

## Finding the Main Musical Idea: Getting to the Heart of the Music

Every great piece of music has at least one special ingredient which delights the listeners. When a conductor identifies that special ingredient, he or she is getting to the heart of the music so that it will come alive in performance.

To gain insight into a choral work and to identify its Main Music Idea it is important to carefully examine its features, including:

- ◆ Melodic phrasing
- ◆ Rhythm
- ◆ Time signature
- ◆ Tempo
- ◆ Tonality, modality and modulation
- ◆ Texture: harmonic settings, polyphony, counterpoint, mixed textures
- ◆ Foreground/background
- ◆ Structure: beginning, climax, ending, sectional music
- ◆ Forms: cantata, introit, mass, oratorio
- ◆ Dynamics
- ◆ Unity

## Interpreting Each Element of the Choral Parts

NOTE: For rehearsal ideas for each musical element, check the index on pages 165-174.

### Melodic Phrasing

- Length of the phrase
- Climax of the phrase

The length of the phrases affects the mood of the music. When singers breathe infrequently for long phrases, the audience reacts either by slipping into a more relaxed state with the kind of slow-paced breathing used while sleeping or by holding their breath in suspense. When singers breathe more frequently for short phrases, the audience may feel as if it is short of breath or panting along with the singers.

### TIPS

Check the phrase lengths.

- ◆ If the phrases are long, the music may sound tranquil, majestic, soaring, or suspenseful.
- ◆ With short phrases the music may sound exciting, hurried, or breathless.

Within each phrase is a climax: the most important moment of the phrase. The meaning of the lyrics is affected by the word or group of words the composer chooses for the climax in the music:

Climax

Come, light the fire.

Climax

Come light the fire.

### TIPS

To find the climax of a phrase, look for the place in the phrase where both the lyrics and the music sound important.

The climax may feature the most important musical characteristics found in a phrase. Although composers can create climaxes with the contour of the pitches or dynamics, there are many other interesting ways to create musical emphasis.

**TIPS**

1. Decide which musical feature will make the climax most effective (e.g. an interesting rhythm or timbre).
2. When a climax is created by a combination of musical features, the resulting effect may be best described by an emotion, temperature or state of being thereby increasing suspense, excitement, heat, energy or a sense of urgency.

For information on the beginnings and endings of phrases, see Book 1 of Successful Performing.


**Rhythm**


- The note value of the beat
- Syncopation
- Momentum: repetitive, free and irregular rhythms


Music sounds rhythmic when some notes are emphasized more than others.


**TIPS**

Decide which notes are stronger in each phrase.

Basic beat  $\frac{4}{4}$  

First note of each grouping  $\frac{4}{4}$  

First note in each measure  $\frac{3}{4}$  

Syncopated rhythms  $\frac{2}{4}$  

(Note the strong beat and strong offbeat)\*

\* See pages 50-51 for more information on syncopation.

Music sounds more rhythmic when the composer incorporates devices that create momentum.

**TIPS**

Look for repetitive rhythms.

- ◆ Inner rhythms and repeated mixed rhythms add intensity to the momentum.



- ◆ Repeated eighth notes in Gregorian chant sound less rhythmic because there is less momentum; the effect is more relaxing.

For additional information on rhythm, see page 15 (inner rhythms), 139 (cross-rhythms), and 22 (freely changing beat).

## SING Exercise 8

Look for the differences in the two phrases.

## REPEAT Exercise 8

- i) READ the Tip for Tone Quality. Hiss each phrase in the exercise rhythmically; then sing it with the lyrics using the same pressure from your tummy.
- ii) Check the tuning for the third of the minor scale (B $\flat$ ).
- iii) READ the Tip for Long Notes.
- iv) As you increase the energy, keep your tone relaxed.

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7 *tuning, syncopation*

**Moderato**  
*mp*

Unison

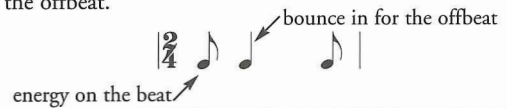
Piano

**TIP for Tuning**

In minor keys, sing the minor third of the key very clearly to bring out its color.

**TIP for Syncopation**

When you sing a syncopated rhythm, add some energy on the beat. Then bounce in for the offbeat.

**VOCAL HEALTH**

Save high notes and loud singing until your voice is warmed up.

8 *tone quality, long notes*

**Legato**

Unison

Piano

VM7S

**Week 9** *diction, dynamics*
**PREPARATION for Exercise 9**

Hiss the rhythms of this exercise.

**SING Exercise 9**
**REPEAT Exercise 9**

- i) READ the Tip for Diction. Make every consonant clear as you sing.
- ii) While you keep the consonants clear, sing each phrase musically.
- iii) READ Tip 1 for Dynamics. Focus on the dynamics.
- iv) READ Tip 2 for Dynamics. Make the soft part as exciting as the loud part.
- v) Each dynamic change has a purpose. For example, the first phrase could be showing how loud the trumpet sounds; the second phrase could be softer because you are listening to the trumpet; the third phrase could sound excited. Give meaning to the dynamics as you sing.

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**TIP for Tone Quality**

Practice hissing rhythms to build up your tummy muscles for better control of your tone quality.

**TIP for Long Notes**

Gradually increase the energy during each long note.

**9** *diction, dynamics*

*Andante*

Unison *f* *p* *f*

The trum-pet be-gins to play. Can you hear it? Can you hear it?

Piano

**TIP for Diction**

Imagine that you are singing to someone who is hard of hearing: do not sing louder, sing more clearly.

**TIPS for Dynamics**

1. Look ahead in the music to prepare for dynamic changes.
2. Keep your mouth open far enough when you sing softly.

*A change in dynamics signals the audience to listen for a change in mood or meaning.*

**Dynamics**

It is difficult for some singers to understand the value of using all the dynamics marked in a score. They may think that music is just “pitches and rhythms.” Help them to experience the power of dynamics when joined with the meaning of the music.

**Rehearsal Tip:**

To demonstrate the importance of dynamic markings, rehearse one of your pieces “inside out” (i.e. sing softly when it is marked loud, and sing loudly when it is marked soft). Briefly discuss the results or just have a good laugh afterwards.