

THE CHORAL PLAYBOOK

WARM-UPS, ROUNDS, REHEARSAL STRATEGIES,
AND MORE TO SPARK JOY AND CONNECTION

BY ANNA
WENTLENT

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FOREWORD

There was a time in my life, as a young teacher just out of university, when I was very concerned about rigor. The difference between me (a vocalist and collaborative pianist who had chosen music as a profession) and my adolescent students (teenagers with a full slate of sports, activities, and classes, one of which happened to be choir) was vast. In an effort to prove that choir deserved the same focus and dedication as their other classes, I collected formative assessments on a weekly basis, assigned a ridiculous amount of homework, and generally attempted to forcefully create an atmosphere of excellence in the model of my own collegiate choral directors. I see now that I was simply enforcing student compliance within a teacher-centered system.

Oh, how the tables have turned. As a choral educator, I have come to prioritize joy, purpose, and belonging above all else. The long and winding road that brought me here included continued education, state conferences, the influence of many incredible public school educators, and simply listening to and observing my students themselves. In a life filled with very little personal choice, our students are *choosing* to be in choir. They are present to make friends, to “relax their mind” during the school day, to express themselves, to let their voice be free, and perhaps most importantly, to simply *have fun*. To take on a pursuit simply for the joy of it is a beautiful thing. How often do we do that in our adult lives?

I aim to help my students develop positive beliefs about their ability to learn and grow in choir by creating an environment where they are free to explore and make mistakes without penalty, where short cycles of play and exploration are followed by immediate, non-judgmental feedback, and where activities slowly ramp up in challenge and rigor as foundational skills are built. Rather than forcing music to fit the mold of a traditional American education, I now see music as a model for what other content areas could be. As Bridget Sweet says in the fantastic publication *Growing Musicians*: “Making music is not a competition ... It is not a race to the top ... It is a unique chance to work together, feel together, emote together, create together, and more.”

The sections of this book are organized according to the order they might be used in an actual rehearsal: stretching and releasing tension, breathing, vocal warm-ups, diction exercises, solfège patterns, rounds, and silly songs. In an

elementary or middle school choir, this may be half (or more) of your rehearsal time together. As Joshua Peddle of the Indianapolis Children’s Choir said, “Warm-ups are where you teach your choir how to sing.” In an ensemble of older, more experienced singers with regular performance requirements, simply pick and choose from the exercises in this book, inserting them into your regular rehearsal structure as desired to build community and connection.

If I’m working with a beginning ensemble (of any age), I gently ease into singing at the beginning of the year. I purposely program lots of movement activities, spoken chants, unison songs, and choir games that help my students relax around me and each other. The method is structured play, and the goal is to establish the choir room as a safe, supportive space, build connections with each other, explore our singing voices, and generally emphasize that singing is an enjoyable, non-threatening activity that anyone can engage in. Singing is for everyone! There is absolutely no discussion of voice parts, mention of auditions, facilitation of voice placement, or similar. There is a time and place for all of that later in the year.

From the very first day of choir, when I use “Jig-a-Lo” as a name game, I get my students moving. We move our arms and hands to shape the sound as we warm up, we choreograph dance moves to go with rounds and silly songs, we use Curwen hand signs when we sing on solfège syllables, and we stand up, sit down, circle up, and more throughout rehearsal. Incorporating movement helps singers concentrate on the task at hand, develop a physical awareness of their own bodies, and connect with their fellow choir members. This is true for singers of all ages but for young singers especially. I believe that movement is an essential component of a well-designed choral rehearsal.

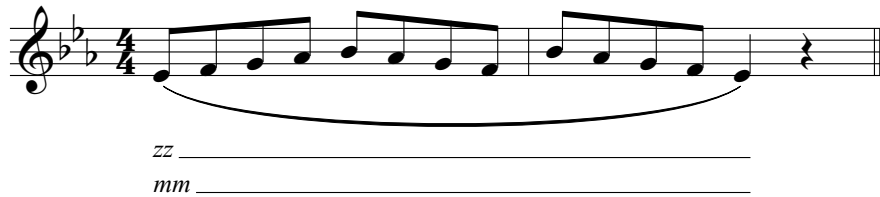
There are many suggestions for movement throughout this book. Some ideas I have learned from others, others I have developed myself, and many more my students have suggested over the years. When a student has an interesting idea, I generally say, “Okay, let’s give it a try!” So feel free to start with my suggestions and then throw them away. I would be overjoyed to know that you and your students are developing your own way of doing things as you laugh, play, and make music together in the choir room!



