



Ask a Conductor

Question 3

What are some ice breakers/community-building activities I can use for our first choir rehearsal of the season? My choir is very new and unsure of the idea of choir warm-ups and singing together with each other.

The “Ask a Conductor” section of *ChorTeach* was a reader-generated Q&A format where readers submitted questions related to teaching, conducting, rehearsing with, or singing with K-12 students. Three to five educators answered the question, with a new question appearing in each issue. There are eight “Ask a Conductor” questions, available in the *ChorTeach* archives at acda.org/chorteach.

Question: What are some ice breakers/community-building activities I can use for our first choir rehearsal of the season? My choir is very new and unsure of the idea of choir warm-ups and singing together with each other.



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The first day of choir rehearsal with any choir, especially a new choir, is always so fun to me. The choir members have a little nervousness about them. They

want to do a good job but may not be confident about singing. Their trepidation is compounded if they are in a room with people they don’t know well. I want to take some of the nervousness out of the room with activities that encourage us to move, sing, and learn each other’s names in a fun, non-judgemental environment.

When working with an elementary choir, one of the first activities I use is “Lean Forward/Lean Backwards.” This activity has singing, movement, and lots of smiles. I ask the students to mirror me as I demonstrate how to “lean” in the various directions. I make it a point to demonstrate how to “lean,” as I do not want any student to fall or to bump another student. After the students understand the directions, I sing the lyrics and have the students move with me: “Lean forward, lean backwards to the left, to the right; hands up, hands down to the left to the right. Lean forward, lean backwards to the left, to the right; hands up, hands down to the left to the right.” Once the students start moving, I invite them to sing with me. We sing the lyrics and move while modulating the key and changing the tempo. The students have a wonderful time with this activity.

Another activity I use is “Tell Me Something Good!” from the R&B hit composed by Stevie Wonder and performed by Rufus and Chaka Khan. I have the students sing the melodic line, “Tell Me Something Good!” (CLAP). I then point to the individual students and ask

them to say their name (so I can learn names and how to pronounce them), tell them what their favorite song is, and tell me something good about their day. After approximately five students answer, I invite everyone to sing “Tell Me Something Good,” and we learn about more students. I always challenge myself that by the end of the activity I should be able to name each child.

After doing these activities, the students are not feeling nearly as nervous or alienated as when they came into the room. They now know each other’s names and have laughed, sung, and played together. I also take the opportunity afterwards to explain to the students about the warm-up process and why we warm-up our voices, minds, and bodies. For more warm-up activities, visit www.Girlconductor.com.



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Below are descriptions of three activities I incorporate into my rehearsals throughout the first week each year. All of them require no materials, have easy-to-explain rules, are a great way to physically and mentally engage students, and allow teachers to demonstrate that voices can be used in unfamiliar ways and it can be fun.

Posse

Rules:

- 1) Each student in the class finds a partner and shares their name with them. Once they have shared their names, they need to face you with their thumbs up to show they are ready to start.
- 2) Once you say “go,” every pair will play one round of rock-paper-scissors.

- 3) Whoever loses becomes a part of the winner’s “posse” and starts following behind them, chanting their name.
- 4) Each winner will then play against another winner. They will know who the other winners are because they will also have a posse cheering them on.
- 5) Each time someone loses, they and their posse join in following and chanting the name of whoever beat them.
- 6) This process continues until the entire class is chanting the last winner’s name.

Pros: The activity is a quick way for your students to begin to learn each other’s names and to hear their own name used in an affirming way. Almost nothing is cooler than seeing “the shy student” have twenty classmates jumping around them, cheering them on as they play.

Things to Consider: This activity should be noisy and will require your kids to move around the room—you will need a little tolerance for crazy. To help regain your students’ attention at the end, you should already have a mechanism in place to draw their attention back to you. This could be a call-and-response, a hand gesture, whatever works best for you. Additionally, to help keep the activity safe, you will want to establish ground rules about how students should travel around the room before you start playing.

