



Rehearsal Break

Incorporating Movement in Choral Performance: A Whole-Body Approach

by Chelsea Huber

Music, and specifically singing, has long been seen as a whole-body process. In 1921, Swiss music educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze envisioned music education practices that reinforce the body as the “intermediary between sounds and thought.”¹ Nearly one hundred years later, music psychologist and educator Donald Hodges referred to music as a “vehicle for the integration of body, mind, and spirit.”² The consideration of body movement for choral singing is not new but often stops short of the performance stage. German musicologist Wilhelm Ehmann, in the text *Choral Directing* (1968), stated that choirs should view themselves as “fundamentally a choir in motion,” but then went on to say that nearly all movements in performance should be inward, reducing outward expression to a minimum.³ This seemingly outdated ideal still persists and can perpetuate Western European-centric aesthetics of choral performance, which simply no longer fits either the singers or the repertoire of twenty-first-century choral music education.

If movement is so intrinsic in choral singing and lauded as a pedagogical tool in rehearsal for both singers and conductors, then why should the movement stop when a choir has an audience? The answer to this question is intrinsically linked to culturally relevant teaching and the move away from the previously dominant para-

digim of Western art music. In addition to connecting with culturally relevant teaching practices, this article aims to combine both psychological and pedagogical considerations for the use of movement in choral performance in order to provide recommendations for choral educators looking to update their use of movement in performance.

Development of Valued Choral Aesthetics

The sacred, Western-European roots of American music education have consistently contributed to what is valued aesthetically in teaching and performance. Historically, even though other forms of music (such as Native American and African American music) existed in communities, these genres were not represented in schools, and Western art music formed the dominant perspective. When non-Western European folk songs began to appear in curricula, they were typically converted to Western music notation despite having aural origins and were taught with Western styles.⁴ Teaching and performing a variety of music, from a variety of cultural traditions, has become a crucial step for twenty-first-century teachers to reflect the backgrounds and strengths of students.⁵

Music educators today acknowledge progress while

recognizing that there is still more to be done. While professional organized events like the Tanglewood Symposia in 1967 and 2007 increased awareness for broadening the global horizons of music selections and pedagogy, the dominant culture of Western art music is still often regarded as superior, while everything else is “other.”⁶ Regarding both American K-12 schools and universities, a “Grand Canyon-like gap” persists between the formal discourse and the reality of music education.⁷ However, music education is slowly but steadily moving away from Western European aesthetics as a singular focus.⁸

In choral music education, visions of still, uniform choristers was considered the peak aesthetic. American composer and conductor Noble Cain’s *Choral Music and its Practice* (1942) even recommended that choirs sit down to perform, in part because standing may lead to involuntary movement, “causing the picture on the stage to move,” and because a seated chorus “cannot inject its personality with its physical freedom.”⁹ Over the next several decades, the rising prevalence of Dalcroze’s ideas of whole-body music education softened the view. Eurythmics, rhythm training through body movement, was combined with the areas of solfège and improvisation to form Dalcroze training, most commonly applied at first to singing instruction for young children.¹⁰ Since the 1950s and 1960s, the Dalcroze approach has been embraced by many choral directors, with a focus on helping students connect body awareness to both vocal technique and specific repertoire.¹¹ In complete opposition to Cain’s belief that singers don’t use their legs when singing, Dalcroze’s techniques are widely applied—to choral rehearsal, at least. Less attention appears to have been given to how these techniques could affect performance.


Swedish psychologist Patrik Juslin included movement as a mode of variability and expression in music performance in the GERM model: the M stands for “Movement Principles,” which recognizes “biological motion” as part of music, consisting of both intentional and non-intentional movement patterns.¹² Thus, potential movement that takes place during a choral performance could be divided into three categories: non-intentional movement from the physical process of singing, intentional but non-choreographed movement,

and intentional choreographed movement. This article will largely focus on the latter two intentional types.

Intentional Non-Choreographed Movement

Consideration of the psychological side of how movement could affect singers begins with non-choreographed, or “natural” movement. Natural movement can blur the lines between intentional and non-intentional movement, but here this movement will be considered as separate from the internal and external physical processes of singing. Non-choreographed movement in performance can be categorized by its relation to the social processes that occur during music performance: coordinating, collaborating, and communicating.¹³ These processes can occur among performers, or between performer and audience. In some ways, the “typical” Western European choral arrangement and expectations could restrict these social processes. Indeed, research on inter-singer communication in choirs is hard to find, but studies of string quartets and piano duos have found that nonverbal communication between performers provided a greater amount of coherence and flow.¹⁴

