

Choral Music in the Junior High/Middle School

Janeal Krehbiel, editor <janealk@sunflower.com>

"Do it Again!"

Repetition in the Middle School Choral Rehearsal

by

Joshua Bronfman

The traditional methods of continuous drill on a particular action (i.e., practicing one skill repeatedly until it is correct) are probably not the most effective way to learn. Rather, the evidence suggests that practicing a number of tasks in some nearly randomized order will be the most successful means of achieving the goal of stable learning and retention.¹

How do you ask a chorus to repeat? If you are like me, you use a small handful of different techniques to help your students isolate difficult parts of the music and also en-

able them to maintain interest. For the most part, however, the primary method for repeating a difficult section is to simply say, "do it again!" In this column, I propose that the do it again approach to repetition may not be the most effective one, especially (though not exclusively) for the middle school chorus.

Singing and learning music is both a cognitive and a physical act. It follows then that we might gain some insight into the choral rehearsal process by examining how humans learn physical skills. Research into motor learning from the field of Sports Medicine provides some possible direction in this area. This research suggests that when learning both unvarying, or closed skills (e.g., throwing a dart, singing measures 3–5 of Brahms' *Waldesnacht*) and varying, open skills (e.g. hitting a golf ball on an unfamiliar course, sight-reading a new piece), diversifying the skill to be learned facilitates better retention of the task, and enables better transfer of the skill to other similar activities and situations more so than simply repeating the task multiple times. In other words, don't just repeat a section of music over and over

- your students will initially learn what you want them to, but they will retain less of the task over time, and they will be less able to transfer the skill to other, similar situations. It is better to repeat something in multiple ways, varying the task randomly with each repeat.²

As a former middle school choir director, I can think back to my own experience and recall the times that I "beat up" a section (more often the guys, who were dealing with the extremes of the voice change) on a particular interval or series of pitches. All too often, I would just make them do it again and again. I might say, "OK, do it again, but on 'doo' this time," and we would rehearse that way a few times. But as the research cited above suggests, this might be a less effective way to learn a task, retain it, and transfer it to novel situations. Interestingly, this research indicates that in certain situations children are more successful at completing a specific task when they practice a set of related tasks rather than practicing the actual task at all!³ Think about that one for a minute.

Not only are we concerned with long term learning and transfer, but

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we as middle school music teachers are especially aware of the need to maintain interest, especially for the boys who are in the full throws of the voice change. They often need quite a bit of remediation, which can become tiring and frustrating for them. By varying the number of different ways in which you repeat, you continually place new challenges before them, which they can be successful at, which in turn should help them to stay focused.

I decided to try to come up with a list of as many different ways of repeating something as I could. I found just the act of sitting down and thinking about the

strategies very enlightening and thought provoking. I rediscovered a few gems in my rehearsal repertoire that I have used in the past - or have seen used but never tried - that I became eager to use in my rehearsals. I make no claim that this is a complete list; it is just a set of techniques that I came up with by myself and in conversations with other directors. If you think of other techniques, I encourage you to visit the choraltalk section of <choralnet.org> and contribute your ideas to the topic labeled "Repetition." I will be regularly updating the discussion with your novel ideas.

- Count singing – the gold standard. With practice this can work for middle school chorus.
- Solfegge, numbers, etc.
- Start slow and speed up each repetition, with no break in between. Make it a game.
- Sing "Super Slo-mo."
- Insert a common song fragment, e.g. "Twinkle, twinkle," or "N-B-C," etc., into the longer phrase. When notes in question come up, switch to common song. For example, "Kyrie E-le-N-B-C-ee-zon." This is especially useful for difficult intervals that repeat in multiple parts.⁴
- Same deal with solfegge syllables, "Kyrie E-le-So-Mi-Do-ee-zon."
- On neutral syllable: hum, doh, lah, dü.
- Sing on text, pulsating the subdivision of the beat.
- Speak the text in time.
- Speak or sing the text in time and when a difficult rhythm comes up, insert a neutral word that you associate with the rhythm in question. "Tri-po-let" or "ti-ti" are good examples, but you can also use any word (I have used "Joshua" for example).
- Sing on neutral pitches, with text, in rhythm. Use the "Shaw-Chord" - Bass, E; Tenor, G sharp; Alto, D; Soprano, F sharp.
- Have the whole chorus or a portion join the group for the section you are working on.

- Sing only portions in question, and stay silent on any other part. As in a fugue – sing only the exposition. In a piece with many accents, sing only the accents.
- Sing in time, but stop and hold difficult pitches, then continue in time.
- Out of time, chord by chord, on director cue.
- Layer parts, in time, without interruption, saying “Add Altos,” “Add Tenors,” etc. Alternate accompanied and unaccompanied.
- Vary a musical parameter: Tempo, dynamics, articulation (staccato-legato), tone color (bright-dark, ugly-pretty, etc.), expression, etc.
- Sing it the wrong way. For example, if you are working on a tritone leap, have them sing a fourth and a fifth, then the tritone.
- Sing with eyes closed.
- Incorporate movement or a gesture: Tap shoulder of person next to you, throw a baseball on the high note, sway, clap a steady beat, walk around the room, etc.
- Sing only the vowels, or sing only one vowel.
- Sing the syllable “Doot” (Final consonant is imploded, not exploded), staccato, for each pitch, regardless of length.
- Sing all pitches staccato, regardless of length, but on text.
- Take away piano.
- Down or up the octave, if very high or low.
- Follow the notes on the page with your finger. Follow the notes of another part while you sing your own.
- Forward and backward – Ask singers to sing the pitches (with or without text) out of time forward and then backward. For example: Forward, “Three Blind Mice” and backward, “Mice Blind Three.” Pitches correspond to text.

NOTES

¹ R.A. Schmidt and T.D. Lee. *Motor Control and Learning: A Behavioral Emphasis*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2004, p. 338.

² Richard A. Magill. *Motor Learning and Control: Concepts and Applications*, 7th ed. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2004. R.A. Schmidt and T.D. Lee. *Motor Control and Learning: A Behavioral Emphasis*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2004.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For sample songs for intervals, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ear_training> and <<http://choralnet.org/resources/viewResource.phtml?id=777&category=2>>

