

## Appendix 13.1

# FIXES FOR CHOIR

Cataloged below are possible remedies for commonly occurring problems when working with a developing choir. Familiarity with this listing will allow the conductor to anticipate or respond in the rehearsal setting with effective solutions to build sound and legato singing, sustain pitch and tempo, improve starts and stops, and work through harmonic and rhythmic challenges.

To better discuss the sound of a choir, the conductor should be familiar with the following terms:

- **Range** – Lowest to highest pitches
- **Tessitura** – The most comfortable pitches (or most often used pitches if discussing songs)
- **Weight** – Lighter versus heavier singing, which should be reflected in the gesture
- **Timbre** – An individual singer’s tone quality
- **Break** – Where the singer’s voice color shifts, sometimes known as a transitional point,
- **Vocal Registers** – Commonly called by names like “chest,” “middle or mixed” or “head” voice
- **Schwa** – A neutral vowel sound typically occurring in unstressed syllables, however spelled, as the sound of “a” in alone, “e” in system, “i” in easily, “o” in gallop, or “u” in circus. The phonetic symbol “ə” is used to represent this sound.

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## IMPROVING LEGATO SINGING AND THE MUSICAL LINE

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### What are some ways for the choir to gain more ownership of the text?

- Ask individual members or the whole choir to **speak the text aloud** (with the choir) to determine the appropriate “ebb and flow” of the words.
- **Discover together the highs and lows of the “storyline,”** as well as the intrinsic musicality of the words. Then apply this to the musical line.
- Ask which phrases are personal **favorites** or speak to the individual singers in a special way.

### How can I improve the vowel color of the vocal lines?

- Instruct the choir to **make the vowels as long and forward** as possible. Practice by singing vocal lines without consonants to concentrate on the color and connections between the vowels in sequence. Then minimize consonants to allow the choir to dwell on the sonorous vowel colors. Sometimes this means shortening consonants to give the vowels more time. (For example, “rise” becomes “*raaaahs.*”)
- At other times, time is “stolen” from the vowels to **allow the voiced consonants to sustain** the sound (“In the morning” becomes “*Inn the mmornning,*” or “Give me” becomes *Givve mme*).

### What steps can I take to emphasize *legato* singing?

- **Vary the weight of the gesture** to allow the freedom to negotiate the essential peaks and valleys of the musical line. Vary the velocity to shape phrases and dynamics.
  - The conductor’s gesture and breath should **seamlessly indicate the connections of words and phrases.** Expand and use more horizontal space to indicate flow. Verticality tends to suggest an edgier, heavier sound. Eliminate any extraneous weight, movements or subdivisions.
  - **Add a subtle, quick schwa** between words (And(uh)still) in this case, to allow the consonant “D” to sound. With some word-ending consonants, like B, D, G, V and the J sound, adding a quick schwa-vowel helps distinguish these from their unvoiced equivalents – P, T, K, F or CH.
  - To avoid disturbing the line of a sustained passage, **downplay the starting and closing consonants** in the conducting gesture, to impel the vowels forward.
  - Empower the choir to sing, and allow them the freedom to express the vocal line.
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## REMEDIES FOR A FORCED VOCAL SOUND

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### What are some ways to remedy a forced vocal sound?

- **“The eyes have it.”** The conductor’s entire body is involved, but the face reflects the space of tonal quality. A lift of the conductor’s cheekbone area and bright eyes indicates the “tonal space” for the choir, and should occur not only during inhalation, but while singing.
- **Utilize warm-ups designed to relax the body of tension**, especially in the upper torso and shoulders. Work to relax the jaw, while maintaining a soft palate lift and a feeling of resonance in the facial mask.
- **Using “yawn-sighs” in the warm-up** (descending “sighs” in the upper register) serves as a reminder later in the rehearsal for singers to make the breath preparation in the position of the highest tone to be sung in a phrase.
- **Gesture for tall, forward vowels.** Kinesthetic learners can benefit from the Vowel “Shape” Exercises found on pp. 251-252 of Chapter Twelve. To summarize: OO = pull forward from the lips; EE = pull string above head; AH = one hand lifts from palm; OH = draw slow circle in front of lips; EH = parallel hands move out and down from side of cheeks.
- The conductor needs to **imagine a beautiful sound** and give that picture.

