather than resting them on your ribcage.
2. Be careful not to conduct with your shoulders or too much whole body movement. You may think you are *feeling* the music, but in fact, you are adding unnecessary gestures which only complicate the message you are trying to convey to your singers.
3. Use your eyebrows, but never your shoulders to show low pitch or flatting issues. The raising of the shoulders will cause tension in the singer’s throats.
4. The hand should be shaped in a cupped fashion, somewhat downward, with the three middle fingers “knitted” together. Do not spread out the fingers as you conduct, as it encourages a breathy sound.
5. The wrist should not be allowed to be too loose, but rather it is an extension of the forearm. There should be a nice “plane” from the elbow.

By learning to use standard choral practices as you conduct, you will be able to convey the pulse of the music with the correct emphasis on the phrase. Never try to conduct syllables because musical clarity, unison and tight rhythms will be impossible to achieve.

Unmetered Music

Unmetered music or music without bar-lines has its own special issues. Sometimes, in modern practices, computerized music has been westernized by adding time signatures. This is an attempt to assist the modern musician to understand how to compartmentalize musical phrases. Byzantine music is organized through a pre-determined Tone or Mode and then structured by the words indicated in the prayer provided. To conduct such music it is important to create a tempo and to emphasize the important or stressed syllables rather than the entire line. Example: *Refrain of the 1st and 2nd Antiphon* by Hilko – Russian unmetered. All of the 8 *Resurrectional Troparions* are good examples of un-metered Byzantine music.

In closing...practice, practice, practice! Not only should you practice with your choir, but also in front of a mirror for yourself. You must feel confident with your gestures, facial expressions and overall communication. If something doesn't work, don't get discouraged just try something else. Don't be afraid to ask questions of other directors and to continue to take classes, we all must continue to hone our skills, no matter how many years we have been doing this service for the Lord.