

KEEPING FOCUS IN REHEARSALS

All choral leaders understand that the more focussed your group in rehearsals, the more productive they are. So how do you keep that attention, when sometimes you feel that the group just want to sit and chat for two hours?

Planning rehearsals is essential. If a leader comes across as disorganised, the choir will assume they can relax, and before you know if there's a constant noise level of chat. There's a caution there though – if your plan is too formulaic and lacks flexibility your group will know exactly what's coming, and after a few weeks they'll become bored, and in turn you'll have major retention issues.

Plan – but be prepared to deviate – maybe a planned 8 minute stretch on one song lasts 3 minutes due to more section time needed. Don't flog it, move on.

Plan – but mix it up. 5 minute round singing followed by ear training, and then breathing? One week, drop the humming and teach them a complicated new round.

Plan – but plot a distraction to ensure their attention. Whilst singing a scale during warm up, hold them on the fifth. Half the choir will continue on to the next note as their focus will have drifted – they'll concentrate harder next time!

Keeping the energy focussed required rapid change – especially with younger singers. 20 minutes of warm up is fine, but ensure you have several different tasks within that 20 minutes – humming, posture alignment, scale-singing, rounds, ear-training, songs with actions will all keep them on their toes.

It's a well-known fact that the best work is done at the start of the rehearsal – stamina isn't an issue, your singers are keen and enthusiastic and looking forward to the rehearsal ahead. However tempting as it is to remain working on one song for half an hour whilst this energy is high, don't. 10-15 minutes per song is the maximum, and even shorter with younger singers. Leaving a song at the point when your group are keen to continue will just mean they come back next week! Intersperse new repertoire with current – if your singers have been note-bashing and working hard on a new piece, it will be a relief to sing something they are more familiar with.

There will be times, of course, that focus is totally lost – you might make a mistake, there may be an outside distraction, or someone's phone may ring. Humour is often the best way to respond to these distractions, and gives you a good excuse to interact with your choir on a more social level. Nip the chatter in the bud though, before it gets too loud. If necessary, it might be a good idea to refocus with a round, or a song with actions.

A major reason why singers lack focus in rehearsals is that they may only see one another once a week, and be keen to catch up with news. This can't be avoided and it's essential regular breaks are taken for this purpose, as well as to have a physical rest. It's a good idea to organise social activities outside rehearsals too. It's a great opportunity for you, as a leader, to talk to the singers about non-choral subjects, but also ask for feedback, repertoire ideas and other suggestions. All this will increase the feeling of inclusion.

Finally – in these days of constant media intrusion, it's essential phones, iPad and (especially) watches are switched to do not disturb!