

The Missing Link: An Intermediate Step for Introducing New Music to Your Choir

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Since the time of early American singing masters who traveled from town to town selling their music books and teaching the public how to read music using a sol-fa system, the process of introducing and learning a choral work has seemed to remain relatively unchanged. Currently, two main approaches dominate the secondary American educational system. The first being rote teaching, in which the teacher plays or sings the notes, with the students echoing until the content is learned. The second being a sight-reading method incorporating alternative syllables that represent a correlating pitch, such as solfege or numbers.

It is in this second method that many educators approach the music learning process in a ritualistic fashion where students first count the rhythms, chant the solfège syllables in rhythm, and finally sing the syllables in rhythm. While this method is effective and utilized by many educators, there remains a missing step in this sequence of music teaching.

The challenge many students face when sight-reading choral music is the amount of information they must interpret. A page is filled with symbols that must be translated into text, pitch, rhythm, articulation, and dynamics. While

more advanced students have no difficulty interpreting these symbols while reading music at a fast pace, other students struggle to keep up. To accommodate these challenges, it is advisable to add an intermediate step in which the rhythmic values are removed, allowing singers to focus solely on pitch (see Figure 1). In other words, this additional instructional step allows the singer to become familiar with the melodic and harmonic content separately from the rhythm and text. In addition, it allows each student time to interpret musical notation, as opposed to relying on the leaders in each section.

The Approach

Using a short section of concert music (Figure 2), create a chord chart by transcribing the original pitches into whole notes (Figure 1). Repeated notes are not included unless the chord changes (see Figures 1 and 2, m. 20). In addition, sustained notes are notated again if a different voice changes pitch, thus changing the chord (see Figures 1 and 2, m. 18). In essence, the teacher notates every chord change using whole notes. It is also suggested that the teacher place

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brackets at the top of the system to designate the corresponding measure numbers found in the original music.

After creation of the chord chart, instruct students to sing the handout at a moderate tempo, using your preferred sight-reading method, with every pitch receiving four beats (as notated in Figure 1). Once students are comfortable with the pitches at this tempo, ask them to sing the same exercise but with each whole note receiving only two beats. To further challenge your students at this stage, perform the exercise *a cappella*, if not already incorporated from the start. Finally, at a slower tempo, instruct students to perform the exercise with only one beat per measure.

While introducing the pitches, a similar process should occur with corresponding rhythms. If the rhythmic values are challenging, provide students with progressive rhythmic exercises that culminate in the notated rhythms found in the song (Figures 3 and 4). For ease, these exercises can easily be notated on a dry erase board. Figure 3 demonstrates this rhythmically progressive exercise. The first line is broken down into the most basic rhythmic subdivisions, allowing students to connect with the underlying rhythmic pulse. Line two is a transitional line incorporating ties that equal the actual rhythm in the score. It is also helpful to tell students to count line two without the ties first, further reinforcing the underlying rhythm. Finally, line three replicates the actual rhythm from the original score.

Figure 1. Micah Bland, arr., *Spanish Ladies*, mm. 18–23.
Chord Chart

Unpublished (2017). Used by permission.

Figure 2. Micah Bland, arr., *Spanish Ladies*, mm. 18–23.
Original Music

Unpublished (2017). Used by permission.

Figure 3. Stephen Foster, *Dolcy Jones*.
Rhythm Exercise

Stephen Collins Foster and H. Wiley Hitchcock, ed., *Minstrel-Show Songs*.
New York: Da Capo Press, 1980. Music from the public domain.

Figure 4. Stephen Foster, *Dolcy Jones*.
Original Music

Stephen Collins Foster and H. Wiley Hitchcock, ed., *Minstrel-Show Songs*.
New York: Da Capo Press, 1980. Music from the public domain.

Suggestions for Implementation in the Classroom

This process takes about one week in a standard fifty-minute class that meets every day. Typically, only sections of the original concert music are excerpted and should be more rhythmically or harmonically challenging or reprised later. For instance, example two is rhythmically simplistic and would most likely not require this approach in a beginning high school ensemble.

While these instructional steps are effective at the middle school and beginning high school level, they are not intended for a more advanced high school ensemble, since these students are usually more capable of reading music. In addition, it should also be mentioned that these methods are intended to be used with concert music, not contest sight-reading exercises.

When making copies of the handout for the class, print the chord chart on different colored paper. When asking students to take out the music, indicate the color used as opposed to the title of the song. This prevents confusion and helps to specify if students are to take out the handout or the music itself.

For teachers with poor piano skills or those who prefer to challenge their students by not using the piano, the chord chart allows singers the opportunity to successfully sight-read music without the aid of a piano. Many educators today strongly encourage the removal of the piano at times in the learning process in order to lessen reliance on it and promote singer accountability.

Possibly the most valuable aspect of the chord chart is the opportunity for the teacher to correct vocal issues such as intonation and tone quality early in the learning process. As is often found, inexperienced singers use poor vocal technique when learning new music; however, by removing extraneous music notation, students and their teacher are able to focus on healthy vocal production. In addition, the slower harmonic tempo allows the ensemble time to listen and tune each chord. Upon successful completion of the chord chart and rhythmic exercises, the ensemble is ready to transfer its knowledge, combine rhythm and pitch, thus continuing the traditional music learning process. Depending on the rhythmic difficulty of the work, it is suggested that students chant the solfège in rhythm prior to singing.

This additional instructional step, although time consuming for the teacher, is incredibly valuable for the ensemble. Through the use of the chord chart, students receive sequen-

tial instruction in the music learning process. As a result, students feel more successful, since they focus on pitch and rhythm separately. In addition, the ensemble gains a greater understanding of the harmonic content, allowing the singers time to listen to other sections. Also, the director has an opportunity to correct vocal technique. **CT**