



Rehearsal Break

Jennifer Rodgers, editor

Running a Vocally Efficient Rehearsal

by Elena Bird Zolnick

When I was growing up participating in various ensembles and singing solos, I frequently heard the comment: “You’ll be a great music teacher when you grow up!” My mother, now a retired choral music educator of forty years, would smile and nod, and then lean toward me to whisper, “*Be careful. If you become a music teacher, you’ll ruin your voice!*”

Unfortunately, many choral educators know too well the truth in that statement. Our own vocal fatigue is difficult to address when we are teaching five days a week and possibly also leading a church or community choir on the weekend. It can become an all-consuming worry, accumulating stress and fear with every utterance throughout the day. That stress can seep into other areas of our lives and even affect relationships, as friends and family wonder why we are suddenly less talkative or avoiding social occasions.

The human voice is about much more than career or musical ambitions—it is largely what makes us who we are as individuals whether speaking or singing. An approach to managing vocal use and efficiency must take this into consideration; the whole picture must be assessed before vocal efficiency can become a part of our daily rehearsal routine. The purpose of this article is to help identify ways to monitor and manage your vocal use while presenting creative ways to make efficient vocal use a part of your rehearsal and teaching techniques.

Assessing Your Vocal Use/Dose

First, it is important to gauge how much voice is used throughout the entire day. The following two voice usage categories determine where it may be possible to limit and rest the voice, starting with what is likely everyone’s most important: relationships.

- a) **Necessary voice use:** basic human communication at work or home and throughout the day. Explain to your family what your vocal needs are, that you love to listen but may not contribute as much to a conversation or need to go to bed earlier than usual. If you have children, communicate with them and your partner that under no circumstance can you raise your voice (barring an emergency), and ask your partner to hold you accountable and step in when needed. At work, let your coworkers know that you will be resting your voice at designated times.
- b) **Social use:** friendly conversations at work, lunch, going out with friends or coworkers. Avoid talking when there is a lot of background noise. Limit talking on Bluetooth in the car, which can cause the voice to become elevated. Create a positive mindset toward being an active listener, rather than a top contributor, in group conversations.

Next, we may approach professional settings for music teachers:

- c) **Teaching:** if you are teaching private voice lessons and giving examples of correct singing and speaking, hopefully this will help your voice to grow stronger! *Demonstrating bad examples can seriously damage your voice!* Do not be afraid to use media and take listening breaks when appropriate; have students read aloud so that you do not do all the vocal work yourself.
- d) **Singing:** singing should be the easiest on your voice if you are using correct breathing technique and maintaining good posture. Vocal fatigue while singing tends to come at the end of a long day when the singer is tired and unable to maintain proper technique. If singing alone causes you vocal fatigue, seek out an experienced voice teacher, Alexander Technique teacher, or voice/speech therapist.
- e) **Rehearsal:** many teachers/directors lead three, four, or five hours of rehearsal a day, especially in middle and high school. This makes it even more important to monitor your vocal use. Likewise, serious musicians and students in chorus may be using their voices extensively throughout the day to practice, attend theater/opera rehearsals, choir rehearsals, social/necessary vocal use, etc. Rehearsal is a place where, as a director, you are responsible not only for your own vocal health, but in part, the vocal health of others. It is, therefore, necessary to train yourself to be vocally efficient in leading a rehearsal, which will in turn create healthy, vocally efficient habits for your singers.

Taken together, these uses of your voice define your usual vocal dose. If your voice is regularly fatigued, consider making adjustments to make your normal vocal dose easily sustainable. Once you know your normal voice use, you must also recognize when an unusual vocal event occurs (e.g., extra amounts of group/presentational speaking, yelling at a ball game, using your voice through an illness) and take both proactive and responsive steps to recover. Remember, too, that an


annual visit to an ENT to get a scoping is a good idea, particularly if you suffer fatigue.

Modification Strategies for Vocal Health and Efficiency

While my work is now primarily in choral conducting, my three degrees in voice performance and performing experience in classical solo voice have greatly benefitted my conducting and pedagogy. As a chorister who would often experience fatigue from hours of singing, I had to learn to modify how I participated in rehearsal. Now, as a director, I have had to learn to monitor and modify how I lead rehearsal so that I do not suffer vocal injury. A vocally efficient rehearsal is also efficient in use of time, and the effects of constructing a vocally efficient rehearsal will be beneficial to the whole ensemble, as well as to the individual singers involved. With this in mind, let us explore ways to be vocally efficient as a director during rehearsal.

1) **Use a microphone.** If you are lecturing or using your speaking voice to teach, use a microphone whenever possible, even in a small classroom. Whenever I suggest this to a director, their first response is usually, “It’s so awkward!” Give it a week and try a microphone with a monitor that is mobile and can be placed farther from you. Depending on where you decide to place the monitor, you will hear less of your own voice, which may alleviate the feeling of self-consciousness, and the ensemble will hear more of you. Not only will you have to project your voice less, but you will also avoid repeating instructions, which means speaking less during rehearsal.

