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The choral ensemble warm-up

The subject of choral warm-up is particularly close to me, as it has accompanied my daily work with choirs since the beginning of my artistic and teaching career. My involvement in choral music began in 1984 in Wola Rzędzińska, a small locality near Tarnów, where I was a co-founder of the mixed choir “Cantus”. During my education, I met outstanding teachers who shaped my approach to working with the voice and the choir. In 1986, during my studies at the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Kraków (Liturgical Music Section), I met the charismatic Professor Jan Wojciech Śmietana, who taught me how to use my voice professionally as an instrument. My fascination with choral music inspired me to explore the beauty of the choir’s sound as a musical instrument, which led me to complete Postgraduate Voice Emission Studies at the Academy of Music in Bydgoszcz. My studies at this institution, particularly individual and group vocal technique classes with Professor Jadwiga Gałęska-Tritt, confirmed my conviction that the vocal training of a choir depends to a large extent on the vocal education of the conductor. Leading various ensembles – the Jagiellonian University Male Choir, Psalmodia at the Pontifical University of John Paul II, the Polish Radio Choir in Kraków – I have always paid special attention to the role of the warm-up. Time devoted to the warm-up has never been time wasted; quite the contrary. Thanks to the use of appropriate vocal exercises, all the ensembles I have worked with have won valuable prizes at prestigious competitions and festivals.

Between routine and foundation – perspectives on the warm-up

While preparing this paper, I came across many sharply contrasting views on warming up the solo voice or the voice of a choral singer. Here are some of them:

When I myself attended singing lessons, I was quite often irritated that roughly the first 10 minutes were devoted to “silly” exercises which, so I thought, did not bring any change to my singing. I used to get frustrated because, after all, SO much money [yes, my dear friends, voice training is quite expensive], and there it was – the same old “brrr”, up, down, over and over again every single time?!?!?

Fortunately, now I am wiser and I do not waste those 10 minutes on silly repetition of “brrr” ... instead, I use those 10 minutes as effectively as I possibly can!¹

In her book *Chór amatorski jako forma edukacji kulturalnej dorosłych* [*The Amateur Choir as a Form of Cultural Education for Adults*], drawing on examples from Kraków choral ensembles, Aleksandra Litawa presents conductors’ contrasting attitudes towards methods of working with ensembles and the warm-up as an element of the organisational structure of rehearsals. The conductor of the *Echo* choir emphasised that it is a key element of every rehearsal and that proper vocal set-up should always precede work on the repertoire. However, the publication also described choirs in which the warm-up was not an integral part of the ensemble’s work and had been abandoned entirely. This was the case in the choirs *Cecyliński* and *Hejnał*:

We do not do a warm-up, we warm up on the pieces. (...) I am not convinced about exercises in an amateur choir, and it is difficult to introduce something one does not believe in. I think it would bore and irritate them (conductor of the Hejnał choir)².

I will now give another example of an approach to warming up a choral ensemble, this time a professional choir.

In 1995, following a competitive selection process, I became director and artistic head of the Polish Radio Choir in Kraków. As part of my duties, I led the choir’s rehearsals and artistic projects, including archival recordings for Channel 2 of Polish Radio, broadcast concerts and CD recordings. Before every artistic event and rehearsal, I led the ensemble in a warm-up. These warm-ups were usually longer in the morning. On many occasions, after 20 minutes of warming up, the ensemble was still not ready to cope with difficult pieces of contemporary music.

¹ *Po co ta rozspiewka?*, <https://gosiasacala.com/po-co-ta-rozspiewka> (29.03.2025).

² Aleksandra Litawa, *Chór amatorski jako forma edukacji kulturalnej dorosłych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, Kraków 2016, p. 88–89.

I must admit that during one of these longer warm-ups I was greatly astonished by a question from the chair of the trade union, Ms Lucyna Szramik: *Director, when will we finally start working?* I leave this question unanswered.

I am a participant in most choral festivals and competitions in Poland. Having observed choral performances at these competitions and during the preliminary rounds, I can state that not all choral ensembles deserve recognition. The lack of proper vocal preparation in some ensembles is particularly striking. There are a number of reasons for this, the most important of which is that, despite generally good musical training, conductors of ensembles lack the vocal training necessary for working with a choir³.

As can be seen from the examples presented, attitudes towards choral warm-ups vary among conductors, singers and singing teachers, often giving rise to divergent, even controversial opinions. Some treat the warm-up as an optional element; others regard it as the foundation of vocal work. From my point of view, the warm-up constitutes a key element of choral practice – it not only supports vocal hygiene and improves sound quality, but also builds the performing community. It is the key to the success of every artistic performance. It may be compared to an athlete's warm-up before a competition – without it, full capacity and readiness to perform more difficult and complex tasks are hard to achieve.

