

Brain-Friendly Strategies for Singer-Friendly Rehearsals



Five Key Principles of Brain-Friendly Rehearsals

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Chicago

Principle #1:
HE WHO DOES THE WORK, DOES THE LEARNING.

- Without MEMORY, THERE IS NO LEARNING; design rehearsals to create deep procedural and long-term memories.
- Teacher GUIDES the work; students are active thinkers/singers.
- Principle of 7 Words or Less; students remember 14% of what is said; 92% of what they teach others.
- It is important that students are THINKING all the time; Question random singers, not just volunteers.
- Everyone has an assignment during the rehearsal; humming, signing, moving, or marking—not just sitting.
- Share the governance: Use we, our, and us; invite suggestions for interpretative nuance; engage leaders in musical and logistical decisions, creating ownership and investment.
- Ask for student reflection mid-rehearsal; check students' comments and write comments to them periodically.
- Teach students to conduct and welcome thoughtful feedback from both conductors and singers.
- Invite singers who are sick to listen to the rehearsal and critically think and write about specified rehearsal issues. Writing deepens memory.

Principle #2:
**THE BRAIN LOVES AND MAKES CONNECTIONS
THROUGH VARIETY AND NOVELTY.**

- Rehearsal focus is enhanced with the use of unexpected and unusual routines and events.
- Synapses fire and connections are made through new experiences and focused awareness.

- Never do anything the same way twice; always add variety or complexity; Sing the solfege line backward, sing staccato instead of legato to isolate pitches, count-sing. Switch it up!
 - Sing, whisper, or write your instructions.
 - Peter Boonshaft:
 - 3 Thing Thursday – *Every time you stop, say only three things.*
 - Mute Monday – *Non-verbal rehearsal.*
 - Foreign Friday – *Choose a Friday to give all instruction in a foreign accent.*
 - Sing with the lights off; sing in circles; mix formations and seating regularly.
 - Be “predictably unpredictable” in rehearsal to enhance focus and community.
 - Sight-sing A FEW MINUTES per day; sing smaller portions of more pieces.
 - Be creative! Don’t get set in a “routine rut.”

Principle #3:
MOVEMENT INTERNALIZES DEEPER LEARNING
AND INVOLVES MORE AREAS OF THE BRAIN.

- 50% of brain cells are dedicated to MOVEMENT—cerebellum— movement enhances and cements learning.
- Do not sit all the time; the brain processes 14% more oxygen when standing.
 - “Sit and get does not grow dendrites or build connections in the brain.”
 —Eric Jensen
- Movement internalizes musical concepts (Campbell and Kassner); show the shape of the line, show the vowel shape; use Dalcroze Eurhythmics to work choral lines.
- The brain is strengthened by ANY kinesthetic connection.
- Teach them to hand sign; it is the kinesthetic link to a system for vocally reading music. The brain is strengthened by ANY kinesthetic connection.

- Kirchner cites Juntune and Hyvönen: “Movement provides the foundation for all other intellectual understanding.”
- Well-chosen movements in vocalises build habits of singing that are internalized more deeply. (See Charlotte Adams DVD) Over time, creative repetition moves learning from working or procedural memory into long-term memory, or what we consider “hard wiring.” (Sousa)

Principle #4:
EMOTIONAL HOOKS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR DEEPER LEARNING.

- Context – Music contains stories and emotions. Tell them about the story of the piece, why you chose the piece, what emotions and thoughts we want to convey through our singing. Better yet, let the choir decide!
- THE BRAIN’S MAJOR FUNCTION IS TO DISCARD USELESS INFORMATION. Make your rehearsals relevant and useful.
- Establish personal connections with your singers and your shared musical journey. Help them feel connected in the choir. Triangle: Student-Student, Teacher-Student, Teacher-Choir.
- Meaning: LET THEM KNOW THE VALUE OF WHAT THEY’RE DOING. “The things we’re doing are growing our brains!”
- Talk about beauty: musical, textual, and life experiences.
- Celebrate successes, both small and large.

Principle #5:
TOO MUCH RISK SHUTS DOWN LEARNING; APPROPRIATE LEVELS OF RISK ENHANCE BRAIN ENGAGEMENT AND DEEPER LEARNING.

- Set them up for success: through careful literature choices, scaffolding, and rehearsal design.
- Appropriate “level of concern” (helpful anxiety) (Madeleine Hunter) raises motivation and retention.

- Fight, Flight, or Freeze: These are reactions to fearful situations and shut down learning. Create a safe, supportive environment where risk-taking is appreciated and a part of learning and singing.
- Let them know constantly that brains are changing and growing even if they struggle.
- Keep risk low when music is new or for individual singers who volunteer to sing alone; ramp up risk when music is learned more completely or for larger numbers of singers.

**LEARNING TO MAKE MUSIC TOGETHER IN A CHOIR
IS A JOYFUL JOURNEY THAT EVOLVES THROUGH
THE CREATIVE REHEARSAL DESIGN OF THE CONDUCTOR.**

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DVDs

- Body, Mind, Spirit, Voice* with Anton Armstrong, André Thomas, and The American Boychoir.
- Daily Warmups for a Beautiful Voice* with Charlotte Adams.
- Enhancing Musicality Through Movement* with Rodney Eichenberger.
- How to Make a Good Choir Sound Great* with Charlene Archibeque.
- Ready, Set, Sing* with Jefferson Johnson.
- Working with Male Voices* with Jerry Blackstone.

How to Make a Good Choir Sound Great! – DVD Creative Positioning of Singers

CHARLENE ARCHIBEQUE, BARBARA BERNER, AND TRENT PATTERSON



This remarkable DVD presents a systematic approach to improving the sound of choirs of all ages, types, and stages of development. From vocal warm-ups, to rehearsals, to culminating performances, this DVD provides a step-by-step guide to help choral ensembles to reach their full potential

The key components are:

- Creative positioning of singers in rehearsals and performance
- Placement of individual singers (voice matching)
- Developing expressiveness through facial engagement, movement, and emotional connections to the text and music

In this DVD, many different standing positions are demonstrated and the numerous factors involved in deciding which position to use are discussed. Dr. Charlene Archibeque demonstrates unique placements that work in varied rehearsal situations, including standing, sitting, using risers, and dealing with a flat floor. She also explores the most effective positions for performance situations, taking into consideration the acoustics of the venue, the strengths and weaknesses of the choir, and the repertoire to be performed.

A focal point of this DVD is the demonstration of the decision-making process involved in the placement of individual singers within a section. Blend, balance, intonation, musicianship, and aural skills—as well as strength of each voice and timbre of each singer—are factors that affect these decisions. Unique “before and after” comparisons, suitable for showing to singers, highlight the contrasts prior to and after voice matching and/or positioning of singers for specific repertoire.

The powerful effects of capturing each singer’s innate expressiveness and imagination are displayed via contrasting examples of engaged and unengaged singing. This DVD, with its unprecedented combination of explanations, graphics, and singer demonstrations, offers a unique and valuable resource for both conductor-teachers and singers.

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