

The choral warm-ups of Robert Shaw

Many of you will already know the work of the late Robert Shaw. Here, Dr Pamela Elrod, Assistant Professor of Music at Texas Tech University (Lubbock, Texas, USA), introduces us to his warm-ups from a personal point of view.

Choral music owes much to Robert Shaw. The musical reverberations generated by his extraordinary creative spirit can still be felt today through his recordings, his arrangements, his letters – and his former singers. I consider myself very fortunate to be among those who comprise the latter group. For a period of just over ten years, I was privileged to be able to sing in several ensembles conducted by Shaw. As was the case with so many of my colleagues, his influence on me as a vocalist was profound – but the impact on my career as a choral conductor and music educator was, and is, immeasurable. Surprisingly, one of the areas in my conducting and teaching where his influence was the most significant was in the often-neglected field of the choral warm-up. Where previously in my experience as a choral singer and conductor, the warm-up period – when used at all – was a time devoted only to vocalizing the singers and perhaps practicing a harmonic progression using *Leh-lee-lah-loh-loo* or *Al-le-lu-ya*, with Robert Shaw the warm-up was something else entirely. It was during this brief portion of the rehearsal that his singers developed – in microcosm, if you will – the art of being an ensemble.

Believing that the chorus was a corporate entity with a spirit of kinship, Shaw used the warm-up period to focus all of those individual minds on matters of tuning, tone colour, ensemble blend, acoustical conditions, and development of the dynamic palette. His belief was that his role was not that of a studio voice instructor, so it would therefore be an inappropriate use of his singers' time to lead them through an array of generic vocal exercises. Rather, each singer was expected to vocalize independently prior to rehearsal, so that the warm-up time could be used to 'tune' the ears and the brain. For Shaw, this was the time to establish the disciplines so crucial to the ensemble's maturing into a truly expressive musical instrument.

In over a decade of singing with Robert Shaw, I became convinced of the complete validity inherent in his warm-up techniques. Their effectiveness was due not only to their pedagogical soundness, but also to their utter relevance to the rehearsal. I began to incorporate more and more of his warm-ups into my own rehearsals – regardless of the age level of the singers – and discovered that they were immensely helpful in developing ensemble disciplines. Of course, as a teacher of singers who were still in the early developmental stages of their vocal techniques, I could not expect them to arrive at rehearsal already warmed up. So I created a warm-up period that included more basic vocal exercises – breathing exercises and vocal warm-ups that focused on all areas of the basic technique – in addition to a series of warm-ups selected from those that Shaw used. Everything took approximately ten minutes of our regular fifty-minute rehearsal time. If rehearsal was scheduled to go longer than fifty minutes, then I extended the warm-up period as well.

Included below is a list of exercises employed by Shaw during the years I sang with him. For an aural demonstration of each exercise, go to the link posted at www.abcd.org.uk. The exercises have been listed roughly in the order in which he would use them – although he would never have used all of them in a single warm-up period. Each was chosen for its relevance to the rehearsal (or performance) ahead, taking into consideration repertoire problems and demands, acoustical issues, and the ensemble itself. In addition, he would constantly 'tweak' the exercises, changing them somewhat – again mostly for reasons specific to the needs in the rehearsal ahead, but also possibly just to keep us all from becoming too complacent in our approach. These exercises were important to him, and he wanted and expected them to be just as important to us.

Warm-up exercises

To produce the purest possible sound, these exercises should be sung substantially without vibrato. This will create clearly audible overtones when finely tuned octaves are achieved (the most evident being the pitch a perfect fifth above the treble voices). Shaw maintained that an ensemble that took great care with intonation would produce a healthier, more vital choral tone. Theoretically, if a smaller chorus follows these principles, they can create a more full-bodied sound than a larger ensemble that does not develop similar disciplines. For each exercise, only the beginning pitch is suggested. Conductors may wish to continue the exercises by moving up or down by semitones (Exercise 7 is the only possible exception – the pitches indicated seem to be the most suitable, given the extremes of ranges that are demanded).

Vowel unification

1 A single pitch, sung in unison (or octaves) on the nonsense syllable *noo*. Begin on a moderately low pitch, such as 'E' and move down by half steps. This exercise allows the singers to concentrate on nothing more than basic vowel unification and tuning.

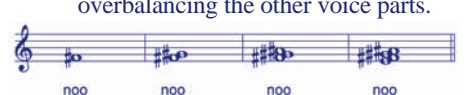


2 A variation of Exercise 1 is to sing through a series of vowels (generally moving from closed to open vowels). The singers should be asked to concentrate on maintaining their unison while progressing through each successive vowel shape. As they sing the more open vowels, they should be cautioned to avoid a) allowing the dynamic to suddenly become louder and b) allowing the pitch to drop.