In my work as a choirmaster, I have always compared all the ensembles I have worked with (including the Polish Radio Choir) to the most perfect instrument – the organ – in which the lungs serve as the bellows, the larynges as the pipes and the individual voice sections – soprano, alto, tenor, bass – as the registers. A choir, being an instrument made up of many voices, is subject to the same laws of music that apply to all other instruments. If we wish to perform a choral work correctly, we must first build a beautifully tuned instrument. After years of working with choral ensembles, I can state that, thanks to the proper synchronisation of vocal functions and appropriate vocal preparation, I was able to develop the desired sound in both equal-voice and mixed choirs. This work made it possible to keep the choral ensembles in good vocal condition and always gave me great joy and satisfaction.

³ *Współczesna Chóralistyka 1 – Wartości, konteksty, perspektywy*, [in:] Włodzimierz Siedlik, *Co słychać w repertuarze Zespołów chóralnych? Tradycje, inspiracje, perspektywy*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Muzycznej im. Karola Lipińskiego we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2018, p. 109.

The role of the warm-up in integrating vocal production and building a unified sound in the choral ensemble

In all choral ensembles, I have always used warm-ups that incorporated the synchronisation of vocal production functions. Every vocal function – breathing, phonation, articulation combined with the phenomenon of resonance in the resonating chambers of the chest, larynx and vocal tract – involves different muscles and structures of the vocal apparatus: for example, the diaphragm and the abdominal and chest muscles in breathing, and the muscles and cartilages of the larynx in phonation. Their actions, however, are closely synchronised. Improper functioning of any one of them immediately causes other muscles to work incorrectly. This occurs as a result of psychophysical processes taking place in the human body. As an adjudicator at choral festivals and competitions, I have often noticed certain shortcomings in preparing the choir, as an instrument, for performances. I have observed that conductors and their choirs enjoy using articulation exercises during the warm-up. Unfortunately, these exercises do not give due attention to proper breathing or to the use of the resonance of individual consonants, which affect the sound of the carrier of tone, namely the vowel.

We must remember that singing is a psychophysical process and that “the basis of the integrity of vocal techniques is maintaining the psychophysical interaction of the whole body”⁴. Therefore, it is worth beginning the warm-up with a few simple general movement exercises engaging the whole body. There are many possibilities, such as marching on the spot, squats or alternating standing up and sitting down to develop a posture of readiness. It is worth emphasising that these activities do not have to be treated as mechanical aerobic exercises preceding “musical exercises”, and even at this stage one can develop the ensemble’s responsiveness to the conductor’s interpretative intentions by performing each exercise in response to a hand gesture (at various tempi and with different expressive qualities). We must not forget – I will emphasise this once again – that although the respiratory system plays a key role in this process, we sing with our entire body⁵. The choir conductor should lead the warm-up with their own voice and be a model of correct vocal technique, intonation and articulation so that singers can correctly reproduce the exercises performed. An orchestral conductor knows the construction of the instruments and the way they are played; therefore a choir

⁴ Jadwiga Gałęska-Tritt, *Jak się odnaleźć w matni śpiewu*, Wydawnictwo PPSSW, POMOST, Poznań 2020, p. 112.

⁵ Agnieszka Płusajska-Otto, *Podręcznik pracy głosem. Ćwiczenia i wskazówki dla osób występujących publicznie*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2017, p. 68.

conductor should also know at least the basic principles of the anatomy and physiology of the voice, if only to avoid damaging or tiring the singer's voice through ignorance. The conductor's voice carries their own emotions. As the outstanding Polish singer Aleksandra Kurzak observes, "singing is based on imagination. First we must imagine what we want to hear. This instrument cannot be seen [...]. It is work with our inner self"⁶. Tension anywhere in the body, even far from the vocal folds, has a very significant impact on the freedom of artistic expression through the vocal apparatus.

Another important aspect of vocal work is focusing on the dynamic type of breathing used in vocal practice. Prolonging the exhalation phase cannot be achieved through excessive exertion of the throat muscles. It should be emphasised that, unfortunately, omitting the warm-up is often the main reason for singers forcing their voices within an ensemble. In working on free sound production and limiting effortful singing, simple exercises such as *yawning* or *lip trills* prove extremely effective. *Yawning* naturally reduces muscular tension and relaxes the throat, while the unforced opening of the jaw contributes to increasing the resonating space in the pharyngeal and oral cavities⁷. *Lip trills*, which involve setting the lips into vibration, are also a simple but extremely effective tool for improving the sound quality of individual voices and thus of the entire ensemble. Based on the continuous airflow necessary to set the lips in motion, *lip trills* can also be carried out at various pitches in the form of *glissandi* within a comfortable range⁸. In my practice as a choirmaster, I often alternate *lip trills* with *blowing kisses*, which strongly activates the lips in extreme positions. This activity has a measurable effect on vowel articulation, which depends on the activity of the orbicularis oris muscle and its coordination with jaw movement in the process of labialisation and delabialisation⁹.