VOCAL WARM-UPS

Stir the Pot

Sing on a lip buzz, hum, or phonate into a straw. While singing, hold one hand flat as if on the bottom of a bowl or pot and use the other hand to “stir the pot.” This will help singers keep their breath moving and spinning. Ascend by half steps.



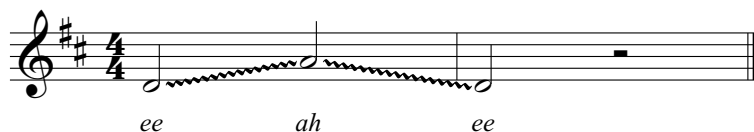
Zah, Zah, Zah, Zah, Zah

Shake out your hands as you sing this beginning warm-up using plenty of energy and resonance. Continue with “zah” or call out changes to the vowel as you repeat: zeh, zee, zoh, and zoo. Start in a comfortable, mid-range key and then descend by half steps.



Do-Sol Glissando

This warm-up is a particularly nice one for young and changing voices of all genders, as it invites singers to navigate into their upper range without conspicuous register shifts or timbre changes. Slide up to “ah” and then slide back down again. As you sing the “ah,” release a bowling ball and let your hand follow it down the lane to the pins. Start low and ascend by half steps.



Zing-a-Mama

“Z” is a wonderful consonant for energizing the voice and helping singers feel resonance toward the front of their faces. While singing the sixteenth note rhythms, rub your hands together as if warming them over a fire or contemplating an evil deed, like a Disney villain. On the final three quarter notes, expand the movement by sending your hands forward one at a time (right, left, right). Ascend by half steps.



SOLFÈGE PATTERNS

Major Scale Variations

Teach or review the major scale at the beginning of the year using something fun, like “Do Re Mi” from *The Sound of Music* or “Do Is Like a Rock” from *Vocalize*. Then use it as a tool to work on pitch accuracy, audiation, phrasing, tuning, vocal independence, and more. There are endless ways to vary the scale. Here are a few possibilities:

Follow the Hand: Starting with *do*, move up and down in stepwise motion by showing the Curwen hand signs. You sign but don’t sing, while your students follow you doing *both*. This requires them to identify the pitch on their own, without the help of a director or the piano.

Disappearing Scale: Remove one scale degree. For example, sing every note except for *fa*. When you get to *fa*, audiate the pitch silently in your head, so that there is a beat of silence. You can either vary which scale degree is dropped or continue in a cumulative fashion until only one scale degree remains.

Drone: Have half of the choir hold low *do* as a drone while the other half sings the scale up and down as usual. When everyone returns to low *do*, cue them to switch roles and repeat.

Round: Sing the major scale in a two-, three-, or four-part round, with entrances every two beats.

Contrary Motion: Start half the choir with an ascending scale from low *do* and the other half with a descending scale from high *do*. For an additional challenge, stop and start them periodically to hold (and tune) a chord.

do re mi fa sol la ti do

ti la sol fa mi re do

Chromatic Scale

This helpful exercise addresses the interval of a half step while reminding students to sing the descending scale with energy and lift. Sing this short warm-up on both text and solfège.

Sing the half - steps on your breath to let them rise with glee.
do di re ri mi fa fi sol si la li ti do

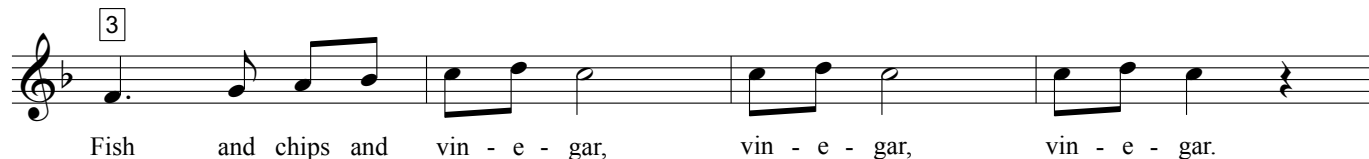
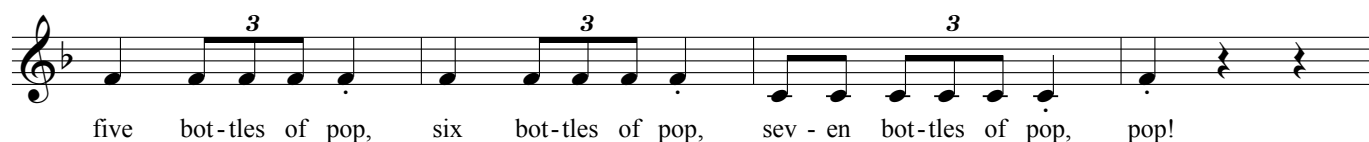
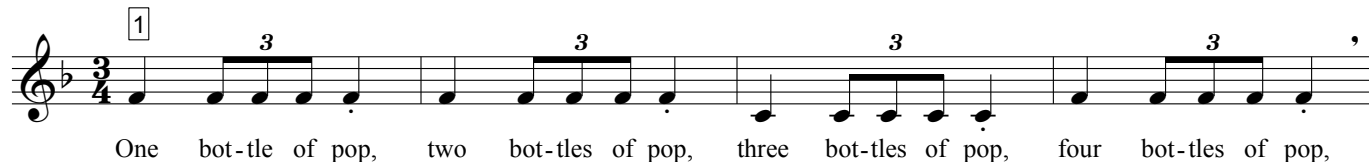
Keep the air - flow con - stant while de - scend - ing care - ful - ly.
do ti te la le sol se fa mi me re ra do

