

SOME TIPS FOR CHORAL SINGERS

Ensemble Awareness

Of all the arts music is the most linked with community of expression. This meaning of music is somehow most open to the amateur musician, and nowhere does it find its expression so fully among people who sing together. It rests upon a common devotion to the composer's utterance and a mutual respect for the personal dignity of fellow workers.

–Robert Shaw

Sing with your ears. Listen to the other parts while you are singing your own. You will be more concerned with the overall sound of the group than with your own voice.

Become aware of the singers who are around you. Ascertain that you are singing in perfect unison (rhythmic, pitch, tone color, dynamic) with the other singers in your own section. Listen to the singers in the other sections. How does your part interrelate with theirs? Should you be singing louder? softer? at the same level? Are you in perfect rhythmic synchronization? Look at them as you sing. Enjoy the counterpoint that your part creates with theirs.

The choral singer will be aware of several techniques that are unique to ensemble performing.

Precision. The solo singer can feel free to determine for him/herself, or even improvise on the spot, where to breathe, where to place final consonants, and even what to wear. The ensemble singer must coordinate these decisions, in advance, with the others in the group.

Exaggeration. The solo singer, especially when working with a microphone or in a small room, can easily convey such elements as text and dynamic changes. The ensemble singer must exaggerate his/her pronunciation of the text and contrasts of dynamics.

Preparing for the Concert

Musical performance is born in those same sublime regions from which music itself has descended. Whenever the music is in danger of becoming earthbound, the performance must elevate it and help it regain its original ethereal quality. . . . It is the duty of the performer to liberate it from the deadness of the printed page and bring it to life again.

–Ferruccio Busoni

An Aesthetic Experience

The concert is an experience in which you will recreate, to the best of your abilities, the work of one or more composers.

After many rehearsals in which you were learning, through a variety of techniques, how to reproduce the composer's intentions, you are now ready to transcend the notes and delve into the essence of the music.

In one of the most intense experiences that humans can feel, you will become one with the music, sharing for a moment in the genius and talent of a great composer.

Confidence

In order to maximize your enjoyment of the performance, you should feel completely secure in your knowledge of the music. That knowledge includes not only "the right notes," but also correct dynamics, pronunciation, rhythmic phrasing, vocal tone, and ensemble awareness. If you feel that your musical confidence is less than complete, it is your obligation to put in the extra time outside of rehearsal, either alone, or with other chorus members.

Distractions

To be able to give yourself over totally to the aesthetic experience, you will free yourself of any potential distractions.

To enable the audience to participate with you in the music, you will make every effort not to distract them from the main event.

Personal Appearance

A sloppily dressed singer can distract the audience's attention from the music. Be sure your concert dress is clean, well fitting, in good repair, and uniform. Excessive jewelry, heavy make-up, and flashy colors will call

attention to you as an individual, and thus away from the chorus as a group.

For your own sake, avoid tight fitting clothes and uncomfortable shoes. For the sake of the singer standing next to you, before the performance shower or bathe, brush your teeth, and refrain from using any strong-smelling perfume, cologne, or hairspray.

Personal Control

Before the concert begins, cleanse your head of any personal problems or distractions. Let nothing interfere with your total participation in the artistic experience, as you transcend your individuality.

As long as you are on stage, you are a performer. Just as an actor becomes an agent of the playwright whose material he is performing, you are an agent of the composer whose music you are singing. Do not “act” out of character by:

- talking, winking, or waving to someone in the audience or to another performer
- fidgeting, bouncing, scratching, or checking your coiffure
- smiling during a sad song, or standing rigidly emotionless during a lively number
- unconsciously mouthing the words while a soloist or another section is singing.

Don't cease being a performer just because your part of the music may be finished. During instrumental sections, dramatic pauses, solo sections, passages which involve other singers, in short, whenever the conductor's hands are in the air, you should maintain in your mind the character of the music.

When you walk on to the stage (and when you leave), have a smile on your face. Proceed calmly, slowly, and silently, watching your step as you climb up to the risers.

If there are chairs, wait for the signal to sit; then do so slowly and gracefully. Before you are called upon to stand, prepare yourself by sitting on the edge of the chair with both feet planted firmly before you.

At the signal from the conductor, open your folder. Hold the music at chest level with your arms comfortably extended so that you can see the conductor and still be able to glance down at the score without moving your head. If you are not holding a folder, let your arms hang naturally at

your sides (not in your pockets, not clasped in front or behind). Stand naturally in a comfortable position, with your weight evenly distributed on both feet. Try not to rock or sway.

