

Physical Metaphor in the Choral Rehearsal: A Gesture-Based Approach to Developing Vocal Skill and Musical Understanding

by Ramona M. Wis

"Pull the phrase—stretch it like taffy."

"Chew those words like a good steak."

"The kind of freedom we want here is like water that ebbs and flows."

Phrases like the above are used by some choral directors as they attempt to help singers develop their vocal skill and musical understanding. Metaphor (defined here as any colorful, descriptive, or imagery-laden language) is what directors use when attempting to clarify an abstract technical concept, diaphragmatic breathing, for example, or an equally abstract musical concept, line. In either case, metaphor can provide a concrete reference for an abstract concept that is difficult to comprehend fully.¹

Verbal metaphor, however, has some limitations as a teaching tool. In some cases, singers can misunderstand the metaphor of choice or be mistakenly led away from the intended goal. For example, the director might ask singers to imagine a light weight hanging from the jaw to acquire a long *ah* vowel. For the singer who already demonstrates the desired position, the verbal metaphor alone can encourage over-extending the jaw and create tension, the opposite result from what was originally intended.

Singers can easily misinterpret words, no matter how colorful or creative. "Build the phrase" to one singer can mean make a big *crescendo*, while to another it means sing a legato line. References thought to be universally understood can trigger

any number of mental images and results. Moreover, words do not automatically initiate action, even in the best ensembles. Without something concrete to focus on, singers often tune out the director, lose attention, or participate minimally in the task at hand.

How are we to handle the abstract concepts that fill our rehearsals? How can we convey our ideas in a clear, meaningful way? Are we to give up metaphor altogether, one of our best teaching tools?

We need not give up on metaphor, but there are benefits to be had by expanding our notion to include physical metaphor—any gesture or movement that is able to get at the essence of the musical idea and involve singers in a concrete, bodily way. Like verbal metaphor, physical metaphor capitalizes on the natural predisposition of the human mind to connect experiences—concrete with abstract, known with unknown—but does so in a more natural, meaningful, and enjoyable way. In short, physical metaphor takes advantage of the way the human mind works and allows singers and directors to reap the benefits.

The Metaphorical Mind and Physical Metaphor

That the mind operates metaphorically is not a new idea, but it is one actively being investigated today. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, the mind processes new information (or learns) by relating the new information to what it already knows: we "conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated."² This is done by metaphorically mapping characteristics or properties of the known onto the unknown. In this way, a context is provided for the new information to be understood and become meaningful.

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Lakoff and Johnson go on to say that all concepts, no matter how abstract, are rooted in physical experience. The fact that we all operate in a physical body within a physical world is critical in understanding how the human mind works. "... [N]o metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independent of its experiential basis."³ All one has to do is examine the language commonly used in a choral rehearsal—create a *line*, *pull* the phrase, *lift* the pitch, *round out* the sound, sing *up* the scale—to find it is based on our physical orientation within the world.⁴ In fact, our everyday language is loaded with physical references: I'm feeling *down* today; prices are *rising*; he *filled* my head with numbers; my heart *sank*, let's *bridge* the gap, etc.⁵

According to Johnson, metaphor "makes use of patterns that obtain in our physical experience to organize our more abstract understanding."⁶ When we link the physical and abstract domains, we typically describe this connection verbally,

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using metaphorical language. But what is important to note is that verbal metaphor is essentially the after-the-fact reporting of that which has been experienced physically. The mind, at a pre-reflective level, searches for ways to connect the new with the old, the unknown with the known, and finds similarities rooted in physical experience. Considering the negative or erroneous associations that can occur with

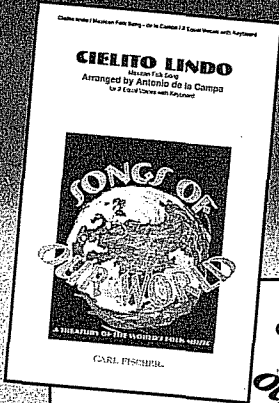
language, how much more effective might it be to realize these connections in a more primal way, using physical gesture instead of descriptive language alone?

