

Choosing Music at an Appropriate Difficulty Level

When a choir works on several pieces at different difficulty levels, it improves more quickly. Easy music gives the singers an opportunity to improve tone quality, breathing, precision, etc. Difficult music requires more concentration and encourages singers to be self-disciplined to craft the finer details of the music. Some music helps singers to become more successful with both technical and musical elements.

TIPS

1. Most pieces should be a moderate challenge, but a choir should work with one or two more difficult pieces and at least one easier piece.
2. Every conductor occasionally misjudges a situation and makes an inappropriate choice of repertoire. If a piece is far too easy or difficult, a wise conductor will file the piece for use with a future choir.

What is easy for one choir may be difficult for another. For example, one choir may find rhythmic music difficult, while another choir at the same general stage of development may have no difficulty with rhythms, but may not be able to sing legato music very well.

TIPS

1. Every piece should have some challenge for your singers, but a piece with too many difficult aspects can result in disaster.
2. A new piece may seem more difficult if it is quite different from other pieces the choir has performed.

The difficulty of a piece can be affected by the lyrics. This is particularly a factor with singers who do not have as much experience with language (e.g. younger singers).

TIPS

1. Music with repeated lyrics is easier to learn and to memorize.
2. If the lyrics are easy to say in rhythm, the rhythms are usually easy to sing.
3. Some lyrics are difficult to pronounce. Singers can be distracted by the lyrics and become unable to fulfill the musical potential of the piece.
4. When a piece has a slow tempo, lyrics are less of a problem because singers have more time to react to any difficulties in the lyrics.

Sometimes music is difficult because the technical aspects of the pitches, rhythms, or harmonies challenge the ears of the singers.

TIPS

1. Music with large intervals is more difficult to tune. If only one large interval is used and it appears frequently, the singers can adjust more easily.
2. Complex rhythms can be difficult particularly if there is a great variety of rhythms. Music is easier if a difficult rhythm is frequently repeated somewhere within the piece.
3. A canon is the easiest music to sing in parts.
4. Melodically based music (quodlibets or polyphonic music) is easier for children than harmonic music because children can follow their own melody. With harmonic music, they can easily become lost in the harmony and start singing another pitch in the chord. Youth and adults find harmonic music easier than polyphonic music. Perhaps their "herd instinct" is further developed and they find it more natural to harmonize.
5. Dissonance makes a piece more difficult.
6. Key changes or key coloring (e.g. quickly moving through a different key) makes music more difficult.
7. Obvious cues make music easier.
8. Music with frequent rests is more difficult. Singers find it easier to sing continuously.
9. Music is easier when the accompaniment supports the choral parts by continuing with the same general style as the choir. A contrasting accompaniment can be distracting for inexperienced singers but is aesthetically interesting for experienced singers.

Week 23 *rhythm, dynamics*
SING Exercise 23

Take two long, slow breaths before beginning to sing.

REPEAT Exercise 23

- i) READ Tip 1. Speak the words together first. Repeat with an exaggerated, "equal" emphasis on every word. Repeat a third time, speaking the words naturally. Finally, sing the words with natural emphasis.
- ii) Communicate the lyrics to an imaginary audience.
- iii) READ Tip 2. Make the change in dynamics obvious.
- iv) Speak the words in rhythm, exaggerating the dynamics. Then sing the music as written.

Week 24 *long notes, expressive communication*
SING Exercise 24

Stand with your knees flexed. You have one beat to inhale before the first two phrases.

REPEAT Exercise 24

- i) READ Tip 1. Try changing the energy slightly as you sing each long note.
- ii) READ Tip 2. Sing while communicating with your eyes.
- iii) Face a partner and sing to her/him.
- iv) Throughout the exercise place slightly more weight on "let" than "the." In mm.5-7 emphasize the words "dance" and "song" because they are syncopated.

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23 *rhythm, dynamics*

Cantabile

Unison *p* *f*

There is beau-ti-ful mus-ic in the air. There is beau-ti-ful me-lo-dy there.

Piano

TIPS

1. Emphasize the important syllable of each word just as you would say the word.
 musical: "beau-ti-ful mus-ic"
 not musical: "beau-ti-ful mus-ic" or "beau-ti-ful mus-ic"
 The meaning becomes more obvious and the music sounds less mechanical when the rhythm of the lyrics sounds natural.
2. Notice dynamic changes. Circle them in your concert music. Dynamics change the whole effect of the music.

24 *long notes, expressive communication*

Rhythmically

Unison *mf*

Let the mus-ic dance. Let us hear the song.

Piano

Let the mus-ic dance... Let us hear the song... Let the mus-ic dance!_

The Lyrics

In choral music, the lyrics help the audience understand the music. Singers can understand the music better if they know how the music and lyrics are related. In some pieces, the lyrics are just as important as the music.

Lyrics help to present the main idea expressed in the music; they also add details to the main idea. Too often singers are so busy with the technical aspects of the music, or the overall sound, that they forget to notice the meaning of the lyrics.

Rehearsal Tips:

1. During the first rehearsal, give your singers time to read the lyrics, or have one singer read the lyrics aloud, omitting any repetition of words. Sometimes it is a good idea to do this at the very end of a rehearsal so that your singers have time to think about the meaning before the next rehearsal. This may even stimulate post-rehearsal discussion among the singers.
2. Make sure that your singers understand what the title of the music means.
3. If there are any unusual words in the lyrics or title, the conductor should explain them during the first or second reading. Keep the explanation short and simple. If there are multiple meanings to the lyrics, explain the ideas at an appropriate level for your singers. Sometimes a few key words are essential to the understanding of the music.

TIPS

1. Let the energy and dynamics gradually change on each long note. Music is a living, constantly changing art. Slight musical changes help to breathe life into the music.
2. Sing with your eyes. Look straight forward to the conductor. When you communicate your emotions clearly, your eyes become the window of your soul.

25 entries, phrasing

With spirit *mf*

Unison

Do you have a hat that I could bor-row?

Piano *mf*

The image shows a musical score for a song. It consists of two staves: a vocal staff (Unison) and a piano accompaniment staff (Piano). The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line starts with a rest for two measures, then enters with the lyrics 'Do you have a hat that I could bor-row?'. The piano accompaniment provides a steady harmonic background. Dynamics markings include 'With spirit' and 'mf' (mezzo-forte).

TIPS

1. Whenever possible, start your breath several beats before your entry. Feel the beat as you inhale so that you will sing exactly in tempo. A choir sounds much more impressive when entries are precisely together and the tempo remains steady!
2. Breathe only between musical phrases (never in the middle of a word).

Singing is like speaking. A speaker pauses slightly between each group of words in a sentence to make the meaning easier to understand. Singers breathe between musical phrases to make the lyrics easier to understand.

4. Some pieces may need a great amount of work on technical or musical details. However, in the final rehearsal, refer the singers back to the meaning of the lyrics so that they will focus on communicating the lyrics for the performance.

SING Exercise 25

Check for your cue in the introduction.

REPEAT Exercise 25

- i) READ Tip 1. Concentrate on the beat as you inhale.
- ii) Let your tummy slowly expand as you inhale.
- iii) READ Tip 2. Imagine that you are singing the sentence to someone instead of speaking.
- iv) Pace your breath to leave enough air for a good quality of sound on the last word.
- v) When singing the word "borrow," emphasize the important syllable, "bor-" and relax "-row."