Choir Warm-Ups: How Effective Are They?

Many of us spent our high school and early college days singing in choirs. We received little attention as an individual, let alone as a musical instrument. Then, we went through the solo singing stage, where we became the focus of attention. We learned, for the first time, that we could dictate tempi, dynamics, and where to take a breath. And, of course, we were given a set of daily exercises that would warm up our voice and extend its capabilities in terms of pitch, range, quality, loudness, and singing style. We felt empowered with our voice.

Later, as some of us re-entered the choir world and, once again, gave up our spotlight as a soloist (for example, to support our local church or community choir), certain choir dogmas struck us as odd. We began to question particular phrasings, why in a certain tessitura the conductor (or even the composer) wanted that particular dynamic, or why we had to blend with a twangy or dull sound to the right or left of us.

For me, the most bizarre behavior in the rediscovered choir world was group warm-up. Here, the conductor (or the choir master) sat down at the piano and played scales or arpeggios. We all join in, men and women, one octave apart, repeating the exercises in half-steps up and down. No mention was made about what the exercise was to accomplish in our voices. Every once in awhile the leader yelled out something like "use your diaphragm" or "drop your jaw" or "round your lips." Sometimes he or she gave us a facial gesture that we all faithfully imitated.

What this type of warm-up totally disregards is the individual nature of human physiology and psychology. Vocal warm-up is a dialogue with your body. First you find out where the voice is (in its freedom and flexibility) at a given moment in time. Is it primed more or less like the rest of your body? How and where does it need stretching and flexing? The *rate* at which you proceed in the warm-up is different from day to day, hour to hour. Sometimes a light, well-mixed, head voice is achieved in 5 minutes; other times it takes repeated warm-up sessions over half a day. One day it is best to start with a lip trill or a hum, other days an open vowel configuration can get the ball rolling right away.

Choir singers, like solo singers, need to be taught enough about their instrument to learn how to gauge its condition. I have never seen an orchestra warm-up such that everyone (strings, horns, woodwinds) plays the same scales or arpeggios simultaneously. The sound of an orchestra warming up is a concert of individuality. Everybody is in his or her own world, "talking" to the reeds, the lips, the bows, or the valves of their instruments. Unity begins when the concert master stands up, gets the \mathbf{A}_4 from the oboe, and addresses the string section.

It's no different in the sports world. At a track meet, you see athletes on the playing field by themselves, stretching, flexing, running short sprints, totally oblivious to what is going on around them. Even team players of basketball, football, soccer, and other team sports do little platoon warm-up.

As more and more is discovered scientifically about the physiology of warm-up, a system of exercises will emerge for specific muscle groups, specific joints and tendons, and specific deficiencies in the voice at a given moment in time.

But how do we get choir singers to be engaged in these discoveries? Those who have gone through the hourglass of choir singing, solo singing, and returning to choir singing need to take other choir members aside, one-by-one, and share their nuggets and jewels with them. But this has to be done discretely and kindly. Statements like: "Do you want to know my favorite warm-up exercise?" are not threatening. Statements like: "You'll never sing that passage unless you take voice lessons" are. It's great to pass the nuggets around and pick up new ones in the process.

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