Demonstration:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HH44f8nkHo0>
or scan the QR code below.



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High-Medium-Low

Rules:

- 1) The students must look at you at all points in time.
They may blink (yes, they will ask you this)
- 2) You will shake your arms above your head, at shoulder height, or down by your waist. Each time your arms change position, you will say either “high,” “medium,” or “low.”
- 3) “Do what I say, not what I do” is what I tell my students. Meaning, they will need to make their arms move in whatever direction you tell them to with your voice. “High” means shake your hands above your head, “medium” is by your shoulders, and “low” is down by your waist.
- 4) Your goal is to trick the students into moving their arms the same direction you move yours, even when your arm movements don’t match up with what your voice says.

Pros: This is a fun activity that can energize and focus your students at any point in a rehearsal. One of the reasons I like using it at the beginning of the year is it allows me to use my voice as a tool for “play.” Once the students are comfortable with the game, I will make my vocal inflection match the direction my hands are moving. If I say “high,” I will use a floaty, falsetto sound, when I say “medium,” I will use my regular speaking voice, and “low” is borderline vocal fry. I can add another level of play by using my falsetto on “low” and a deep pitch on “high.” This helps break the ice a little with my students in regard to using their own voices, especially when encouraging boys to access their own falsetto. For a smooth transition, you can end this activity on a “high,” then go directly into siren echoes to begin your vocal warmups.

Things to Consider: There are lots of ways you can adjust the difficulty of this game: how long you wait between before having the kids change position, how emphatically or calmly you give a command, establishing short, repeated patterns of commands and then breaking

them in sneaky ways. I would incorporate these tricks gradually. All of them can make the game way more fun for a class that is eager for a challenge, or really frustrating for a class that isn’t quite ready.

Demonstration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vJrz7_uzsc or scan the QR code below.



Four Behind

Rules:

- 1) You will create a four-beat pattern using some sort of body percussion (snapping, clapping, patting your legs, etc.) or vocal sound.
- 2) The students will echo your pattern.
- 3) While they are echoing you, you are simultaneously showing them the next four-beat pattern. This creates a cycle of them echoing the pattern that they just saw, while watching you to see what they will do next.

Pros: This is a great attention grabber to use at the start of class or can function as a brain break in the middle of rehearsal. Incorporating spoken patterns can let your students play with timbre, range, and dynamics. For added benefit, you can have them play the game to music. This is a fun way to help develop their sense of steady beat. You can also incorporate challenging rhythmic patterns that will be introduced in your repertoire and help them develop fluency in those patterns in a playful way.

Things to Consider: I’ve had the best luck teaching this one when I break down the learning process. First I’ll have the students echo four beat body percussion patterns, but I won’t show them their next pattern until

they've completed the one they've already been given. Once they are clear with that step, then I will explain to them how they will need to think ahead and give them spoken cues to help keep them on track. I will begin to phase out the spoken cues, and then they should have it.

Demonstration:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzThpraoZ1I>

or scan the QR code below



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Creating a safe rehearsal space is crucial when working with musicians no matter the age or experience together as an ensemble! The more your musicians trust themselves, each other, and of course, you as the conductor, the more connected they will be to the music-making process. Although we are anxious for their first sound as a choir, we must see past the voices in the room and invest in the hearts of those who make the music.

Begin by selecting activities that require little social investment at first. One of my favorites is the activity "This or That" or "Would You Rather?" Using a list of prompts, the director or assigned leader calls out "would you rather..." and the students will move to either side of the room based on their response. This is a great way for students to see shared interests without pushing them out of their comfort zone.

I will often follow an activity like the one above with a name game. I recommend using a game like "Connections." All students should begin seated. Students will say their name and something they like and another student will respond and say, "My name is ___ and I also like ___, but I also like ____." The "connect-

ed" student will rise and join the student who began the game. You may need to provide topic guidance so students can easily select their "likes." This involves a little more personal investment, but it is another way for students to create those personal connections with people in the room.