I was shocked to find how my teaching and rehearsal strategy changed when I was not desperate to be heard! My own demeanor was much calmer, and I was able to give better instructions, make clearer distinctions, and the energy in the entire room felt much more at ease. While I do not recommend speaking/instructing over an ensemble while running pieces, it is, at times, unavoidable. The microphone will help you to be heard and understood, eliminating the need to start and stop, which uses more voice for both director and singers.



2) **Avoid speaking over the singers**, especially if they are talking. Find a healthy balance between allowing social time and rehearsing. Allow the singers to enjoy their time together without cutting into your vocal rehearsal quota by *planning* for short social breaks. This is good classroom management or “crowd control.”

3) **Use the piano**. This is important not only for your own vocal conservation but for your singers as well. Unless your goal is to teach ear training, use a keyboard to teach the music. The keyboard can be utilized to teach in two ways: a) play along with a section, or b) play a section of music for the singers to learn by call-and-response.

4) **Break into sectionals and delegate**. Sectional work can be both time and vocally efficient. You may get the same amount of music learned in half the amount of time or less!

Delegate a leader in a section to run the sectional. It is a good idea for the director to lead at least one of the sections (rotating depending on who needs the most assistance). If you find yourself in need of vocal rest, simply visit each sectional rehearsal to check in on progress, give tips, etc. This not only helps the time and vocal efficiency of rehearsal, but it also creates ownership and camaraderie within sections and presents an opportunity for new leaders to emerge. If you do not have a singer who can lead a sectional from the piano, you may try:

- Switching places with the section leader and playing while the singer conducts
- Sending the staff accompanist with that section
- Combining sections so there is one person in each rehearsal who can plunk notes
- Making rehearsal recordings and having student use them together in sectionals

This last option is ideal for middle and high schoolers—it is easy to make voice memos and make them accessible to students. It will also allow you as the director to manage rehearsal well. You know how long the rehearsal recordings are (e.g., the recording is ten

minutes long; instruct them to go through it twice and “see you in twenty minutes!”), and you may also isolate difficult parts of the music for the students to drill with the recording (“we are going to sing through this key change three times...”)

One roadblock in rehearsing in sectionals could be a lack of facility space, as the different sections need separate spaces. However, administration may help you find an empty classroom or vacant office, stairwell, or even a locker room. If you are leading singers outside of the classroom, create time in your rehearsal at the beginning or end for one section or another. Alternatively, call them early or keep them late if the students’ schedules allows for flexibility.

5) **Effective time management in rehearsal** is particularly important for vocal efficiency, as well as helpful in planning to get through all the music that needs to be rehearsed. Make a specific rehearsal plan before each rehearsal. A general outline may look like:

Rehearsal 3:30-5:00pm
Warm-up: 10 min
Bach sectionals: 20 min
Bach tutti: 10 min
Liszt: 40 min

However, it can be helpful to be more specific with the rehearsal outline, particularly as a concert approaches:

Welcome/chat: 3:30-3:32
Warm-up: 3:32-3:40
Bach sectionals: 3:40-3:58
Two minutes for transfer time
Bach tutti: 4:00-4:08 (a three-min chorale run twice)
Transition to Liszt: 4:08-4:10
Movement 1: 4:10-4:16
Movement 2: 4:16-4:24
Movement 8: 4:25-4:40 (needs work)
Final movement: 4:40-4:44
Run movements 1, 2, 8, and final: 4:45-4:59
Rehearsal ends at 5:00 pm

Either option helps in efficiency, but the latter option also helps prepare the director for tricky sections that may require more attention. In the first option, I include an unscheduled ten minutes as a contingency for getting off schedule. In the second option, every minute is accounted for in rehearsal, including the transfer/music shuffling time. I have found that this detailed planning makes it more likely that rehearsal will end on time, saving both the singers' and director's voices and keeping everyone happy!

6) Isolate difficult parts of the score. This should happen naturally in rehearsal. However, rather than isolating challenging sections of music, consider small measure groupings or even intervals. The less singing that is done while learning music, the more vocally efficient. You may also find a way to integrate these challenge points into a warm-up, particularly if they are through a section's *passaggio* or if phrasing or intervals are difficult.

7) Learn music without singing it. Create a culture where singers are expected to have their notes learned before singing a piece in rehearsal. For example, if you are in a teaching situation, hand out music at least three days before you plan to rehearse it. Assign a rehearsal track as homework and find a way to test/grade the singers on their preparation, perhaps with the help of section leaders or in the use of octets and small groups.

I once had a director who said he memorized everything before he ever sang it in order to save his voice for the rehearsals. It can be difficult for amateur musicians to accomplish this, but it can be possible to memorize the text and rhythmic gestures before singing a single note. If your singers are not able to do this independently, make memorization of text and rhythm, without singing, a part of your music-learning process within rehearsal. Separating pitch, rhythm, and language will assist in this.