Solo singers frequently use upper-body movements to express emotion or narrative; in one study, solo singers of Western contemporary popular music frequently used antero-posterior movement, or leaning forward or backward, which aided in emotional expression and supported production of high volume and strength.¹⁵ Choral singers, when standing close together on risers, do not have the same freedom. In addition, while chamber music players use glances to communicate, choir members in the standard row formation are all facing the same direction: toward the conductor. Without a shift in arrangement, such as a semicircle, and more space in between singers, choirs are denied this collaborative and expressive angle. Even younger singers could, however, develop a habit of managing “regulatory gestures” to collaborate with fellow singers in performance while still maintaining connection to the music with or without a conductor.¹⁶ A cappella or vocal jazz singers demonstrate this, as they sing successfully without a conductor. Examples of cross-ensemble communication include popular music groups such as



Highline Vocal Jazz, Pentatonix, Lawrence the Band, or collegiate a cappella groups.

To begin encouraging natural movement and communication for singers on stage, directors may consider adjusting standing arrangements, allowing singers to face each other to better communicate, with more space in between each person. While performing in a full circle is not practical in most performance scenarios, a circular rehearsal arrangement can be slightly adjusted for a semicircle in performance. In addition, depending on the style of music, conductors may choose to further extend the potential for singers' collaboration and communication by removing themselves from the podium entirely, perhaps even participating as a singer themselves.

Ensemble singers, to some degree, are also communicating with the audience while they perform. Vision is a dominant sense, so the visual aspect of a performance provides crucial information about musicians' expressive intentions.¹⁷ In a study conducted where college students observed both instrumental and vocal chamber music performances, the visual element of performance, including expressive movement, communicated the performers' expressive intentions to the audience more than audio presentation alone.¹⁸ A similar study suggested that middle school students could more successfully tell the difference between expressive and non-expressive performances (both vocal and instrumental) when they watched a video of the performance.¹⁹

Ehmann's idea of internal movement can and should be used as a springboard for encouraging natural, non-choreographed movement that connects with the audience in performance. Some choirs have employed conducting-like upper body movements in performance, such as the St. Mary's International School Varsity Ensemble performance of Randall Johnson's *Benedictus*.²⁰ In *Teaching Choral Music* (1999), Don Collins proposes using the text as a starting point: "when choir members have internalized a text, appropriate movement is a result."²¹ Including the printed text and translation in program notes for a concert could further reinforce this audience connection. Although any one singer's movements should not draw singular attention, uniformity can be achieved if singers are able to communicate with each other and balance their expression. As a result,

Collins suggests that "listeners will enjoy both an aesthetic and an emotional experience."²² Communication with the audience goes both ways, as the visual or aural feedback of audience reactions can influence the performers as well.²³

In her 2020 *Choral Journal* article, Kathryn Briggs writes: "movement while singing creates muscle memory within the choir."²⁴ When choreographed movement is implemented with music, there may be an increased degree of internal physical synchronization, or "entrainment," among participants. "Physiological responses," as Donald Hodges describes, includes processes like heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration.²⁵ A 2013 study in *Frontiers of Psychology* suggested that unison singing led to biological synchronization of heart rate and respiration, which could be further enhanced by movement.²⁶ This could potentially have effects on the audience as well: while results were affected by how much attention the spectators paid to their own breathing, a 2015 study in *Frontiers of Human Neuroscience* suggests the feasibility of breath synchronization between dancers and spectators during a live performance.²⁷ Some of these drawn connections are hypotheses, but the area of physiological entrainment in choirs is an intriguing direction for future research.

Intentional Choreographed Movement

Choreographed movement in choral music is most frequently used outside of the typical Western European tradition, due in part to the more overt levels of expression used in non-Eurocentric genres such as show choir, gospel, or African choral music.²⁸ When implementing choreography with culturally diverse music, directors must be sure to consider the underlying culture, and connect with culture bearers to be sure that the movements are respectful, especially if modifications are needed.²⁹ Any choral performance should reflect the typical performance practices of the culture represented, resulting in a potential for many styles to be displayed within one concert program.

Two practical considerations for adding movement to choral performance that apply to choreography are the memorization of music and adaptations for singers with disabilities. Singers must memorize music to be able to

execute most upper body movement or body percussion. This sometimes means it is better to rehearse the music first and add movement later. Directors may also choose to teach music entirely by rote, especially if rote learning is aligned with the culture of the music. Music stands, while useful in rehearsal, block the visual effect of movement in performance and should only be used in certain cases when necessary. Singers with disabilities should be provided with multiple options of adapted movement. For example, upper body movement could be replaced with lower body movement, and vice versa; percussion instruments could be a viable substitute for body percussion.

