



TOTAL
CHOIR
RESOURCES

Little Book of Choir Warm-ups

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**Ideas and
exercises to
inspire your
choir**

Welcome



Thank you for downloading the **Little Book of Choir Warm-ups**.

As choir leaders, we know how important it is to plan engaging and effective rehearsals that give your singers lots of variety and inspiration, while warming up their voices in essential ways.

The warm-ups in this book are arranged in five sections that relate to different aspects of singing and voice production. They are tried and tested on our choirs.

We like to mix and match exercises from the various sections to create warm-up sessions that are different every time and that get our choirs ready and eager to sing.

We hope you find these warm-ups helpful in planning your own choir rehearsals.

Have fun!

Victoria & Christine

PS: You can download FREE audio tracks to accompany the warm-ups at totalchoirresources.com/LBCWaudio

Step 1 - Relaxation

When our singers arrive for rehearsals, there's lots of chatter and a lively atmosphere as people greet their friends and catch up with news. We like to start our warm-up sessions with a bit of relaxation for three reasons.

Firstly, it calms the chatter and brings the group to silence.

Secondly, it changes everyone's focus from the stresses of the day to the activity they are about to embark on.

Thirdly, it helps to alleviate physical tension, which can impede good singing.

1 Shoulder rolls

Roll the shoulders forward then back, squeezing the shoulder blades together then releasing. Shrug the shoulders up, then release. Do this a few times.

Top tip: Whenever you ask your choir to do any sort of movement, don't forget to remind them to work within their own limitations and that they're free to modify anything or even leave it out altogether.

2 Head turns

Without twisting the shoulders, turn the head slowly one way then the other, gently releasing the neck muscles. Lower the chin to the chest, then raise it towards the ceiling (never allowing the head to fall back).

Top tip: This exercise sometimes gets a laugh when people turn their heads opposite ways and find themselves greeting their neighbour.

3 Lion Breath

This is a yoga exercise that's great for releasing tension. Take a deep slow breath in, and on the out-breath, straighten your arms, spread your hands, widen your eyes, stick out your tongue and say "Haaaaaa". Repeat.

Step 1 - Relaxation

4 Shake out

Gently wiggle your fingers, then your toes inside your shoes. Shake out your legs one by one, then your arms and hands.

Top tip: Keep it gentle, particularly when shaking out your hands.

5 Shrug shoulders

Gently start raising and releasing your shoulders, about twice a second. Then add a spoken "aah" sound with each shrug. Really let everything go!

Top tip: If your choir's enjoying this, try bouncing the knees too. It looks quite silly but it's fantastically relaxing.

6 Bad posture to good

Slouch into really bad posture, then gradually "grow" into good posture: tuck the pelvis under a little, pull the navel towards the lower back, expand the chest, lengthen the back of the neck and imagine being suspended by a thread from the crown of the head.

Top tip: You can add to this exercise by asking your singers to let the "thread" lift them onto the balls of their feet before lowering them gently down.

Step 1 - Relaxation

7 Tarzan

Beat your chest with your fists while saying “aah”, just like Tarzan. Extend this into a gentle massage, pummelling your legs, thighs, arms and shoulders (and anything else you can reach!).

8 “Clean your teeth” with your tongue

Slide your tongue around your teeth, reaching all the way around your mouth. A great way to release tension in the mouth and jaw.

9 Massage your face

Gently massage your jaw, cheeks, forehead and temples with your fingertips. Open and close your jaw a few times. Finish with a good, long yawn.

10 Rag doll

A bit like “bad posture to good”, but starting bent over forwards, head down and fingers trailing on or near the floor, like a rag doll or a marionette. Then “grow” upright.

Top tip: This exercise might not be suitable for all choirs. Make sure your singers know that they can skip anything they might find physically challenging.

Step 2 - Breathing

Good breathing is essential to good singing. A steady, consistent breath helps to produce a pleasant sound, and allows us to sing long phrases with confidence.

Including breathing exercises in our warm-ups encourages our singers to develop the muscular strength and stamina needed to give their voices reliable support.