Moving on to articulation-focused exercises, so popular in choral warm-ups, we must not forget about phonation exercises. Although they perform different functions in the process of voice training, both types of exercises are closely interconnected. Articulation exercises concentrate primarily on the work of the speech organs and aim at developing clear and precise pronunciation, correct diction and flexibility of the articulatory apparatus. Phonation exercises, on the other

⁶ *Tajemnica przepony*, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/3958-tajemnica-przepony.html> (30.03.2025).

⁷ D. R. Boone, S. C. McFarlane, *A critical view of the yawn-sigh as a voice therapy technique*, "Journal of Voice" 7 (1993) no. 1, s. 75–80.

⁸ Anna Kasprzak, *Głos jak dzwon*, Vox Ana, 2020, p. 86.

⁹ Agnieszka Płusajska-Otto, *Podręcznik pracy głosem*, op. cit., p. 84.

hand, concern the process of producing sound, i.e. initiating and sustaining vocal fold vibrations, shaping the carrying power and timbre of the voice and helping to achieve stable intonation. In practice, both types of exercises should complement each other, since a flexible articulatory apparatus gives the voice clarity, but it is the correctly produced sound that allows this clarity to be fully utilised. The gradual introduction of more difficult exercises requires constant attention to maintaining correct vocal-respiratory reflexes established at earlier stages of the warm-up. When we start working on our diction, we must remember that the text in a piece is as important as the music, and *vowels are the music of the word*¹⁰. We should sing in such a way that it is the vowels, as carriers of the sound, that convey as many musical features as possible (duration, dynamics, timbre), while the consonants accompanying them in various combinations form a colouristic element characterised by precision and high expressiveness.

Another extremely important issue is the proper use of resonance. I have already discussed this aspect in the context of exercises using lip vibrations, but I believe that the key point is to realise that many structures in the body act simultaneously as resonators. These include the chest, lungs, bronchi, trachea, larynx, and the pharyngeal, nasal and oral cavities. In order to fully exploit the phenomenon of resonance, one must use the muscles which, together with the cartilaginous and bony structures surrounding the resonating chambers and cavities, do not obstruct the airflow during exhalation. Among the most common causes of distortion of the air column are an unnaturally positioned jaw, a lowered soft palate and an unfavourable tongue position. Every voice resonates. However, when we hear a voice that carries exceptionally beautifully, we have the impression that it is full and powerful without effort – as if it were flowing from the whole body, and not just from the limited space of the mouth. And that is precisely the key: that is music.

Conclusion

We must remember that our whole body is an instrument, and a choral ensemble, constituting a single instrument made up of many bodies, needs space in order to unify its sound and become one. This space is provided by the warm-up, during which singers not only safely warm up their vocal folds, but above all gain flexibility and collective readiness for intensive work on the repertoire as an ensemble. As Sylwia Prusakiewicz rightly notes in her publication *Zadbaj o swój głos i zobacz co się stanie* (Take Care of Your Voice and See What Happens): “Your voice is an

¹⁰ Bogumiła Toczyńska, *Jak wyglądasz słowem?*, Gdańsk 2006, p. 12 (the author's teaching notes used during workshops).

extension of you, a parabola of your soul, a mirror of your experiences, mental states, thoughts and feelings. Your vocal folds, like your entire body, are a unique and highly subtle instrument. For them to serve you well, you simply have to take constant care of them”¹¹. A conductor leading the warm-up with a choral ensemble cannot suppress their emotions or effectively mask them. In this artistic work, one must reveal one’s true self with complete authenticity.

Throughout my artistic career, I have been guided by a saying frequently repeated by my charismatic choral conducting teacher at the Academy of Music in Kraków, Professor Arkadiusz Basztoń: There are no bad choirs, there are bad conductors.

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¹¹ Sylwia Prusakiewicz, *Zadbaj o swój głos i zobacz co się stanie*, Internetowe Wydawnictwo Złote Myśli, Gliwice 2006, p. 8.

Abstract

The choral ensemble warm-up

Vocal warm-up constitutes a key element of work with a choral ensemble. The aim of the warm-up is not only to prepare the vocal apparatus for intensive effort, but also to build the choir's collective sound as an instrument. Drawing on many years of experience as a choirmaster and on the relevant literature, the author presents the interdisciplinary nature of the choral warm-up. He discusses the significance and functions of the warm-up in choral practice, outlines the methodology of conducting vocal exercises in terms of their sequence and increasing difficulty and provides examples of practical solutions applicable both in professional ensembles and in choirs with varied levels of ability.

Keywords: choirmaster, choral ensemble, choral ensemble warm-up, vocal technique

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