

# 1. Elementary Voice Training

## A Guide for Directors of Children's Choirs

We write a great deal about imaginative programming, enthusiastic leadership, coordination with the church school curriculum, and adequate preparation for rehearsals. Every one of these subjects is vitally important in our choir work and we speak of these things with certainty and clarity.

However, when we begin to talk or write about vocal method, we become less proficient in expressing ourselves clearly. This, I believe, is caused by different sets of terminology which we acquired at various periods of our own vocal studies. All of us should bear in mind that there are many ways of expressing the same truths, and that it is not necessary to verbalize with long professional terms in order to work successfully with children's voices. But *singing* is essential. Choirs are for singing. To sing well, children need instruction, guidance, and positive singing experiences.

What is good tone? Do I know what sounds I want to hear? Do I know how to go about developing good tone with my children? Though tone quality is an intangible thing, there are proven and tangible ways to achieve it. The foundations of good tone are easy to lay if approached in a positive, disciplined manner. The *development* of good tone, however, is never-ending.



**STOP**



**LOOK**



**LISTEN**

At your very next rehearsal, take this railroad crossing advice.



**STOP!** Stop singing *with* the children. Stop leading them with a too heavy piano. Stop being so satisfied with learning the notes that you never get to the *music*.



**LOOK!** Look at the children's faces. Do they show signs of physical strain? What about their eyes and expressions? Do they look alert and "tuned in," or are they passive and far-away in thought? Are they slumped over and long-necked? What is the overall picture of your young choristers as they sing? Body language gives us important clues.



**LISTEN!** Listen to the singing sounds the children are making. *Listen* honestly, objectively. Face the music! Don't drown them out with piano or your own voice. Are they shouting? Are they whispering? Are they talk-singing? Do you rely on a few good singers to carry the others?

### **How and when shall I begin my improvement campaign?**

Begin *now* – with YOU! Be sure that your inner ear knows what it wants to hear. Good recordings will help. Purchase at least one. Listen carefully, and be aware of tone quality, pitch, diction, dynamics, and phrasing.

Here is a short list of types of recordings which would provide realistic and positive vocal models.

- *a good church choir*  
Westwood Choristers, Minneapolis, MN  
Ronald A. Nelson, director
- *a select group*  
Bach Choir, Princeton, NJ  
Sue Ellen Page, director  
Cathedral Choristers, Corpus Christi, TX  
Lee Gwozdz and Greg Labus, co-directors
- *a concert choir*  
Toronto Children's Choir, Toronto, Canada  
Jean Ashworth Bartle, director
- *a professional choir*  
American Boy Choir, Princeton, NJ  
James Litton, director
- *a church related choir school*  
St. Thomas Boys' Choir, New York, NY  
Gerre Hancock, director
- *an English cathedral choir*  
King's College Choir, Cambridge, England  
Stephen Cleobury, director

Try singing hymns and anthems you plan to teach, not for the purpose of singing *with* the children, but to establish a concept of tone within yourself. The golden rule should be to show choristers how to do it, but then let them do it themselves. Choose a few good *a cappella* warmups to become aware of the vocal sounds your choristers are producing.

## Checkpoints for Your Next Rehearsal

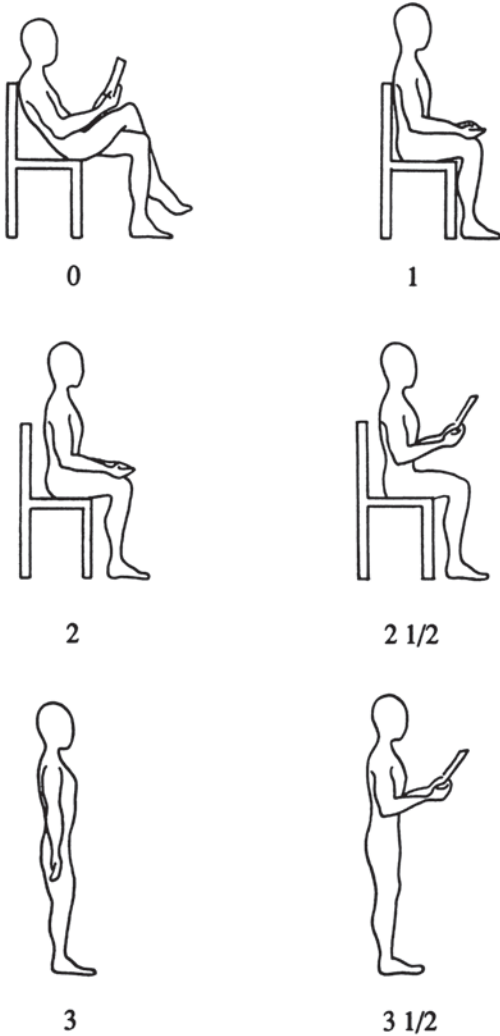
### ✓ Posture and breathing

These two basic principles go together. Teach children to sit *tall* without stiffness or tenseness (usually caused by raised shoulders). Shoulders and arms should hang at ease.