1 Birthday cake

Ask the choir to imagine that there is a birthday cake about one metre in front of them. They have to blow out the candles from where they're standing, just by saying "ha!". The little jolt that they feel in their abdomens when they do this gives them an idea of where their "support" muscles are and how to engage them when they are singing.

Top tip: Inexperienced singers often struggle with the idea of "vocal support". This exercise is a good way to introduce them to the concept.

2 Bicycle tyres

Once your singers have got the hang of engaging their support muscles, they can begin to strengthen them. Take a breath halfway in (don't fill the lungs completely), then, with a hand on the abdomen, say "ha, ha, ha, ha" etc. The lungs will naturally re-fill with air slightly between each "ha", allowing you to carry on the exercise for 10 to 20 repetitions of "ha", or as many as is comfortable before taking a long recovery breath.

Top tip: If your singers complain that their tummy muscles ache a bit after this exercise, they're probably doing it right!

Step 2 - Breathing



3 Surprise!

Breathing in quickly and silently is an essential skill for singers. Introduce your singers to this idea by asking them to breathe in as though they have been taken by surprise. Combine this with a long out-breath to "ss". Gradually increase the length of the out-breath.

4 Long note

Breathe in, then sing a long note out to "oo". As you breathe out, keep the ribcage and sternum lifted (shoulders relaxed) and imagine the navel gently drawing up and back towards the small of the back. Repeat, extending the long note each time.

Top tip: This is a great exercise for reminding your singers how their posture affects their breathing.

5 Long note harmonies

You can add some extra interest to the long note exercise by having different sections of the choir singing different notes to make up a chord. Experiment with adding second, fourth, sixth, seventh and ninth intervals to major and minor triads - a great way to combine breathing exercises with a bit of harmony tuition.

Step 2 - Breathing

6 Sack of potatoes

Singers often struggle to breathe deeply without raising the shoulders and tensing the neck muscles. Ask them to imagine holding a sack of potatoes in each hand which prevents them raising their shoulders at all. Then breathe in deeply and out to "haaaaaa".

7 Rhythmic breaths

Take a deep breath in, then say "ha, ha, ha, ha" on the out-breath to a slow 4 beat. Breathe in again and repeat, but this time each "ha" is double speed, so 8 to the bar. Finally, double the speed again so there are 16.

8 Chin to chest

Breathe out, lowering chin to chest. Breathe in, raising the head so that you are facing forward, then breathe out to a low hum. This is particularly effective and relaxing with closed eyes.

9 Dramatic sighs

Breathe in, then as you breathe out, sigh heavily as though you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. Repeat, with even more melodrama.

Step 3 - Gentle Range Building

We all want to sing as confidently as possible across our vocal range.

These warm-ups encourage singers to explore the full extent of their range without straining their voices.

The exercises in this section are easy to modify with different vowel and consonant sounds to create nearly infinite variations.

1 Humming slides

Any gentle humming exercise is a great way to start singing comfortably and safely. It also focuses the voice in the front of the face, which assists with tone and resonance. Start low in the voice and slide up and down a perfect fifth to “mm”. Repeat, climbing a semitone each time.

Top tip: Encourage your singers to think of the slide as “turning a dial” so that they avoid leaping between notes.

2 Sirens

Sirens are similar to slides but rather than having a set pattern like the previous exercise, they allow singers to explore their own ranges. Ask your singers to hum with a closed mouth from the lowest note they can make (obviously this will vary from person to person) up to their highest note and back again. Try this a couple more times asking them to extend the range a little at both ends.

Top tip: make sure singers keep their neck and shoulders relaxed. Many singers have a tendency to raise the shoulders as the pitch of their voice rises.

Step 3 - Gentle Range Building

3 Descending sirens

If you are singing a piece and want to access the lower part of your range, a few descending sirens often do the trick. They're also great at "ironing out" breaks in the voice.

4 Descending chromatic scales

Singers, particular those higher voices, tend to focus all their energies on building their range at the top and often neglect their lower range. Sing descending chromatic scales using different vowel sounds, and starting a semitone lower each time, and plumb the vocal depths.