### What can I do to avoid a pinched, thin vocal color when singing soft dynamics?

- **Insist on the proper dynamics to match the desired vocal color.** If piano dynamics lack color and support, rehearse the passage at a warm *forte*. Then instruct the choir to recall the **sensation**, but singing it at a *piano* dynamic.
- Men can avoid harshness or a pinched sound color by **maintaining a rounded mouth position**.
- **If the overall sound color is thin, work on breath and posture.** Vocalize on voiced consonants (B, P, M, NG, and Z) to improve contact with the seated breath.

## What are some techniques to improve the quality of high tones?

- To avoid a pinched and light sound with upward leaps, **ask singers to apply the hand gesture of a Ferris wheel moving *up and over* the ear** (or in the shape of a question mark). This creates the sensation of more space moving into a melodic leap, with the energy emanating from behind and below the ear and carrying the sound *up and over*. The tendency is to approach a high note from *up and under*, resulting in a forced, possibly split and flat pitch.
- Instruct the singers that the leap to a higher passage requires: **(1) an increase in air support, (2) dropping the jaw as they leap upward, and (3) maintaining a rounded mouth position on**
- **the leap upward.**
- Instruct the singers to **consider a leap as a succession of smaller steps.** (For instance, introduce **DO** leaping up to **SOL**, using **DO-MI-SOL**, or **DO-RE-MI-FA-SOL**). The progression not only aids pitch, but builds momentum, improving the quality of the higher tones.

## Does the key make a difference in your choir's vocal color?

- **Learn your choir's best-sounding tessitura and range.** Be careful when choosing repertoire to not pick pieces in keys that cross the "break" often, or lie exclusively in the lower or upper registers, both of which will fatigue the voice. Favor those pieces (or negotiate the key) to place the majority of the vocalizing in the facial mask or "head-mix" voice. See Appendix 13.3 for a Summary of Voice Ranges and Tessitura.
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## WAYS TO ENERGIZE SUSTAINED TONES

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### How can I counteract a dullness of vocal tone with my choir?

- Right from the start of rehearsal, **use the warm-up to develop a vibrant, energized choral “ring.”** Stretch to energize the body after a long day of work or school. Stretching increases the lung space (be sure there is space between the ribs), stabilizes the posture (with the sternum high), and aligns the spine (which promotes low and deep inhalation, as the abdominal muscles are attached to the pelvic bones).
- **Breathing exercises with counting** and sustained notes help to activate the diaphragm, and encourage the group to breathe together.
- **Initially vocalize in the facial mask** area using “N, NG, M” sounds, and then by buzzing tunes or doing lip trills. To encourage head voice, this initial vocalization should use a descending pitch pattern (like SOL-FA-MI-RE-DO).

### What can I do to energize the direction and flow of sustained tones?

- **Keep the conductor’s hands moving**, while maintaining a feeling of the pulse. No two beats, as they are sustained, should ever sound the same. Long notes should always be going somewhere, with an increase or decrease in intensity and energy, sometimes reflected in an ebb and flow of dynamics.
- Occasionally **gesture to spin the sound**, especially on longer notes.

### How can I maintain a consistent, vibrant tone when negotiating different dynamic levels?

- **Be careful that your gesture doesn’t collapse the sound** too quickly when indicating a *decrescendo*, which will deflate the sound and pitch. Instruct the choir to create more space with a *crescendo*, then maintain the opening with the *decrescendo*; reducing the volume without losing the intensity of sound.
  - **Use count-dynamics**, where the choir is counting incrementally across the duration of a *crescendo* or *diminuendo* while half the choir sings the passage. Reverse roles and then have the full choir sing the passage, with the gradual counting, from a whisper to a shout, heard in the inner ear.
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## IMPROVING STARTS AND STOPS

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### How can I improve the beginnings and endings of phrases?

- Be sure the conductor and choir are **breathing together in tempo**, especially anticipating an entrance or bridging into a new phrase. The deep-seated breath must be in rhythm.
- **Mirror the first vowel of the initial word of a phrase.** Clarity is aided by the conductor indicating or mirroring the closing vowel with the gesture and face. The same is true for opening and closing consonants. With voiced consonants a more sustained gesture is required (“noeIII”), while a quicker gesture accompanies unvoiced consonants. (“silent night”).
- Sometimes **adding voiced consonants before unvoiced consonants** can improve the quality of choral sound (ooWhen). Imagine initial consonants a “whisker” before the beat. Occasional voiced consonants can be lengthened (A-mmenn).