ONE BOTTLE OF POP

This cheerful camp song can be sung straight through or in a three-part round. The repetitive lyrics make it great for adding some silly movements (counting with your fingers on the first verse, waving a “no way” finger on the second, etc.). Just make sure everyone is getting up into their head voice on the final verse. Before teaching it for the first time, do a few vocal sirens to help your singers find the correct placement.

Camp Song

Playfully, in one (♩. = ca. 54)



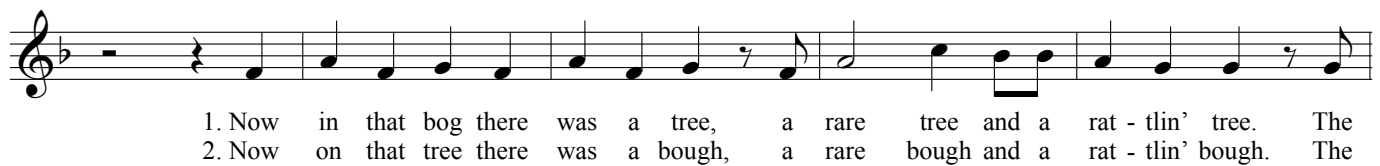
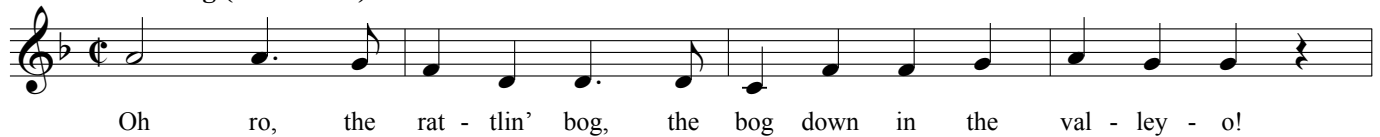
THE RATTLIN' BOG

This rollicking folk song comes from Ireland. Like "The Twelve Days of Christmas," it is a cumulative song because it has a list at the end of each verse which grows throughout the piece. Each addition is more rattlin' (splendid) than the last. Since this song has been passed down by aural tradition, many different versions have developed over the years. Feel free to add to what is listed below!

Repeat m. 14 as many times as necessary to sing all the items in reverse order, before finally moving on to "the bog down in the valley-o!" and returning to the chorus. It is typical for the song to increase in speed with each verse, becoming a challenge to determine who can sing the lyrics the fastest without making a mistake.

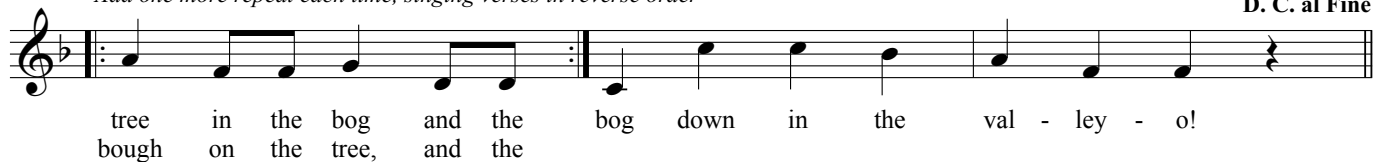
Irish Folk Song

Rollicking (♩ = ca. 108)



1st time - no repeat

Add one more repeat each time, singing verses in reverse order



D. C. al Fine

3. Now on that bough there was a branch ...

4. Now on that branch there was a nest ...

5. Now in that nest there was a bird ...

6. Now on that bird there was a feather ...