



# *Incorporating Mindfulness into the Choral Rehearsal*

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As music teachers, we often have the advantage of being able to build relationships over several years with our students. We often see warning signs before others. We teachers are the individuals a student may confide in when he or she is struggling with anxiety or depression. We foster a sense of community and family in our ensembles that perhaps offers a safe space or a support network that our students might not have in other places in their lives.

Based on the programming I am seeing at other directors' concerts, as a choral community we are doing our best to show our students that there is hope. We choose themes for our concerts such as light, dreams, social justice, and equality. The frequency with which we program works such as Andrea Ramsey's *A Letter from a Girl to the World* or Jake Runestad's *Please Stay* says to me that we are addressing some important issues head on in our rehearsals.<sup>1</sup> This led me to wonder whether I could do more to explicitly give my students tools to help with challenging situations or feelings.

Studies show that meditation can be just as effective at relieving anxiety in teenagers as antidepressants.<sup>2</sup> I decided that I wanted to try to incorporate mindfulness into my re-

hearsals. Of course, I was faced with many questions: How do I implement this? Would my students hate it? Am I taking too much time out of each rehearsal when that next performance is around the corner? I decided the best way was to start exploring. What better way than to use what I know.

As a high school student, I participated in workshops on Creative Motion. A Dalcroze-related school of thought, it explores getting in tune with your body and deep breathing. After week-long camps in these activities, I always felt at peace. Only recently did I make the connection that much of what I had learned there were mindfulness practices. I decided to start with some of the tools I had learned as a high school student. I decided to begin incorporating mindfulness into my rehearsals using a centering exercise that has students focus on the breath and deep breathing. The following exercise takes about ten minutes:

Have students lie on the floor. Dim the lights or play quiet music in the background if you like. Have the students focus on their breath, taking long, deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth. Then ask students to place one hand on the stomach with their pinky on their belly but-

ton with their thumb pointing to their chin. Have them focus just on breathing into the space created by their hand, wrist to fingertips.

Ask the singers to fill up their hands like water in a water balloon, bottom to the top. Once they feel that sensation, ask them to remove their hands and concentrate on breathing into that same area without the hands. Repeat the exercise with the palm of the hand placed over the belly button and finally with the thumb over the belly button to feel a low breath.

Have them connect all three areas, bottom to top without hands. If time allows, you can also have students sit on the floor and pull their knees up to feel the sensation of breathing into their backs since they will feel the resistance of the floor.

Once this exercise is completed, have students slowly come to a standing position very carefully since they might be light headed. After they are standing, I have them repeat this exercise in a standing position at their own pace. This allows them to feel the deep breath in a standing position since they will need to be able to do this while singing. Initially, I find that it is easier to feel the breath while lying down, but you could start this exercise in a standing position. I like to debrief students after this exercise to see what they have noticed. Then we share with others. Students usually connect deep breathing with singing before I do.

The next day, I take a minute or two to ask students to review these steps at their own pace while in a standing position. Eventually we pair this down to a fifteen- to thirty-second centering exercise. Once they are comfortable with this activity, I expand the exercise to give them other activities on which they may focus.

Here is what this exercise looks like in my rehearsal currently:

As soon as the rehearsal begins, I ask students to close their eyes. This automatically focuses the ensemble. Once the room is quiet and the singers have taken a few breaths, I ask them to focus on something specific, saying things such as the following:

- Focus on your ribs expanding.
- Feel the breath expansion in your back.
- Breathe into your shoulders and release any tension you

feel.

- Yawn and lift your soft palate.
- Yawn and feel expansion in your throat.
- Think about what kind of rehearsal you would like to have today (or this week).
- Set a goal for yourself. What would you like to accomplish today (or this week)?

I ask one or two questions like those above each day based on what I think that particular ensemble might need. The students know it is time to open their eyes when I begin playing the first warm up. Since they have already made a connection to the breath, I find that they are more focused on a good breath from the start.

I surveyed my students to see their responses to this exercise. This survey occurred after only one week of starting class with the shortened exercise.

- 80% of the singers said that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they enjoyed this exercise. Only 3% did not.
- 83% said that this exercise helped them be more focused during rehearsal. 5% said that it did not.
- Several students said it helped them think about breathing to sing better.
- Several students said it helped them feel more connected with the entire group.
- “At first I thought it was ridiculous, but later I didn’t have those thoughts about it anymore.”
- “I love this exercise and feel that I can use it in ways other than in choir to help with anxiety and to really think hard about my actions.”
- “It’s a nice way to get everyone on the same page before we start rehearsal. I feel it helps everyone be better prepared to be productive.”

- 60% of students said this was a technique they could see themselves using outside of choir.

I have also found many benefits from a conductor's perspective. Instead of having to explicitly ask my students to focus at the beginning of rehearsal, I just ask them to close their eyes. It puts me in a better mind-set encouraging a positive behavior rather than trying to stop a negative one. Since the students are present in the moment, they are able to let go of what might have happened earlier that day more easily. Focus during the entire rehearsal is much improved.

During the first week when passing out music for a recent concert, the students were able to get through what I had initially planned for the first two weeks. I've also used these techniques to get students prepared for performances. When they arrive for a concert, I can now say in a speaking voice, "close your eyes," and the room falls silent and focused.

I have more exploration to do when it comes to incorporating mindfulness into my rehearsals, but it's been an encouraging start. I know some directors are using yoga at the beginning of rehearsals, so maybe that is my next step. I have always said that if I can have a positive impact on even one student's life in a year, then it was a successful year for me. If I can give my singers one more way to cope, another way to be present in the moment, or another tool to help them when they are struggling, maybe I will have done my part to help a student I didn't realize was hurting. ■

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Major Depression: The Impact of Overall Health. (May 10, 2018). Retrieved from <http://www.bcbs.com/the-health-of-america>

<sup>2</sup> Jamison Monroe, *The Adolescent Brain on Meditation*. (August 18, 2015). Retrieved from [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com)