Turn pages silently. Hold the spine of your folder in the left hand. With the right hand, hold the corner of the page well in advance, then turn slowly and silently. In very soft passages or dramatic pauses you may be asked not to turn the page at all.

When the concert (or section) is finished, lower your folder as soon as the applause begins.

If you (or another singer) make a mistake, don't show it. Most people in the audience won't realize that a problem has arisen unless the chorus displays facial expressions of panic and pain. If you get lost, keep mouthing some lyrics until you find your place again.

Nerves

At the concert it is natural for you to be excited. If you're not excited, then you don't belong on the stage! Being nervous is normal too, but be aware of and control several effects that nerves can have on your body.

When we're excited our hearts beat faster. Since our innate sense of tempo is measured relative to the pace of the heart-beat, our conception of tempo may be off-balance. We may tend to perform music faster than we have rehearsed it. If you remember this, you can try to rein in that tendency to rush.

Another effect of nervousness is a tightening of the muscles in the throat and larynx. This phenomenon was demonstrated in a humorous sketch by Don Knotts on the Steve Allen television show in the early 1960s. When asked if he were nervous, the petrified comedian would answer, in a staccato, high-pitched voice, "nope!"

For the singer, this involuntary tightening of the muscles around the vocal cords can cause sharpening of pitch (where it may have never occurred in rehearsal). Sometimes this is the perfect antidote for a chorus that may have been flattening in a particular passage. But sometimes, if unchecked, it can ruin the group's intonation.

If you find yourself getting excessively nervous, take several slow deep breaths. Concentration on proper diaphragmatic support is the best medicine for a tight strained throat.

Health

To muster the necessary strength required for a concert, you must be in top physical condition. The day of the concert should be a relaxing one for you. Save your voice. Be well rested. Take a nap, but not just before the concert; it takes a while for your vocal apparatus to wake up.

Avoid medications (such as antihistamines) that leave the throat dry.

If you smoke, cut back.

Avoid any drugs or alcoholic beverages that will impair your ability to concentrate.

Do not eat a heavy meal before the concert; it will make you sluggish. On the other hand, don't starve yourself; eat a light meal a few hours before the concert is to begin.

Avoid dairy products—they'll coat your throat with phlegm. Avoid carbonated beverages—they'll make you burp.

Drink lots of (room temperature) water. Warm drinks are better than cold; cold constricts, warm relaxes.

Take care of yourself! Avoid situations that could result in your catching a cold. Wash your hands frequently. In a chorus, no matter how big, every singer is important.

Walking on stage:

The first thing the audience will see is the choir walking on to the stage. Remember to walk UP to your riser then across – it looks much sharper that way. (When leaving, walk across THEN down.)

Page turning

- In order to make page turning quieter and easier, please remove all staples from music (folios excluded)
- Keep folder at your side when going up on the risers and open folder when instructed by Josh
- Turn pages only when you are singing (never during a rest) – anticipate the end of the page.
- At the end of a piece, wait till the applause then turn to the next piece.
If your first entrance is not on page one of a piece, turn to that page at the beginning.

A few last-minute reminders.

- Please make sure your uniform is in great shape and your music is in concert order in your black folder.
- If it's awfully heavy, you could consider carrying only the music for the first half of the concert; then during intermission, switch folders. You will have time (about 25 minutes) to change into your uniform between the on-stage rehearsal and the concert.
- When you walk onto the stage, look confident and smile. Have fun!
- Larry will tell you in which hand you should hold your black folder (generally the side that is away from the audience).
- I will give the signal to open your folder. (if I forget, as I sometimes do, lift it up as soon as Ed starts to play the intro.) Close your folders as soon as the applause begins at the end of each half of the concert.
- If you haven't yet done so, make sure you can sing from memory any pieces that have been so assigned.
- Also make sure you know all of the repertoire well enough that you can sing confidently, with a smile, and with eyes contacting the conductor, the audience, and your fellow musicians, as appropriate.
- During an extended instrumental section or vocal solo, please do NOT follow the music in your score. Watch the performers!
- At the end of the concert I will give the entire chorus a bow. I'll raise one hand, then, when I bow, you bow as well. Bow from the waist, stay down for five seconds (count them) and then bend back up.