

Building Blocks to Success

by: Anthony Trecek-King and Michele Adams

In the fall 2008 issue of the Massachusetts Music News, I spoke about the importance of teaching music literacy. As a continuation to that article, we would like to offer selected strategies to assist music educators as they begin this journey with their singers. Currently, at the Boston Children's Chorus, we are developing the BCC Model of music education to foster music literacy for singers at all levels. Ear training and sight singing form the foundation of our model. Teaching these skills can be a bewildering task. We hope to demystify the challenge.

When children learn how to speak, they master the practices of language through observing, listening, and practicing their own communication skills, not through repetitious rote memorization. They become familiar with the sounds of the language and then, attempt to mimic these as they formulate their own thoughts into words. An approach to music literacy can be the same. Singers must first become familiar with the sounds of music, i.e. intervals and rhythms, before they can begin to apply it to their own musical vocabulary.

We use the diatonic scale as the starting basis for teaching the melodic elements of music. We begin with the standard Kodály solfege and Curwen hand signs. In just 5 minutes, you can teach any singer a few simple intervals. First, familiarize the singers with a comfortable key for singing, say, C major. Then, have them sing either a five note scale or the whole octave. Use the solfege syllables and accompanying hand signs, and make sure the singers mirror your actions. Once they are comfortable with the stepwise predictable motion, begin to skip around diatonically. One of our key components is to continue stepwise practice while also working on intervals of skips and leaps. Err on the side of high expectations, and challenge the singers, as you can always pull back.

When working with interval training,

we begin by finding the descending minor 3rd (*sol* to *mi*). It is a very singable interval, one they have heard from many childhood and traditional songs. They should be able to sing it easily. It is already a part of their musical language. We also find that, if you wait until later to

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introduce intervals larger than a second, always focusing upon stepwise motion in singing, it becomes much more difficult to aurally discern these relationships. Afterward, introduce *la*, then *do*. You can then jump to another minor third (*do* to *la*). Next, add *re* and *fa* to work with the pentatonic scale. Now you can introduce some melodic content, like *Amazing Grace*, on solfege. Just use your hands! You have equipped your chorus to begin thinking about pitch relationships, and through hand signs, they already have a tactile tool for use in further exploration of music. Think of all the music your kids could sing on solfege successfully with an introduction to the pentatonic scale. Finally, toss in *fa* and *ti*, and you are ready to skip around the entire major scale. We make a practice of mixing in stepwise motion to keep them honest. Believe it or not, that is it. You begin with small steps (and skip and leaps), only 5 – 10 mins a day (or in our case, per week), and you will be floored at the results in just one year.

As the singers grow secure with intervals, we transition them to a broader understanding of this information, stretching their command of the information to include reading and writing music. Again, we want the singers to be really comfortable with the aural skills before we transition them to paper. Sound before sight. The key here, just as with the aural training, is to build upon

what you have already taught them, and keep adding intervals. Within a few months, they should feel really comfortable skipping around the diatonic scale from the hand signs and their ability to read music will strengthen in similar fashion.

After you have built the foundation, the next step is to secure a comfort within the diatonic scale. We do fun things like modulate to distantly related keys and work our way back to the key where we began. Now, you may be thinking whether or not you can do this with your own choir. Of course you can. We have done it with singers at age seven in just 10 minutes per week. Those same singers are now able to shift between major and minor keys, sing chromatic scales, and perform some pretty tough modulations – all by observing hand signs and all within just two years of work. The hardest part is getting started. Remember, infants want to learn to speak, and they make it happen. Listening, then talking, leads to reading. Singers want to learn to sing. Listening, then singing, leads to reading – music.

So, you may ask, what are the benefits for actually learning the *real* music – the choral repertoire you have programmed for the next concert? Once the singers are fluent in hand signs and can accurately produce those pitches, you can teach them their music through solfege. One of our rules of thumb is this: Always teach something! Choral octavos should always include some portion of music that even your least experienced singers will be able to sight read on their own. When choosing repertoire, select wisely, and find music that allows children to practice the intervals they are learning. This is a valuable tool, because the singers are doing the work. They are reading abstract notation and forming musical sounds. The end result is the singer with the ability to sight-read: an independent musician.

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