Because choral directors teach not only in an abstract medium (music), but also work with an abstract instrument (the voice), they depend on metaphorical language to help develop vocal skills and musical understanding. Rather than limiting ourselves to verbal metaphor, essentially a second-order tool, we can expand our rehearsal techniques to take advantage of the workings of the metaphorical mind and its physical grounding by utilizing physical metaphor.

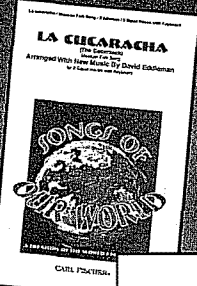
Exploring Physical Metaphor

According to Lakoff and Johnson, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."⁷ Applied to the choral rehearsal, this means finding a gesture that seems to embody the essence of the musical idea and then applying it to the music. For example, if singers are struggling


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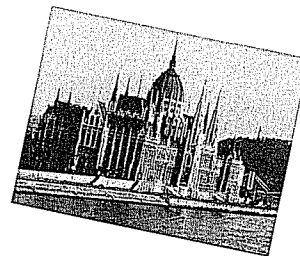
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with poor intonation, the director might invite them to pull up the pitch with their hand. When one considers the chain of physiological changes that the lifting activity encourages—a more erect posture, lifted eyebrows, supported breath—it becomes apparent that physical metaphor has the power to create a decidedly different result than its verbal cousin. The activity of lifting, rather than just the words "raise the pitch" or "imagine the pitch floating up," can create a stronger, more meaningful connection between body and mind and can lead to an immediate improvement in sound.

When trying to get singers to project their voices, the director can have them "throw a ball into the outfield" to create the necessary energy. Again, the bodily involvement encouraged by the metaphorical activity can produce a dramatically different result than the verbal directive "send the voice into the balcony." Rather than craning their necks and shouting toward the balcony, singers can metaphorically map the energy and freedom associated with a throw onto their production of sound, achieving the

desired result.⁸

Gestures are not only effective in dealing with the challenges of vocal technique; they can be very effective in helping singers feel and understand the music at a deeper, more primal level. Singers can experience the structural elements or the expressive qualities of the music in their bodies: they can see what their hands are doing as they paint the phrase, they can feel the tension and release inherent in the line as they enact these kinds of gestures, and they can connect their kinesthetic awareness with the sound and its subtle or dramatic changes.⁹

Imagine, for example, attempting to help singers understand the relationship of their vocal line to others', perhaps in a fugal piece. The director can ask singers to stand or raise their hands when they have the melody and sit or lower their hands when they have supporting material. What results is a mural of the composer's construction, a visual representation of the parts as they move from foreground to background.

Consider the challenge of creating a feeling of energy and direction in a line.

Instead of intellectualizing this concept, the singers might spin an imaginary lasso that gets wider and wider until it finally releases at the point of arrival in the phrase. The spinning activity can help create a sound that is freer and more natural, reflecting the momentum inherent in the music. The singers' understanding of movement in music is greater when they move; their understanding of rhythm, phrasing, momentum, direction, and many other musical concepts becomes real when they map their own experiences with actual, physical movement onto the music.

Some may argue that the subconscious mind cannot distinguish between the real and the imagined, and therefore, vivid imagery alone should be able to create the desired musical effect. Why even bother with physical metaphor? First, based on the work of Lakoff and Johnson, it is clear that whatever is recalled in the imagination will be dependent upon physical experience — there is no purely conceptual experience.¹⁰ Second, metaphor works because it links two things together. Without physically linking the lasso