### How does the conductor’s posture and breathing influence how the choir shapes phrases?

- When the choir’s breath does not seem deep enough, the conductor’s preparatory breath and gesture could be too high and lack a clear breath impulse.
  - **What They See Is What You Get (WTSIWYG).** This includes the conductor modeling strong posture with the sternum high and relaxed shoulders, elbows forward and out, head level, and chin never raised. The arm extension and breath of gesture should reflect a low, wide and deep breath with rib-cage extension.
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## HELPS FOR MAINTAINING PITCH

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### What steps can I take to maintain pitch with my choir?

- **Maintain vowels across the ensemble uniformly high and forward.** It helps to remind singers that the breath preparation needs to be in the position of the highest note to be sung in a phrase.
- Remind singers to **use more space in the mouth as the line ascends.** This is a combination of a more open mouth in an upward manner, as well as more space in the back of the mouth.
- **Avoid any sensation of weight or over-conducting** with your motion. It can help for palm(s) to be in an open and relaxed position, as though holding the sound, but doing so without suggesting a *crescendo*.

### What are some tips for maintaining pitch through the duration of long tones?

- On long tones, **check that the colors of the vowels do not vacillate**, but rather maintain pitch. Sometimes it helps to break up long tones or chords into a series of shorter values (such as eighth notes), and sing them on a neutral syllable, like “*doo*” or “*deh*.” The idea is the breath energy of the repeated tones helps focus pitch. Then go back to the original vowel, asking the singers to imagine the string of repeated shorter values tied together.
- **Sing only the primary vowel with diphthongs**, avoiding the subordinate vowel. To “R” or not to “R” and other diction rules are found on pp. 258-262 of Chapter Twelve.

### Can the key make a difference with maintaining pitch?

- When a piece tends to go flat or sharp, **rehearse the piece a half or whole step higher** above the home key, sometimes *sotto voce*, and then return to the original key, to establish a memory of the home key.
  - Key does affect the overall color of a piece, so **an alternative key may suit the comfortable “ring” of your ensemble**, improving projection and vibrancy of vocal tone. Sometimes altering the starting key for a performance by a half step can establish a more settled “home key.”
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## IMPROVING INTONATION AND PITCH

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### What are some steps I can take to improve my group's listening and pitch?

- **Alternate phrases between the men and women**, or sections, to listen for and match vowel colors.
- **Sing phrases or harmonies using an initial staccato “doot” or “doo”** in the proper rhythm. This minimizes the guess work with the initial pitch or vowel, and thereby improves the accuracy of pitch, rhythmic precision, emphasizes the use of clear vowels, and aids the singers in locking in harmonies.

### What are ways to improve the color and intonation of specific vowels?

- To avoid the **vowels AH and EE** sounding flat, ask singers to think high and forward, toward the cheekbones.
  - With the **AH vowel**, the tongue lays flat in the mouth.
  - **With EH**, as in *let*, think high and forward, but raise the tongue to close the vowel and round the lips.
  - To counteract the **lip vowels OO, EH, AH** sounding spread, round and narrow the lips.
  - With the **tongue vowels EE, EH, IH**, raise the tongue higher and forward. Suggest that there is space above their tongue when singing these vowels.
  - If the **EE sounds overly bright**, the cheeks and lips are back, so suggest a compromise between that bright EE position and that of an OO, as though wrapping the lips around the sound.
  - To avoid a tight, pinched soprano sound in its higher register, drop consonants and render the passage on an **UH or AH vowel**. The text will be effectively carried by the underlying alto, tenor and bass parts.
  - Refer to Appendix 12.1 - **International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)** for more detail on proper pronunciation of English vowels and consonants.
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## NEGOTIATING PIVOTAL PITCHES AND HARMONIES

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### What are some tips for locking in harmonies with consistency?

- **Have the choir listen to a harmonic passage**, concentrating on the harmonic shifts and watching how their part fits in. Ask singers not to hum or sing along at this point, but use their “inner ear.” Then isolate the difficult pitches by part or in relationship to other parts. Experiencing the harmonic relationships with the other voice parts is as valuable as learning the individual part (lines) themselves.
- **Call out individual parts to sing alone**, while other parts sing “inside” silently until called upon to join in alone or in tandem with another part (for instance, altos with basses). This gives harmonic context.
- **Apply solfege syllables** aurally to difficult transitional lines (sometimes without the aid of the notated music). This could be included in the warm-up preparation. Later in the rehearsal, reference the notated music to help lock in these transitional harmonies. Visual learners need this reinforcement.

