Voice Building 101: Guidelines for Choral Vocalises

Dr. Meredith Bowen
Assistant Professor of Choral Music
Michigan State University
bowenmer@msu.edu
www.meredith-y-bowen.com

Slides

> "Improving each singer's tonal core—that is, training a focused tone—allows for blend despite differences in timbre. Bringing all of the singers to their best, focused, and supported singing makes vibrant, expressive tone possible."
> — Emmons & Chase

Why Voice Building Matters

The Conductor as Voice Teacher

- Every rehearsal shapes vocal technique.
- Warm-ups should solve problems, not simply fill time.
- Blend emerges from healthy individual singing.
- Focus before volume.

Goals of Tonal Development

- Resonance
- Warmth
- Freedom
- Core/focus
- Spin
- Intonation
- Flexibility
- Expressivity

1. Building the Instrument: Body and Alignment

Posture and Body Awareness

Purpose: Remove physical tension and establish efficient alignment.

Activities:

- Shoulder rolls
- Stretching large and small muscle groups
- Face, jaw, and tongue release
- "Step into the corner" alignment exercise
- Body mapping
- Yoga and Tai Chi principles
- Grounding and balance exercises

Connection to repertoire: Sustained phrases, dynamic contrast, expressive singing.

2. Breath as Energy for Sound

Motor Before Tone

Purpose: Coordinate breath flow and engagement.

Activities:

- Breath circles
- Silent inhalation
- Hissing exercises
- Pulsed "sh"
- Lip trills
- Straw breathing imagery
- Dog panting
- Laughter exercises

Discussion:

- Breath supports sound rather than pushes sound.
- Energy flow versus muscular tension.

Connection to repertoire: Long phrases, articulation, dynamic control.

3. Resonance and Tonal Core

Connecting Breath to Voice

Purpose: Establish efficient phonation and resonance.

Activities:

- Hums (M)
- N consonants
- Z buzzing exercises
- NG resonance
- Five-note patterns
- Sirens

Key concepts:

- Forward resonance
- Vibratory sensations
- Tone core
- Focus before volume
- Resonance versus brightness

4. Flexibility, Agility, and Range Development

Purpose: Develop freedom and coordination.

Activities:

- Descending patterns
- Arpeggios
- Octave slides
- Sirens
- Register transitions
- Sequential range expansion

Vowel Development:

- Consonant-to-vowel transitions
- Same vocal tract, different vowels

- Maintaining resonance across vowels
- Forward placement through consonants

Discussion:

- Healthy range extension
- Registration events in adolescent voices
- Avoiding forced tone

Connection to repertoire: Large leaps, changing tessituras, expressive phrasing.

5. Ensemble Listening Skills

Vowel Unification

Purpose: Create a common acoustic space.

Activities:

- Neutral-vowel singing
- Vowel matching
- Section exchanges
- Unison listening exercises

Connection to repertoire: Text clarity, projection, unified ensemble sound.

Intonation and Balance

Activities:

- Tuned fifths
- Drone work
- Chord balancing
- Root-fifth-third listening

Discussion:

- Intonation as listening rather than correcting.
- Balance as an acoustic phenomenon.

Connection to repertoire: Tuning difficult harmonies and sustaining pitch.

6. Repertoire-Informed Vocalises

The Warm-Up to Repertoire Continuum

Demonstrate how to:

1. Identify a challenge in the score.
2. Isolate the skill.
3. Create a vocalise.
4. Transfer immediately to repertoire.

Examples:

- Difficult interval leaps
- Challenging vowels/modifications
- Range issues
- Rhythmic precision
- Legato phrasing
- Diction concerns
- Harmonic tuning

Diagnostic Listening and Corrective Vocalises

Listen for:

- Breathy tone
- Pressed tone
- Flat pitch
- Sharp pitch
- Dark/covered vowels
- Spread vowels

The Five Questions

Before using any vocalise, ask:

1. What skill am I teaching?
2. Why does this ensemble need it?

3. How does it connect to the repertoire?
4. How will singers know they were successful?
5. What comes next in the sequence?

Warm-Up Planning Template

"What if I only have five minutes?"

1. Alignment (30 sec)
2. Breath (30 sec)
3. SOVT (1 min)
4. Resonance (1 min)
5. Vowel unification (1 min)
6. Repertoire-specific exercise (1 min)

Resources:

Vocal Technique: Davis and Latour

The Perfect Blend: Tim Seelig

Circle of Sound: Doreen Rao

Evoking Sound: James Jordan

150 Rounds for Singing and Teaching: Bolkavac and Johnson