A Suggested Repertoire of Gestures

Gesture	Description	Application
Directional pointing (intonation)	Point upwards while singing a descending line.	To assist intonation; to prevent a dead tone.
Spiral gesture	Rotate index fingers around each other in front of the body or in the area above or on the sides of the head. Make continuous circles with both hands.	To keep the sound moving; to keep air, line, moving forward; to create energy in the sound.
Hands on face	Use hands to help shape jaw and mouth opening; e.g., back of hands, fingers pointing down on cheeks; or index fingers pushing cheeks in slightly.	To create relaxed, open vowels; to form vowels into desired shape; to create space; to change color of vowel (from dark, pulling down on cheeks, to bright, with a back-of-hands, fingers downward gesture).
Dart throw (or throw the note)	Send an imaginary dart to a focal point ahead (may use two hands in successive and repeated throws).	To achieve clarity on entrances; to be on time with an entrance to create a good unison sound as a section; to focus tone.
Pick note out of the air	Pick an imaginary note out of the air—lightly, but cleanly.	To sing a precise entrance without glottal attack or accent.
Football pass (or golf swing)	Throw an imaginary football, paying attention to: the breath preceding the tone; a complete extension of the arm; and the follow-through as pass is released.	To project the sound; to sing with supported tone; to prepare with a full body breath before singing.
Basic throwing gestures	Use a one- or two-arm throwing gesture.	To project the sound; to sing with energy; to get the body under the sound.
Frisbee toss	Throw an imaginary frisbee; watch it fly upwards and soar far before gracefully landing.	To create a line with an arch to it; to sing with energy and support; to project the sound.
Arm cross and press	With elbows bent, make an X with the wrists in front of the chest; press down, out, and up in one fluid motion that extends the length of the phrase. Must feel resistance with this gesture, as though moving through water.	To sing with support throughout the phrase; to keep energy in the sound throughout the phrase.
Recline position	Lie on back and feel the action of the abdominal muscles upon exhalation/inhalation.	To engage breathing muscles fully; to help singers become aware of location of breathing apparatus.
Karate chops	Create a rapid chopping motion with two hands, placed vertically in front of the body; may choose to start gesture on a higher plane and move it downward during the phrase.	To sing in an articulated or staccato, separated style.
Stretching gesture	Use a fluid, conducting-type stretching gesture away from the body.	To emphasize the correct word or syllable in a non-accented manner.
Violin playing	Play an imaginary violin with a long, down-bow.	To stress a particular word or syllable with a weighted, non-accented feel.
Rubber band stretch	Stretch an imaginary rubber band in a vertical position.	To create a long vowel; to create space.
Growth gesture	Start by creating a small space with the hands, gradually making it a larger space; keep hands below chest height to ensure proper breathing.	To create a "large" sound; to create a full, supported tone; to create space in the tone.
Foot stomp	Stomp foot on the particular beat desired.	To emphasize an entrance; to create an accent; to account for a rest.