"Integrating these team-building exercises have done wonders for the culture of my program and the relationships we have with each other."

Once we have spent more time together, I like to incorporate activities that involve a little more interaction and social investment from my students. Choir speed dating was a suggestion from a choral colleague and I love it! Students will form concentric circles where the inside circles rotate clockwise every 30 seconds to answer a fun question with their partner. It is easy to come up with silly things like "what is a song you are embarrassed you know all the words to?" Choir speed dating allows you to format your questions to the needs of the ensemble, which, again is important as you are building those relationships.

Additionally, each Friday, I devote time so students could chat as a class through a few different activities, some of which have also been mentioned in this Journal and online.

- Shout-outs have been a great way to leave encouraging messages for other students in the program. I read them out loud and students clap and celebrate as they are passed out.
- I also encourage them to share a high (wow) or a low (pow) from their week. My students love this and will often take the whole class time if I am not careful!
- When the students have a stronger bond, we do an activity called, "Throwing of the Beads." Students stand in a circle and I throw a beaded necklace

to a student and deliver a genuine compliment. The recipient then chooses another student until all students have gone.

- I also incorporate movement/dances, funny warm-ups, solfège games, and sometimes karaoke to make it a FUN FRIDAY. We still rehearse but use it as a planning session for the next week.

Integrating these team-building exercises have done wonders for the culture of my program and the relationships we have with each other. Whatever you choose to do, make sure it is authentically given and implemented in the rehearsal. You are integral to the community building of your ensembles and set the tone for the year to come. Make it a great one!



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The idea of community in the choral ensemble is very important. So many times, we get to the end of a concert cycle and realize that there are some altos who have no idea who is in the tenor section, or as is common in school settings, seniors who don't know any of the sophomores' names! There are activities that we can engage in during our first rehearsal to plant the seeds for a tight-knit and close musical community to form. For me, the most important part of community building is that it feels organic and interwoven with the musical goals of the ensemble. As we come to understand the different reasons singers come to choir, it is vital that we act with intention when it comes to forming the identity of the group. I've learned that the classic icebreaker games of "Two truths and a lie" or small group charades can be dynamic and fun for a moment, but those games lack any real and lasting substance when it comes to learning about another person.

One of the best ways to get to know the sections is during the voicing process. I always keep the other sections in the room while we go through and listen to every singer in various combinations until we find the correct sound for that group. Even if you don't do full voicing on day one, it's helpful to at least go around and hear everyone sing something individually or as a section. I'm also reiterating each singer's name out loud while I do this so that everyone (including me) begins to associate names, faces, and voices.

Another place to begin community building is during sectionals. As we have undoubtedly learned, every section begins to take on their own sound and group dynamic the longer they sing together. During sectionals, bonds can be formed over conquering a particularly hard passage or by sharing a private joke with the conductor that only they know about. Forming solidarity within a section is easier when the goals are common and focused on the music. The moment that every tenor in the room experiences that rich, golden tone that they've been striving for is a transcendent one, and it can lead to a moment of section pride when they rejoin the choir and get to show that off, heaped with praise from the conductor.

You may notice that I haven't given many examples of activities that do not have a strict musical focus. My ideas about leaving goofy games and activities aside are very much shaped by conversations that I've had with singers over the years. Often, I hear that singers are sometimes uncomfortable being pressured into sharing personal information about themselves, no matter how innocent the information might seem. A person who does not participate in the game can be viewed as a "wet blanket" or someone who "hates fun," which undermines the stated goal of community building. Though everyone comes to choir for a different set of social or emotional reasons, everyone is there for the music, so synthesizing community with music makes the most sense with the least amount of potential friction. We build lasting structures by ensuring they have strong foundations. If you build your choir community on firm musical ground, you'll never look back and lament that you didn't do trust falls in the first rehearsal. Listen to your singers, feel out the emotional "pulse" of the choir, and guide them towards what is truly important and best for everyone involved. ■