For singing while seated, feet should be squarely on the floor. Leg crossing should not be permitted during rehearsals.

When children sit or stand correctly, there is the natural tendency for the rib cage to expand and allow air to fill the lungs. Be sure your choristers get the idea of *expanding* to breathe (widening the lower rib cage to allow deep, low breathing) rather than high-chest, tense-neck breathing.

A sequence of posture positions:

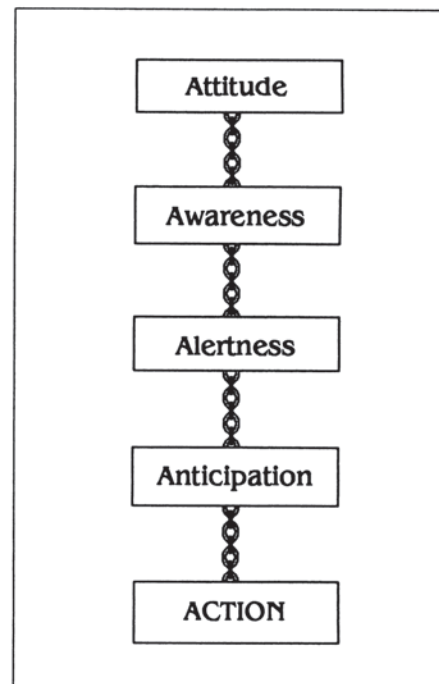


Children should be taught to breathe *quietly*. Close your eyes. Have choristers inhale so quietly that you cannot hear the slightest sound. For singing, breath should be inhaled through the mouth – so that the throat will be open and the air will be free to descend to fill the bottom of the lungs. To encourage brightness, suggest choristers think of breathing also through their eyes! (Imagery)

### ✓ Alertness

There is a definite link between good posture and the attitude of alertness. I believe that alertness, though required, must be inspired. Your children will “mirror” you. Encourage eye contact between each child and yourself. Children must be taught to *watch*, so they will develop a feeling of mutual endeavor with the director.

One of my favorite word-sequence posters looks like this:








### ✓ Think before singing

Concentrate! Control the breath so that the first word won't be a big explosion of air. Concentration can mean the difference between a good beginning and a poor one.

## Communicate Clearly to Choristers

When working with young singers, we need to know how to communicate what we *mean* and what we *expect* when we say, “Sit with your best posture,” or “take a big breath”!

Vocal term (We call it)	Active term (We say)	Supplementary statements (We need to <i>know</i> more than we say)
<p>Good posture</p> 	<p>Stand tall</p> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Stand (or sit) tall, both feet squarely on the floor. Aim toward ceiling with <i>crown</i> of head (<i>not</i> forehead).</li> <li>2. Chin down. Long-necked giraffes and stretched-necked children do not sing well.</li> <li>3. Keep shoulders down (not raised at stiff attention). Allow arms to hang loosely, while chest remains naturally high.</li> <li>4. Can you sit or stand this way and still be able to wiggle your head and shoulders loosely? Robots rarely sing beautifully!</li> <li>5. Encourage children to sit and stand with straight, supporting backbones. (Examine the size and style of the chairs you are using in your rehearsal room.)</li> </ol>
<p>Proper breathing</p>  <p>resting position (rib cage)</p>	<p>Expand</p>  <p>inhaling position (rib cage)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Expand rib-cage all around. I like to use the mental picture of a pebble tossed into a pool.                      </li> <li>2. Good posture is the best preparation for proper breathing. The rib cage should not “sink” down on the hip bones! Think <i>tall buoyancy</i>.</li> <li>3. Air must be <i>allowed</i> to enter <i>quietly</i> – it must not be sucked in, vacuum cleaner style. Breath must go low — to the bottom of the lungs — not high to the neck or shoulders.</li> <li>4. Breath should enter quietly through the mouth and through an open throat, as in the experience of a pleasant surprise. Try it! Suggest keeping the <i>molars</i> of the upper and lower jaws separated. (Lower jaw should swing slightly back, not jut forward.) Clenched teeth cause tension and prevent an open throat.</li> <li>5. Breath, expression of thought, and phrasing are all bound together.</li> <li>6. Teach children to be a little economical with breath. Never allow all the breath to escape on the first sound of a phrase, <i>not holding back</i>, but using it evenly and gradually, so breath will last to the end of the phrase. Save enough to end phrases with clarity.</li> </ol>