8) Separate pitch, rhythm, and language. Pitch, rhythm, and language all use distinct parts of the brain. It is almost impossible to sight-read or learn music while also attending to solid vocal technique, particularly if a song is in a foreign language or contains difficult rhythms. It is simply too much for the brain to focus

on at one time, and attempting to do all these different skills at once, without preparation, is likely to lead to vocal fatigue for singers. Instead, consider learning the music in this order:

- a) *Text.* Even if the text is in the singers' first language, read it out loud first. This helps the singer anticipate the phrase and manage the breath. If the text is in an unfamiliar language, have the singers write in the literal translation. You may also choose to hand out a poetic translation, but the literal translation is necessary for singers to be the best artists possible and helps immensely with memorization.
 - b) *Rhythm.* Speak the text in rhythm, particularly if the rhythm is challenging. Clap or tap the big beats and subdivisions while speaking the text in rhythm, and practice entrances for polyphonic rhythms.
 - c) *Pitch.* Teach the pitches using the keyboard (unless the purpose is to improve ear-training). Accompanying the singers on their parts can still provide some ear training while guiding singers. However, when you reach the extremity of a section's range, make sure to play the phrase for them before asking them to sing it. This is particularly important for the higher extremity of the range—the brain must know the pitch to sing it, and there is a risk of laryngeal tension if the singer does not know the pitch and is searching for it. This also eliminates creating inaccurate muscle and pitch memory for singers.
- 9) Incorporate voice therapy exercises into warm-ups.** Voice therapy has grown tremendously in the last few decades and is helpful for healthy speaking as well as singing. Find a voice therapist (preferably someone who works exclusively or extensively with singers) to work with and create a routine of voice care for yourself and your choir. This may include learning to speak on the breath and with healthy resonance, which also positively influences the singing voice. Following are some useful vocal warm-ups that incorporate voice therapy exercises:

a) Singing with straws. Encourage your choir to bring a straw to every rehearsal or keep a box of disposable straws in your rehearsal space. Singers can sing through straws with or without water. Introduce the bubble-blowing exercise, where one places the straw in 1-2 inches of water and blows bubbles using mindful breathing and a consistent flow of air on the exhale. Then add vocalizing, while blowing bubbles, on a simple and short melodic exercise. This is a terrific way to wake up sleepy vocal folds and train a healthy vocal onset!¹

b) Start vocal warm-ups in the middle of the range, using a closed vowel on a limited-range descending scale. For example:

- 5-4-3-2-1 on [lu]. Work from the middle of the range down, and then back to the middle and up. Eventually work in larger intervals and range, but not until the “easiest” part of the voice has been sufficiently warmed-up. Do not warm up the extremity of a range until the voice is comfortable in the middle range. A sprinter would be likely to pull a muscle if taking off from the starting blocks at 100 percent with no incremental warm-up, and it is the same for our vocal folds!

c) Rather than starting vocalises on a vowel, start them with a consonant, voiced or unvoiced, that precedes the singing with ample breath:

- [fju]
- [zo-i-o-i-o]
- [hUng] moving from the [U] to the [ng] quickly like a hum, but with the tongue raised to the palate

10) Assure that your choir members are enjoying themselves and that rehearsal is fulfilling!

A rehearsal that drags mentally will drag vocally—both for the director and the singers. Some rehearsals will be more enjoyable than others, but the choir should always be able to recognize a sense of purpose in what the ensemble is trying to achieve. Each stage in rehearsal must be recognized as a step toward the final goal, whether

it be in the warm-ups, note-learning, or fine-tuning of a piece.

Once the energy starts to go down, posture drops, singers become mentally disengaged, and the director may become desperate, all of which leads to bad vocalization. If you recognize the energy needs a boost, give a short break, tell a story that connects the choir to the work, or do a physical “re-boot” that gets the blood flowing such as stretching or marching in place, rubbing hands together or shaking out extremities, and breathing exercises.

Conclusion

The benefits of running a vocally efficient rehearsal go beyond saving the voice of the director—they also lead to saving the voices of the singers, running a time-efficient rehearsal, and keeping the mental energy of the choir and director engaged. A choir director who cares about their own voice will demonstrate to the singers how to care for their own voices, creating an environment of teamwork, as well as recognition of the individual voices that make an ensemble. With these tools in mind, a director should not be afraid, for the sake of the voice, to conduct, teach, or sing for years on end! ■

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¹ Jeremy N. Manternach, Lynn Maxfield, Matthew Schloneger, “On the Voice: Semi-Occluded Vocal Tract Exercises in the Choral Rehearsal: What’s the Deal with the Straw?” *Choral Journal* vol. 60, no. 4 (November 2019): 47-56.