

Practical Strategies for Instrumental Music Directors Who Teach Choir

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I. General

- a. Even though you are a musician, you are NOT a vocalist. Be realistic about your limitations as an educator. This is not what you were trained to do. Accept that and find people or resources to help you and absorb everything. It can be quite exciting to expand your knowledge and ability so try to be positive about this opportunity you are embarking upon.
- b. FIND A VOCALIST AND LATCH ON. Many of the subjects in this session were learned over the phone between myself and close friends that I am blessed to have you happen to be top notch vocal instructors. At one point, I was literally on the phone everyday with this person, and I have always considered myself to be a competent musician. I just knew what I was not, and that is how to succeed at this. YOU need a teacher to do this properly. After all, the greatest teachers simply recycle and slightly tweak lessons learned from their amazing teachers.
- c. Three things that always must happen- These must be developed equally at all times
 - i. Ears,
 - ii. Eyes
 - iii. Physical

II. On day one, what are you going to do?

- a. Start with Sound (We will actually engage in these activities to start the session) Pitch Pipe
- b. Think of Me (taught by wrote) Clap on Two and Four
- c. If time permits...improvise on the spot four parts that go together using solfege. Ask for somebody to present a topic and make up a song above the class as they sing. "How long did that take?" "The students at this point are in!" etc.

III. Focus and team building

- a. We will engage in a call and response physical activity in four four ..it will include physical motion and speaking
- b. We will get in a circle and do various team exercises such as "Name walking," "Passing claps and sounds," "The Human Wave," "The Human Score," or "Rhythm Improvising and Conducting" I will make sure to tell the interesting story about where I stole these ideas.

IV. Breathing

- a. Successful wind players know how to breath, but many times they are taught literally about the diaphragm, and the physical nature of proper support. In a large class atmosphere, don't get caught up in the literal with this topic. Teach proper breathing without the students having any idea what is actually happening in their bodies
- b. Metaphors for Inhalation and Soft Palate position
 - i. Backwards light bulb
 - ii. Straw sipping
 - iii. Fish bowl
 - iv. Yawning
 - v. Sipping (this is a tense exercise that forces the student to work to breath)
- c. Metaphors for Exhalation (this must be taught at different rates and dynamics)
 - i. "Tummy tappies" as they breath out for different count variations
 - ii. "Mouth Circles" as they exhale
 - iii. "Jazz Hands" slowly rising as they exhale for different counts
 - iv. Hissing (to be used in conjunction with sipping at different rates-even one count each-it gets intense)
 - v. Breathing out through different size metaphorical straws for different rates of resistance
 - vi. The paper or pinwheel test
- d. Of course the inhalation and exhalation metaphors can be combined to create many different variations depending on the pieces you are trying to work up
 - i. For example, When I did Whitacre's "Sleep" it took long and slow breathing with amazing support. When we do ~~Sydney~~Guillame pieces which are hard, fast, technical, and wordy, the breathing exercises must be geared to more aggressive.

V. Vocal Exploration

- a. Strange sounds are the best way I can describe this but it gets them going
- b. Rising oohs like you heard in college from those annoying opera majors
- c. Face massaging
- d. Loose lip buzzing
- e. Tongue to the teeth buzzing (you can combine both of these with pitch...it really gets the air moving)

VI. More Metaphors, analogies, or physical activities

- a. For sustain in, pull an imaginary string out of your hand as the kids sing through a long note.
- b. If for instance, your basses are flat having them squat. When they sing down a phrase have them slowly stand up. You can probably think of tons of funny

permutations of this one

- c. Buddy Breathing-not sure if it fits here, but it's important
- d. Teach them to conduct-this will come up later
- e. "Dooting" - An awesome one
- f. For Melismas, separate the pitches w with doots first with hands on the tummies. Then, apply the slur with the same support.
- g. Make up dance moves-Any physical action to accompany a musical mood can be effective. Be creative.

VII. The IPA

- a. Learn it now
- b. There are five general vowels. Make sure you have words to accompany each of the vowels so they can relate. As you study your scores, isolate the vowel sounds for the kids in the context of their repertoire. Having a group agree on vowel sound is key to their overall tone quality, timbre, and most importantly. Their INTONATION.
- c. Many times the basses or tenors are flat, simply because they are being lazy with their vowels! (I'll give some examples)
- d. Especially with "u" Use the "operation mouth" and the hands on either side of the lips pushing slightly forward to ensure the forward nature of the vowel.
- e. Sopranos need to know that their vowels can change slightly as they go into the upper tessitura and basses need to know not to worry so much about their tone quality when belting out a low e. We need to hear it!
- f. Talk to a vocal coach about this vowel stuff!!