Gesture	Description	Application
Clapping/tapping	Clap or tap lightly to the smaller subdivisions within the phrase.	To keep intensity or energy going by feeling subdivisions within a phrase that has a slow tempo or long note values.
Candle blow	Blow out an imaginary candle.	To pronounce aspirated consonants strongly.
Standing on cue	Stand when your section sings its opening phrase or when your section sings the motive in this fugal passage, etc.	To call attention to section entrances by the singers' own section and others.
Brush stroke (or palm raising/lowering)	Paint a long, fluid brush stroke horizontally or vertically in front of the body.	To create a legato line.
Body with the phrase	Move the whole body (e.g. turn slowly in a circle) with the phrase.	To create a consistent <i>crescendo</i> or <i>decrescendo</i> ; to sing a long, legato line.
Directional pointing (tone placement)	Point forward from the forehead; point along the side of the face, arching up and forward.	To give focus or point to the sound.
Focus in the mask	Place hands, palms down, near the ears, fingers resting on the area just below the cheekbone; focus on a spot in front of the room. Imagine singing from above the fingers.	To sing from the mask; to focus sound forward.
Flat hands to point	Start with hands, palms down, chest high and a body width apart. Gradually point forward as you sustain the tone.	To move from a spread to a focused tone; to move from a darker to a brighter tone.
Ladder climbing	Climb an imaginary ladder, using hands on rungs as you climb.	To move cleanly and firmly from note to note or chord to chord.
Toe lift	Raise up on your toes as you sing.	To assist in intonation, especially ascending leaps.
Hold/lift pitch	Use one or two hands and hold or slightly lift the pitch in the palm of the hand.	To support the final pitch in a phrase; to lighten up a pitch; to reinforce sustaining a pitch.
Pulling up/picking up	Pull up the pitch as though picking up a small object.	To assist intonation; to lift pitch.
Clap and release	Experiment with different ways of making a clap; a flat clap; a sliding clap (hitting lightly and moving away from the base hand); clapping close to the body vs. farther away from the body.	To become aware of the quality of the release of sound; to apply these qualities (resonant vs. clipped) to vocal releases.
Finger releases	Tap index finger of one hand into the palm of the other at the moment of release; quickly touch thumb and index finger of one hand together at the moment of release.	To create a precise release, especially of consonants.
Small circles	Draw small circles with the index finger in front of mouth; make two circles using the thumb/index fingers of both hands and extend these circles from the face forward (or start with hands extended and bring circles toward you).	To create a round, hollow "oo" vowel.
Shaking arms	Shake arms, releasing tension.	To release tension, especially that which causes sharpening problems.
Vibrato/no vibrato	Vibrate hand or create a smooth brush stroke.	To create vibrato in tone; to smooth out or eliminate the vibrato in tone.

movement to the singing, the momentum may remain a characteristic of the lasso, not of the singing. Finally, it should be clear that the physical activity of singing, dependent upon the body as its instrument, would benefit from the constant physical engagement of the singer in the rehearsal process.

In exploring gestures to be used, the director should remember that almost any physical gesture or activity can be called upon as long as it (a) is easily demonstrated/performed and (b) shares a fundamental characteristic or quality with the concept being taught. A good starting place in developing a gesture repertoire is the area of sports activities, with its array of throwing, swinging, and momentum-creating moves. Singers can easily follow and perform these activities and will be able to quickly connect their freedom and movement with the freedom and movement found in the music. Other sources for physical metaphor are shapes (circles, figure-eights, lines), machines or vehicles (clocks, locomotives), or simply free-form

When using physical metaphor, singers are forced to be actively engaged in the rehearsal and take ownership of their growth.

exploration of direction and physical planes.

A suggested repertoire of gestures that can be used in the rehearsal process is shown on the chart on Pages 28 and 29. This list is by no means intended to be exhaustive or definitive. Rather, it is a starting point for the director to begin experimenting and thinking about teaching in a different way.

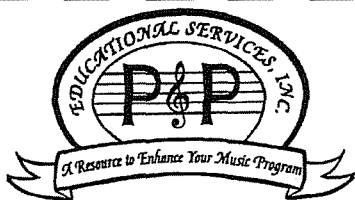
Using Physical Metaphor in the Rehearsal

How might the director use physical metaphor in the rehearsal on a regular basis? First, it is recommended that gesture activities be used in every warm-up period to get singers accustomed to this way of learning and to help build their physical metaphor vocabulary. For example, when working to unify vowel shapes, singers can create the shapes with their hands, positioned in front of their mouths. Refining the shape in the hands refines the shape of the vowel in the mouths. Intonation and tuning exercises may involve pointing upwards or picking up the note with one's hand for flattening or relaxing the note with a palms-down, freely descending gesture for sharpening. Work on choral blend may involve a smooth, painting gesture to reduce or match vibrato. To liven up a dead tone, use loosely vibrating hands to invite life into the sound. Breathing exercises are easily accompanied by any number of intake and exhalation gestures to control the air as it is steadily used over the phrase.