Divisi textures

3 Two, three, then four pitches sung on *loo* or *noo*, creating a whole tone cluster. Singers may also sing on *nee* or *naw* or move from *nee* to *aw*. This exercise is useful for determining balance issues in two-, three-, and four-part *divisi* textures. In addition, the dissonance created by the cluster pitches is preferable to more consonant intervals because one can more readily determine if one voice part is overbalancing the other voice parts.



Intonation

These exercises are especially useful in establishing discipline in the area of intonation. Shaw would jokingly admit that raising the pitch one-sixteenth of a semitone at a time was probably not possible. Nevertheless, the singers would eventually learn how to move gradually up (or down) in extremely small degrees – and maintain a unison throughout.

4 Beginning on a moderately low pitch such as ‘E’, move up a semitone in 16 pulsed unison pitches (effectively dividing the semitone into 16 separate notes, with each sung almost imperceptibly higher than the last).



5 A variation of Exercise 4 is to have sopranos and tenors ascend a semitone, while altos and basses descend a semitone, ending a whole tone apart.



6 Another variation is to sing Exercises 4 and/or 5 in one long sustained 16-beat ‘note’.



7 ‘Noo-ah’ exercise. This is highly effective not only for developing the ears and brains in matters of intonation, but also for achieving unanimity of line throughout and between vocal registers. Singers should be encouraged to control the vowel shape and the dynamic when moving from the *oo* to the *ah* vowel, so that the secondary vowel does not ‘pop’ out too suddenly. Singers who tend to carry too much weight from lower to upper registers will eventually learn how to maintain a more consistent tone colour as they sing larger intervals in higher registers. According to Shaw’s former assistant,

Norman Mackenzie, the exercise ascends by semitones and descends by whole tones for several reasons. First, to reinforce ear-training by using different intervals for ascending and descending, thereby causing the singers to think more carefully. Second, to more easily find the next starting pitch/interval (because of the harmonic relationship). Third (quoting Mackenzie), “...the reason he enjoyed the most – it makes the exercise somewhat shorter...” Note: The final version (in common time) should be sung with tenors doubling sopranos at the lower octave and basses doubling altos at the lower octave.

Changes in acoustics

Exercises 8, 9, 10 and 11 place the singers in the position of preserving correct intonation while constantly changing their acoustic. For instance, when a singer turns around in a circle, he or she is singing into an ever-changing reflective surface, forcing him or her to listen acutely in order to maintain a consistent pitch. A similar result may be achieved by asking singers to face the nearest wall of the shell (or room). In both instances, ears and minds are forced to make minute, instantaneous adjustments in order to maintain accurate pitch, tone colour, and balance. Shaw maintained that this was the fastest way for singers to become accustomed to new acoustical environments.

8 Beginning with a unison pitch on *noo* or *nee*, change vowels rapidly *ad lib* while slowly turning 360 degrees.



9 Move from *noo* to *ah* and at the same time, crescendo from a soft to a full dynamic. Do the same with each singer facing the nearest wall. A variation is to turn 360 degrees while continuing to crescendo.



10 Another variation of Exercises 8 and 9 is to use whole tone clusters or minor thirds (with basses doubling altos and tenors doubling sopranos).

11 Yet another variation of Exercise 9 is to add too much vibrato once the dynamic level reaches *forte*, thereby distorting the pitch. Then repeat the exercise and add just enough vibrato to warm the pitch. Since this particular exercise is intended to develop an awareness of tonal consistency, singers should not be asked to turn 360 degrees. Rather, they should face forward so that they can maintain a consistent acoustical surrounding.

Tone colour

Exercises 12 and 13 are useful in developing an awareness of the variety of tone colours available to the choral ensemble. Note: a minor third or whole tone cluster may be used in place of a unison pitch.

12 Begin with unison pitch on *nee* with an overly bright vowel. Crescendo and darken the vowel. Do the exercise again, beginning with a tone that is too dark, gradually brightening the vowel during the crescendo.



13 A variation of Exercise 12 is to begin dark and as the choir grows louder and brightens the vowel, open to *ah* while continuing the crescendo.



Dynamics

14 Measuring crescendos and diminuendos. This exercise is crucial to developing an ensemble's awareness of its own dynamic palette. If a chorus can establish levels of dynamic intensity in an isolated manner, it will be much more adept at achieving healthy and appropriate levels of dynamic contrast within the musical texture.

a) On a unison pitch, using the syllable *nah* crescendo from *piano* to *forte* over a period of eight beats. Then, begin *forte* and decrescendo to *piano* for eight beats.



b) Instead of a unison pitch, use a minor 3rd (with basses doubling altos and tenors doubling sopranos) or any combination of more than one pitch.



c) Using either a unison pitch or more than one pitch, have sopranos and altos begin *forte*, while tenors and basses begin *piano*. Then, have the chorus sing eight-beat crescendos or decrescendos (depending upon the beginning dynamic), continuing for several counts of eight.



