



BENSON'S MUSICAL MUSTS

adapted from Judy Bowers

Dr. Jeffrey Benson
San Jose State University

Teaching our singers to be independent musicians

1. Rule of **vowel purity**
Vowels are always pure with NO pollution (consonants like L, M, N, R, or other vowels).
2. Rule of **phrase shape**
Each phrase has a high point to which we crescendo and from which we diminuendo. The end of the phrase should generally be softer.
3. Rule of **long notes**
All long notes must grow or decay (grow or go). Never sit idly on a long note. (Note: this can tie in with Rule #2...long notes grow or go based on where they are in the phrase.)
4. Rule of **punctuation**
Breathe or lift at any punctuation mark.
5. Rule of **word stress**
Within the macro phrasing, we must work on micro phrasing. Lean into the more important syllables and words.
6. Rule of **diphthongs**
98% primary vowel, 2% shadow vowel
7. Rule of **slurs**
The first note of the slur gets weight; each note that follows gets less weight and is sung softer.
8. Rule of **short notes**
Short notes move TO long notes. They often need to be shorter than printed to stress the next beat. (Short to long, weak to strong)

While all these rules may not be true 100% of the time (rules are meant to be broken sometimes), having them in place helps give our singers ownership of the musical process and aids us in becoming dispensable.

51 IDEAS TO ENGAGE OUR SINGERS (and avoid routine)

Dr. Jeffrey Benson
San Jose State University

Dr. Laura Natta
Crosspoint Wellness



1. Do a warm-up in the middle of rehearsal
2. Pull out a piece from earlier in the year, just to sing through it once and then put it away
3. Switch the order of the solfege syllables in your warm-up
4. Sing a sight-singing exercise or musical phrase backwards
5. Sightread at the end of rehearsal
6. Ask your singers to write a haiku about the piece (or about the text)
7. Use Dalcroze to walk to a fabulous recording you want to share
8. Have your singers create a meme about one of your pieces
9. Ask your singers to write a new or companion text for the piece
10. Change the orientation of the room or alter the seating arrangement in some way
11. Bring a prop to class that relates to one of the songs and don't mention it until partway through rehearsal
12. Have them conduct along with you
13. Ask individuals to take turns conducting the choir
14. Have the singers interlock arms while singing
15. Have a small group of students sit out and listen, take notes and provide feedback
16. Only students in certain birthday months sing phrases
17. Ask students to lead sectionals or mini-rehearsals on student-led songs
18. Use Laban gestures (e.g. dab, flick, float, glide) with singers to teach articulation
19. Have students text each other the answer to a question you've asked
20. Step to the rhythm of the text
21. Have students stand in circles by section
22. Sing in the cafeteria or gym (rehearse or mini performance at lunch)
23. Sing with the lights off
24. Sing the piece twice as fast or twice as slow as usual
25. Step to the tactus
26. Try to avoid predictable half-step changes for each warm-up; bounce around keys or warm-up by whole step
27. Shape phrases with "choir gang signs"
28. Choose a rehearsal where you do not speak at all with your choir (everything is mimed)
29. Step to the subdivision (micro beat)
30. Have students text each other an interpretation of poetry, then share anonymously
31. Sing in a full circle around the room
32. Have students stand in mixed quartets
33. Have students act out the story of the text

34. Play solfege games where you add motions to several (or all) of the scale degrees (e.g. snap your fingers on “fa” or stomp your feet on “re”)
35. Ask singers to hold a chair while they’re singing in order to engage core
36. Sing in the stairwell (or another extremely resonant space in the building)
37. Have sections leave out a measure of music (audiate) as they rehearse
38. Rehearse outside
39. Have students create a skit about certain pieces
40. Ask the students to hold hands while they’re singing
41. Have singers record themselves on a device while singing with the full ensemble
42. Have singers send each other those recordings and provide feedback for a colleague
43. Alternate phrases of a song, so each row of the choir only sings a phrase at a time
44. After learning the foreign language fully, sing the terrible English version underneath
45. Stand and sing to the row behind
46. Have students sing with a chair in their arms, out in front of their bodies
47. Singers can compose a new fugue theme or melody to complement the repertoire
48. Have students switch parts in the middle of a piece (sight-read a new section’s part)
49. Include trivia in the rehearsals (related to the poetry, music history, theory, etc.)
50. Have small groups create a skit/commercial for your concert or to “sell” the piece/poetry
51. Sing solfege scales and leave out a different note each day

Selected Resources

Books

- Levitin, Daniel. *The Organized Mind*. New York: Dutton, 2014.
- Levitin, Daniel. *This is Your Brain on Music*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Sousa, David. *How the Brain Learns*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2011.
- Wolfe, Patricia. *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2010.

DVDs

- 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.

Dr. Jeffrey Benson
 San Jose State University
jeffrey.benson@sjsu.edu

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lnatta@crosspointwellness.com

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