VIII. Warm up to your repertoire and to the level of your class

- a. Teach the concepts in your pieces apart from your pieces. Teach to teach, not to perform. You will be able to move much faster if your kids are actually taking concepts away from each piece you choose
- b. Don't just randomly pick some dumb warm ups from a book
- c. Cater them directly into your lesson and your objective
- d. Get the breathing in, do the vocal exploration, then some vowel work on some scale patterns in the KEY OF YOUR INTENDED PIECE!
- e. Example, when we did "Blow Blow Thou Winter Wind" it was full of melismas (long ones!) We warmed up trying to hold vowel sounds over the course of many conjunct pitches.

IX. Don't expect them to learn more than one thing at a time

- a. Study the hell out of your scores. You need to have them memorized
- b. Separate the skills out from one another and teach them apart before you expect

- them to do it all at once
 - c. Example, if you have a piece with tricky lyrics, teach them the music first with "La" or whatever syllable comes to mind
 - d. Teach the lyrics in rhythm separately. When both ends are mastered-combine
- X. If you don't know every note before rehearsal, don't bother. Know your scores and be ready for real time assessment at all times.
- a. If you are a pianist, you can use it as a crutch. Step away, and use a pitch pipe. When mistakes are made, assess cheerfully and continue.
 - b. If you let a mistake go more than 3 times, it becomes the right way. Then you are unteaching the wrong things....ugh
 - c. You have to be patient with the rhythm of the education. You must stop and correct as many things as possible with a cheerful disposition. This seems simple, but real time assessment is what separates us from the other teachers! ...except for math teachers.
 - d. So... study your scores and be prepared to listen to your students. Really listen to them and have a concept of what YOU WANT before one note is sung. It's not fair to ask your students to memorize if you haven't already done so...and they notice.
- XI. "Choral students can't read." This is the choral teacher's crutch phrase. Remember....do, see, hear.
- a. Teach your students the language. Make it a huge priority.
 - b. Have them learn both clefs (all of them)?
 - c. You can hand out simple speed tests for this. They might not like this part, but not everything is fun! Fun happens later.
 - d. Teach the theory, (as much as time permits) I go as far as to include chord progression and voice leading using four-part solfege clichés.
 - e. Rhythm. Teach the seven deadly rhythms and the two huge two count rhythms and drill them every day.
 - f. Teach meter before time signature. It's a process.
 - g. Have the students conduct while improvising different combinations of rhythms?
 - h. Do simple rhythm dictations
 - i. Attack it from a million points of views. Even adding words to rhythms can sometimes be helpful
 - j. Teach the circle of fifths.
- XII. Solfege and Sight-reading
- a. I do movable do
 - b. I have folders on my desktop organized by key signature full of authentic

repertoire taken off of IMSLP.

- c. We pick a different key every two weeks
- d. Have them sing the scale while LOOKING at it many times. They can use numbers or note names too.
- e. Practice intervals with a scalar approach with each key (meaning practice finding Re to La by internalizing all the notes in between.
- f. Practice Solfege clichés...especially the ones in your upcoming repertoire 7. Practice singing, I-V-I and other common chord progressions in four parts
- g. Sight read every day for two weeks in a given key. It helps to have authentic chorales. They're not hard to get but you need to have them handy because you know you are going to need to get them at the last second

AS A NON VOCALIST AND A NON PIANIST I TRULY BELIEVE BY GROUPS HAVE BENEFITED FROM THE FACT THAT I HAVE HAD TO DEPEND ON SOLFEGE AND OTHER TECHNIQUES TO TEACH THEM .

XIII. Classroom Set Up

- a. Change it often and don't be lazy with this.
- b. Start with rows, do diamonds, circles
- c. Move kids around often to find the best timbre and so as to not allow dependency amongst students. They love to latch on to the best singers around them. Keep them learning and on their toes
- d. It might help to draw up 10 seating charts before the year even starts

XIV. Repertoire

- a. They have to have fun but not at the expense of the integrity of the music
- b. Know your group. Challenge them but don't kill them
- c. Start young groups with SAB
- d. Gospel is awesome for young groups
- e. For younger groups, try to have them singing acappella from day one....at least one per concert.
- f. For your advanced groups, here is some great stuff. Check it out (I'll have some good ones here)
- g. GOOD OR BAD REP CAN MAKE OR BREAK YOU. It is probably the most important thing in this whole Presentation.

XV. Don't underestimate the kids. It usually means that YOU are being complacent!

- a. Whatever demographic, grade....etc. . These kids can do what YOU can teach. I have always been amazed at how much they are capable of, as long as the game plan is laid out for them and as long as they are motivated to succeed from within. You can provide this. You need PASSION. It is infectious and they will catch the disease.