The inclusion of show choirs in schools today is not as widespread as it was in the mid-twentieth century, and in the United States the prevalence of show choir varies widely by geographical area.³⁰ The show choir movement did, however, contribute to the advent of “choralography,” a term first coined by conductor Frank Pooler in the 1970s, which aims to make choreographed movement more accessible for singers. Choralography’s benefits have been considered for both singer and audience. Choralography consists of gestures based on the musical text, and promotes rhythmic accuracy, breath support, and a sense of cohesion and camaraderie among singers.³¹ In terms of the audience, choralography can provide an experience that is not only entertaining, but also educating. Sally Albrecht, a popular choralography clinician, recommends keeping movements simple, and focusing mostly on the possibilities of facial expression and upper-body movements to match the style of the music.³²

Genre Considerations for Movement

In the performance of gospel music, whole-body movement is fundamental. Types of movement can include unified swaying or rocking to the beat, turning, stepping, clapping, or an improvised combination of these that fits the tempo and style of the song.³³ Combined with facial expression, movement provides a feeling of celebration that is traditionally central to gospel music.³⁴ When teaching gospel to students for whom it may be a new style, providing performance examples can go a long way to help form a foundation for perfor-

mance. Gospel choirs at HBCUs such as the historic Fisk Jubilee Singers, the Morehouse College Glee Club, or the gospel choirs at Howard and Virginia State University, to name just a few of the many strong examples in the United States, are great places to start. Once singers are introduced to the gospel style, teachers should provide improvisatory opportunities with specific suggestions to avoid inappropriate movement.³⁵ Having singers help compose movements (with parameters) can also provide a valuable and culturally accurate experience.

African choral music, which has been arranged and implemented with great variety for choral ensembles in the United States, is intrinsically associated with dance, and in some traditions, the audience fully participates as well.³⁶ In specific styles like *ngoma* where music is sung and danced simultaneously, a great deal of physical space is needed to allow for freedom of movement.³⁷ Choral directors without adequate space may need to be creative to execute these styles, opting for auxiliary or even outdoor rehearsal spaces when necessary. If this is not possible, singers can still perform movement to a fulfilling effect while maintaining a limited physical plane, such as in the performances of *Ndikhokhele Bawo* by EXIGENCE, and *African Medley* by the Stellenbosch University Choir.³⁸

A greater degree of contemporary choral composers are including body percussion, a type of choreographed movement that creates an instrument in itself. Body percussion can be used to emulate specific atmospheric noises such as rain, to experiment with differences in timbre, or to create a specific visual design or tableau.³⁹ Often intertwining with improvisation and dance, body percussion is significant in the traditional and contemporary music of Africa, Slovenia, Japan, India, Indonesia, and more.⁴⁰ Performances by ensembles such as the Gondwana Choirs of Australia and the Vancouver Youth Choir provide a wealth of body percussion examples from a variety of cultures.


Movement from Rehearsal to Performance

Singers’ attitudes toward movement are important to the successful implementation of movement in rehearsal. In one study, students’ attitude survey responses suggested that they felt movement improved their alertness,

vocal technique, and expressiveness in rehearsal.⁴¹ This principle can be put toward movement in performance as well. Teachers should create a foundational rationale for how and why the movement fits with the repertoire and foster an open dialogue with singers about their enjoyment and perception of the movement's success. In addition, movement in rehearsal can "free up the singers," removing inhibitions and self-consciousness, and internalizing the music with freshness in the body.⁴² Cultivating trust is tantamount to involving movement of any kind with a choir, helping even the most cautious of singers feel comfortable and avoiding "calling out" any one singer.

Theres Hibbard's "BodySinging" method can be foundational in its view of the voice as "a natural integration of body, mind, and heart when expressing musical ideas and emotions."⁴³ Engaging students in both outward and inward responses to music can have valuable implications for when those students perform, engaging students in cognitive awareness of their bodies rather than the potentially intimidating concert surroundings. Instead of remaining mostly still in performance, singers can use Hibbard's suggestion of an "active, energized stance" as the foundation for intentional movement.⁴⁴

In an effectively expressive choral performance, the conductor should not be the only one moving. Singers should have the freedom to use movement as a tool for expression as well, in ways that accurately fit the music being performed. The implementation of movement in performance practice requires a re-thinking of Western European-based choral traditions. For example, singers need not stand in three straight rows onstage simply because of the traditional persistence of that particular "look." Even music that has been performed with rigidity for centuries can find new life with movement, such as in the 2019 performance of a 1727 Bach motet by the Aeolians of Oakwood University, featuring uninhibited but smooth movement that underlined the phrasing and articulation of the music.⁴⁵ Choral educators can call upon the needs, cultures, and strengths of their singers, communities, and the repertoire to create performance practices that are culturally responsive. Both natural and choreographed movement formed in this way can enhance the performance experience for both perform-

ers and spectators. Music's whole-body implications can have a place in both the choral classroom and on the stage. 

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NOTES

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