During the rehearsal of repertoire, the director should feel free to confront any vocal or musical challenge with physical metaphor. Simply stop at the point of the problem, demonstrate a gesture, and invite the singers to join in. Ask singers to do this first, without singing, focusing on the gesture alone. Then add singing to the gesture and work on these together until the concept or skill is solidified.

Pointing out the differences between two things, as well as the similarities, is a fundamental characteristic of metaphor. This explains why it is often helpful to use gesture to make singers aware of what is not wanted in vocal production, ensemble sound, or phrasing. It is another way of taking singers from what they know (poor vocal technique, for example) to what they have yet to learn (healthy vocal technique).

For example, singing an ascending line, especially if it reaches into one's upper range, is often a difficult and intimidating task. Singers can become increasingly strident in sound, suffer intonation problems, run out of breath, and give up. The director might approach this challenge by first asking singers to mime climbing a ladder very laboriously. Then invite the



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ensemble to sing while performing this difficult task, being aware of the effort involved and its effect on the sound. Ask singers if the result is the desired sound. Next, invite the singers to raise their arms in a relaxed fashion and slowly press down, palms toward the floor, and to pair this very different gesture with the vocal line. Continue working the physical gesture so it creates a sense of grounding and strength as the line progresses, providing the singers with the energy and freedom they need to sing the line successfully.

Depending on age, experience, comfort zone, and any number of other factors, singers will respond in various ways to this new, physical approach to rehearsal. Most will quickly join in after the initial shock wears off; others will need to come along at their own rate. It is best to approach these activities daily with a positive, encouraging attitude—always inviting, never berating—until they become as commonplace as anything else that is typically done. Even the most reluctant singer will eventually join in,

though it may take weeks or months.

Benefits of Physical Metaphor

Aside from successfully learning the concept, several important benefits are realized when using physical metaphor. First, by focusing on the gesture, singers stop thinking so hard about the goal—a process that often inhibits success and creates a great deal of anxiety. They simply let Mother Nature take over. Tasks that seem insurmountable (singing a relatively high pitch with freedom, for example) now become no problem because the mental energy is redirected to something achievable for the singer: creating an arched, sweeping motion with the hand. If directors want to improve the sound, they can do so by working to improve the gesture—an easier, more concrete task.

Secondly, when using physical metaphor, singers are forced to be actively engaged in the rehearsal and take ownership of their growth. No longer can they sit

and minimally participate, moving their mouths but contributing little. The ensemble's analytical skills are required as they are called to pay attention to detail and nuance and the feel of their voices as they shape and experiment with the choral sound. These behaviors create a positive rehearsal atmosphere where growth (let's explore and continue to shape this) rather than deficiency (fix this problem) is emphasized.

A third benefit comes in the form of assessment. The director who uses physical metaphor has a quick method of evaluating individual participation within the choir during the rehearsal. It is virtually impossible to sing with energy and vitality while gesturing sluggishly, and vice versa. While this assessment is not of the gradable kind, it can point out which individuals are actively participating and can tell you a good deal about their particular vocal strengths and limitations (who sings with tension in the low register, who is not as expressive, etc.), which you can address at a later time.

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Fourth, physical metaphor has many implications for directors and their conducting gesture. As professionals trained to think with their hands, directors can easily find ways to incorporate scaled-down versions of rehearsal gestures into their own conducting, whether in subsequent rehearsals or in performance. When viewed in these contexts, these gestures help singers recall the discovery process they went through regarding the musical challenges in the composition. Singers will begin to look more intently for physical cues and become more responsive to the conductor's gestures.