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Shaw warm-ups (cont)

Robert Shaw believed that, in terms of rehearsal disciplines, the chorus was not much different from the orchestra. Skills were layered one element at a time – as each new element was added, the previously taught elements were further reinforced. He maintained that attempting to teach everything at once would most likely lead to a confused and imprecise product where the music was not allowed to be heard in a truly honest fashion. He employed the same philosophy when it came to the warm-up, and the result was that his singers gradually began to assume responsibility for all matters having to do with the interpretation of repertoire. We should expect no less from our own choirs.

(The author would like to thank the following for their input into this project: Mr Thomas Shaw, Robert Shaw's son; Ms Nola Frink, former administrative assistant to Robert Shaw; Mr Norman Mackenzie, former musical assistant to Robert Shaw and currently the Associate Conductor for Choruses with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra; Dr Susan Brumfield of Texas Tech University; Dr Thomas Hughes of Texas Tech University; Dr John Dickson Texas Tech University; and the Texas Tech University Choir.)

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Remember to look at our website, www.abcd.org.uk, to hear examples of these exercises.

SB

NW Stop Press

Our North West Youth Singing Day is on Wednesday 12 November. Gillian Dibden will take morning and afternoon sessions with two different groups of youngsters aged between 11 and 14. It will take place at Altrincham Grammar School for Boys: the morning session will be for ABCD affiliated choirs and the afternoon for school choirs within easy travelling distance of the school. Some prior work on some of the music used will be required. Up-to-date details from Mavis Fletcher (01772 655939).

Science on Stage at the ROH

A unique event took place in March in which one of our members, Jon Wakefield, along with his co-writer Dave Quick, organised a huge community project for youth singers under their partnership name 'Science on Stage'. The production *Twister's Run* was performed three times in Nottingham and then at the Linbury Studio Theatre at the Royal Opera House.

The partnership, Science on Stage, has been a driving force for Jon and Dave for some ten years and is the fusion of a number of passions. It aims to promote the understanding of scientific principles through music and dance.

Jon, who writes the music and directs, has many years of experience working with adult and youth choirs and has strong ideas about engaging and retaining interest from youngsters in singing. His success rate with youth choirs over the last ten years suggests that there is a formula here which needs to be employed on a wider front. He is comfortable with a wide range of musical styles ranging from the purest SATB to Gospel and Rock. This variety is the key element in the formula and the uninhibited energy released by a hundred or so youth and adult singers is rarely seen in schools today. *Twister's Run* was first performed in 1997 at the Nottingham Playhouse.

Science is the next key element and this is provided by Dave, a chemistry teacher, who creates the libretto. Two other productions also written by Jon and Dave, *Little Blue* and *Salmonella* have been performed with generous grants from the Arts Council. *Little Blue* tells the story of our planet from birth to its death and was performed at the Albert Hall in Nottingham for two nights. *Salmonella* which describes graphically the effects of this notorious tummy bug on our system was performed at the Nottingham Playhouse. The third ingredient is, of course, dance which completes the mix of music,

science and dance. Add to this spectacular lighting and we understand why the youngsters are queuing up!

Deborah Bull invited Jon to take *Twister's Run* to the Linbury Studio Theatre back in September 2002. The project involved students from three junior schools, a comprehensive school, two Nottingham Dance Schools and members from the adult choir, 'In Accord' which Jon directs. The story tells of a sycamore seed and its journey from seed to a mature tree. It survives wild storms, slugs, millipedes, the mysterious fungus and countless nerve-racking moments in its journey. Perhaps the climax of the piece is the representation of photosynthesis at the molecular level and the formation of the hexose sugar molecule, the first building block of life. The use of music, words and dance to convey the mystery and power of this process is a moving experience. The finale of *Twister's Run* is a powerful rock song for solo voice with a backing of over one hundred and fifty singers and dancers, which would be well placed on any West End stage.

Since *Twister's Run* lasts just one hour the first half of the evening was used to showcase extracts from two earlier productions, *Stardance* (now published by Piper publishing) and *Little Blue*. This allowed a number of older singers and dancers, who have now left the school, to return and perform.

Jon and Dave who are now working on their next production, *Steel*, have also written a series of songs for KS2, *Munchin' n' Crunchin'* which is again science based and is published by Piper Publishing. If you are interested in using any of their material or would like Jon to work with your choir you are able to contact him at jonwakefield@burlington.fsnet.co.uk.

Jon Wakefield