



Rhythmic Integrity in the Choral Rehearsal: A Bag of Tricks and More

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Robert Shaw, the legendary conductor, was tenacious in his pursuit of precise rhythm in every ensemble he conducted. From attacks and releases to the placement of diphthongs and consonants, Shaw instilled a sense of rhythmic integrity with all of the musicians under his direction. I believe one of the keys to his great success was his belief that choirs shouldn't merely feel the rhythm; they needed to think carefully about what defined the various rhythmic components of any work. The use of count-singing became an important tool for developing group musicianship in any Robert Shaw chorus.

Count-singing is the practice of rehearsing a choral work on counts rather than singing the text. Singers use a number on every beat containing a pitch, thus engaging the singer for the entire length of long notes. When subdividing rhythms for eighth-note patterns in duple time, singers should sing 1 & 2 &, etc. Shaw replaced the number "three" with the syllable "tee" to make the tongue move faster and not slow the rhythm on that beat. For greater rhythmic definition, singers should count sixteenth notes as 1 ee & ah, 2 ee & ah, 3 ee & ah, etc. To perform a cut-off more accurately, singers should place the appropriate consonant

on the rest following the last pitch, for example, 1 & 2 & 3 & "t," if the rest is on 4 and the concluding consonant is "t." Variations on this method should also be utilized for all compound meters.

Understanding and having a method for solving counting problems is vital to the musical health of an ensemble.

Rushing or Dragging Tempi

- Accent "ee"
- Metronome
- Get physical
- Telegraph
- Recording
- Slow down
- Fewer beats
- Count 8

Accent "ee." Start with count-singing. By accenting the second sixteenth note in a beat group, stress is taken away

from the down beat in any beat group. Singers are forced to think about the forward motion of the music.

Metronome. If singers are having difficulty internalizing a steady beat, impose an external beat. An amplified metronome can make them aware of when the tempo starts to pull ahead or fall behind.

Get physical. An ensemble often rushes a tempo because singers have not internalized the steady beat. Marching in place can be a way to use large body movement to internalize beats. A variation is to stand in a circle and face the center. Instead of marching in place (left-right left-right), step sideways (left foot to the left, then right foot moves to touch left foot, repeat same motion) so that the circle rotates in a clockwise motion to the beat.

Telegraph. Have singers place their right hand on the shoulder of the person beside them. Gently use the forefinger of the right hand to tap the beat on the shoulder of that person. This can also be done in a circle with consistent effect so that singers get both kinesthetic and visual reinforcement as they sing. When the ensemble has had success telegraphing the beat to other members, then internalize the beat by tapping their fingers on their own chests.

Recording. Record your rehearsal. Often, singers are not aware they are having tempo problems until they hear a recording. Don't wait for the concert! Record rehearsals and let the singers listen. Then, they are more likely to work on techniques that lead to good rhythmic singing.

Slow down. When a group rushes the tempo, the singers may need to focus more on the subdivision of beats. Changing the tempo, slowing it down, and forcing singers to internalize sixteenth notes instead of eighth notes will allow them to concentrate on placement of the downbeats.

Fewer Beats. When tempos are dragging, try conducting the music in two instead of four beats to a bar. With triple meter, try conducting in one. The visual change for the singers will lead to a different feeling about the phrase and help pull the tempo forward. This is preferable to your conducting the same pattern even larger. A bigger-looking four pattern takes longer to execute than a simple two pattern and can actually contribute to the tempo problem.

Count 8. Give a down beat to the ensemble and stop conducting. Tell singers to keep the beat in their heads and when they reach the number eight, shout it out. See how much variation there is in the placement of the end of the phrase. As the group gets better at internalizing eight counts, try sixteen counts.

“Slushy” Articulation

- Isolate
- Speak-sing
- Alternate text and numbers
- Softer
- Begin somewhere else in the score
- Get visual
- Where's the consonant?
- Diphthongs

Isolate. Eliminate some of the confounding variables present when singing. Singers have a plate full of components with which to deal—pitch, rhythm, text, tone color, etc. By isolating a single element, the singers are more likely to achieve success. Gradually add the other elements into the mix.

Speak-sing Speak the rhythm on a neutral syllable with a percussive attack. “Tah” and “dah” work better than “la” because of a faster tongue. Also, sing the rhythm patterns on one pitch. For variety, have the ensemble sing on a chord that defines the tonality of the music, e.g., the I chord. Then sing the written notes on a neutral syllable. Try the same sequence using the text. Speak the text in rhythm, sing the text on a single note, and finally try the text with the written pitches.

Alternate text and numbers. To reinforce rhythm, have one section of the ensemble sing on the text and the other sections countsing (see above). There are many combinations, most of which can promote clear, accurate articulation.

Editor's Note: This article continues with more on articulation and a section on solutions for common counting problems. Read the full article in the Spring 2009 issue of *ChorTeach* at acda.org/chorteach.