Finally, while exploring the use of gesture, directors will most certainly discover more about the music itself, thereby

increasing their understanding of the expressive possibilities inherent in the piece. It is not unusual to refine ideas of how the music should sound by exploring gestures and experimenting with them. It can be a discovery process that leads the director, as well as the singers, to a greater understanding of and experience with the music.^{11, 12}

NOTES

- ¹ Jeffrey M. Cornelius, "The Use of Metaphor in the Choral Rehearsal," *Choral Journal* 23, no. 1 (September 1982); Gary Duane Funk, "Verbal Imagery: Illuminator of the Expressive Content in Choral Music" (D.M.A. dissertation, Arizona State University, 1982); Marilyn Sherman

Overturf, "Implementing Concepts of Vocal Sound: Rehearsal Approaches of Four Conductors of Outstanding High School Choirs" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1985); Charles L. Rives, "Selected Conductors' Perceptions of Aesthetic Rehearsal Techniques" (D.M.A. dissertation, Arizona State University, 1983); Sister C.M. Phelan, I. H. M., "The Influence of Susanne K. Langer's Symbolic Theory on Aesthetic Education" (Doctoral dissertation, Temple University, 1972); Carroll L. Gonzo, "Metaphoric Behavior in Choral Conducting," *Choral Journal* 17, no. 7 (March 1977).

- ² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 59.

³ Ibid., 19.

- ⁴ Overturf notes that the examples of verbal imagery used by the conductors in her study had their basis in physical experience. For examples and discussion, see page 211 of her study.

- ⁵ The reader is urged to consult Lakoff and Johnson for a thorough understanding of the physical groundedness of concepts and for discussions of the way in which metaphorical language reflects the process by which a concept is developed as it works its way up from body to mind.

- ⁶ Mark Johnson, *The Body In The Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xv.

- ⁷ Lakoff and Johnson, 5.

- ⁸ The relationship between gesture or movement activities and singing has been studied and well-documented under the realm of eurhythmics, specifically as developed by Emile Jacques-Dalcroze. Also see: Janna Brendell, "Vocal Development in the Choral Rehearsal: An Interview with Nancy Telfer," *Choral Journal* 38, no. 2 (September 1997); and Stephen John Kramer, "The Effects of Two Different Music Programs on Third and Fourth Grade Children's Ability to Match Pitches Vocally" (Ed.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1985).

- ⁹ The relationship between movement activities and the development of musical understanding has been the subject of much research, again primarily under the realm of eurhythmics. See: Annabelle Sachs Joseph, "A Dalcroze Eurhythmics


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Approach to Music Learning in Kindergarten through Rhythmic Movement, Ear-Training and Improvisation" (D.A. dissertation, Carnegie-Mellon University, 1982); Sue E. Crumpler, "The Effect of Dalcroze Eurhythmics on the Melodic Musical Growth of First Grade Students" (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1982); Helen Yvonne Cheek, "The Effects of Psychomotor Experiences on the Perception of Selected Musical Elements and the Formation of Self-Concept in Fourth Grade General Music students" (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Michigan, 1979); Dorothy Taylor, "Physical Movement and Memory for Music," (*British Journal of Music Education* 6, no. 3 (1989).

¹⁰ "We have seen that our conceptual system is grounded in our experiences in the world. Both directly emergent concepts . . . and metaphor . . . are grounded in our constant interaction with our physical and cultural environments. Likewise, the dimensions in terms of which we structure our experience . . . emerge naturally from our activity in the world. The kind of conceptual system we have is a product of the kind of beings we are and the way we interact with our physical and cultural environments." Lakoff and Johnson, 119.

¹¹ For ideas on the use of movement activities and conductor training, see Claire McCoy, "Eurhythmics: Enhancing the Music-Body-Mind Connection in Conductor Training," *Choral Journal* 35, no. 5 (December 1994).

¹² The subject of this article reaches into many areas of research, including cognition, metaphor (music as metaphor, gesture as metaphor), eurhythmics, and phenomenology. For a more detailed discussion of any of these topics and an extensive listing of references, see Ramona M. Wis, "Gesture and Body Movement as Physical Metaphor to Facilitate Learning and to Enhance Musical Experience in the Choral Rehearsal" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1993).

—CJ—

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