### What are some ways to aid accuracy of pitch when learning harmonies?

- **Walk the full ensemble through a series of chord changes** very slowly, out of rhythm, only moving on when each subsequent chord change is heard, secure, and felt. Remind the singers that music is a voice-leading journey from a previous reference pitch to the next expected pitch, which anticipates another pitch. When there is an unexpected harmonic “surprise,” such as a sudden pivotal half-step shift, rehearse this with all parts, rather than as an isolated part, so that the singers experience their notes in harmonic context.
  - **Listen for the thirds of chords.** Choral intonation is “truer” when the thirds are sung high. True intonation creates sympathetic vibrations which create a rich resonance and blend.
  - Ask choir members to **point with their index finger for every note of a passage**, aiding the singer in placing each pitch. A helpful alternative, especially with younger singers, is the use of Kodaly hand signs, which visually reinforces voice-leading tendencies.
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## FIXES FOR RHYTHMIC CHALLENGES

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### **My choir doesn't quite sound together? What strategies can improve rhythmic accuracy and sense of pulse?**

- **Ignore the pitches and count the rhythm** (1-an-2-an-3--4 or ta-ti-ta-ti-ta--ta, etc.), clapping or slapping the knee at the commencement of each pitch duration. Next, maintain the proper rhythm with tones added. Many choir conductors avoid the addition of text until the rhythm and pitches are locked in.
- **Use a staccato “doot” or “doo,”** as noted above, not only as an exercise for locking in pitch, but for rhythm. First establish a strong underlying pulse rhythm by either counting aloud (1-an-2-an-3-an, etc.) or snapping fingers. This exercise brings levity to the rehearsal when, for instance, one voice finds itself isolated resolving a suspension on its own.
- **Ask for a little daylight** between dotted notes and the next to increase clarity.

### **How can I improve the rhythmic accuracy and closing sounds of phrases?**

- **Reinforce rhythmic placement of closing consonants** by instructing the singers on what exact beat an unvoiced closing consonant will be sounded (put the T right on beat four). When this is marked on the copy, then the singers are not only counting through the duration of the tone, but gauging vocally the exact distance to phrase its conclusion. Sometimes this may mean tapering the conclusion of the tone, as it moves to voiced consonants, or a gradually increasing of volume to aid a strong articulation.
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## WAYS TO SUSTAIN TEMPO

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### What are some ways to counter tempo that rushes or slows?

- If the tempo slows or rushes, **then the ensemble lacks a sense of consistent pulse**. Clap, count, or snap along. Keeping the pulse steady and together is often aided by asking singers to walk or march to the beat while singing.
- When the tempo slows or rushes, **the conductor may not be listening to the breath of the choir** or may not be indicating a breath or subdivision for the choir to follow.
- Prevent the tempo slowing by the conductor **staying ahead of the beat**, rather than following the sound of the choir.
- **Conduct only the primary beats** when the choir sings off-beats or syncopation. Emphasize lining up the off-beats exactly in the “pockets” between the beats.

### How can I make a steady transition in tempo?

- Anchor transitions in tempo with **subdivided counting** (like 1-an-2-an-3-an-4-an).

### Often issues with tempo have to do with retention of previous learning. What practices can improve recall?

- **“When the heads go down, we lose tempo.”** Begin to memorize phrases, requiring the singers to only make an occasional reference to their copy. Not only are the choir members more focused on the conductor’s face and gesture, but they are hearing more of what is around them, improving blend and rhythm.
- Skipping a rehearsal on a piece can cost the conductor a lot of re-hashing, which can be mutually frustrating as your singers “re-read” the material. **Just touching on the “trouble” sections of a piece or “performing” a section of the piece in each rehearsal** will help the choir retain the text, pitches and proper tempo. Distributing the overall learning over a longer period will ultimately render a better performance.

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See the **CHORAL TRAINING RESOURCES** listing at the conclusion of Chapter Twelve on page 263 for more valuable insights. With this listing above, I am indebted to James Jordan (*Evoking Sound*), Bettina Shepherd (*The Everything Singing Book*), my wife Priscilla Burgmayer, Eric Dina, Heather Osmond and Dr. Beatrice Holz.