5 Vowel sounds with slide

Ask your choir to speak elongated vowels "ah-eh-ee-oh-oo" in a single breath. Then sing the sequence on a single note, adding a slide (up a fifth and back works well) on the "oo" at the end of each phrase.

Repeat this pattern, raising or lowering the starting note by a semitone each time. Each cycle of the vowels with a slide should be done in one breath.

Top tip: Check that your singers are keeping their jaws relaxed and their mouths open.

Step 3 - Gentle Range Building

6 *A la Mode*

While your choir sings scales that gently stretch the top and bottom of their vocal ranges, there's no reason why you can't challenge their brains as well.

Try alternating major (Ionian mode) and natural minor (Aeolian mode) scales. You can also try other modal scales:

Dorian - eg. all the white notes on a piano from D to D.

Phrygian - eg. all the white notes from E to E.

Lydian - eg. all the white notes from F to F.

Mixolydian - eg. all the white notes from G to G.

Locrian - eg. all the white notes from B to B.

All these modes have a distinctive "feel" and it can be interesting for your singers to start thinking beyond major and minor.

If you need a mnemonic for remembering the order of modes, our favourite is this:

I	(Ionian)
Don't	(Dorian)
Play	(Phrygian)
Loud	(Lydian)
Music	(Mixolydian)
After	(Aeolian)
Lunch	(Locrian)

Step 4 - Resonance

“Resonance” refers to the vibration of sound waves in the cavities of our head and neck. These vibrations allow us to project our voices so that we can be heard by an audience.

To improve resonance, we can encourage our singers to keep an open throat while they’re singing, place consonants at the front of their mouths, and maintain a “bright” facial expression.

1 Simple hums

Humming is one of the best ways to introduce singers to the concept of resonance. Ask them to hum quietly, then increase the volume. They should feel their lips buzzing.

Extend the hum and up and down the choir’s vocal ranges, feeling how the buzzing moves around the face and neck.

Top tip: Try “nn” and “ng” as well as “mm”.

2 Fricatives

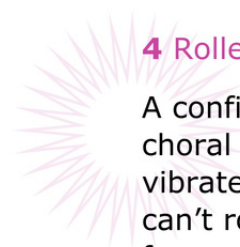
Fricative consonants (“friction” consonants) are those that make a sound by impeding the flow of air, like “v”. These are great for getting the lips, tongue, throat and cheeks warmed up. Try pulsing a long sound like this: “Vvvv-Vvvv-Vvvv”.

Other fricatives to try are: f, s, z, th (as in “there”), sh, j (as in the French “jus”).

3 Descending scales

Ask your singers to place their hand flat on their upper chest. Sing some descending scales to “ng” (as in “sing”) and feel how the resonance moves from the head into the chest.

Step 4 - Resonance



4 Rolled "r"

A confident rolled "r" is important in traditional western choral singing. It occurs when the front of the tongue vibrates against the hard palate. Many people think they can't roll an "r", whereas genetic limitations affect very few.

Rolling an "r" up and down a sliding scale gets the whole mouth, face and throat buzzing and warm.

Top tip: Singers who can't manage a rolled "r" can vibrate the lips instead (like a horse snorting).

5 Bright face

Singing with a "bright" facial expression, with the cheeks lifted as in a smile, makes a huge difference to the resonance and tone of our singing voices.

Ask the choir to sing any easy song or round with exaggerated happy and alert faces. They'll probably feel rather silly, but you'll quickly discover that what they think is "over the top" is actually spot-on.

Top tip: Sometimes, a reminder to "smile" can result in distorted vowel sounds because singers instinctively stretch their mouths sideways. Try asking them to think "awake" or "bright" instead.

Step 4 - Resonance

6 Thinking “up”

When singing any descending passage, it’s easy to end up a bit flat, both in tone and pitch. Try singing descending scales while gradually raising your hands, palms up, towards the ceiling.

The same can help *vice versa* (pitch moving up, hands moving down) to help singers who are trying to access their higher range without straining. Sing ascending scales while moving the hands from shoulder height down, palms down.

7 Papa Mama

Sing “papa mama” repeatedly on a single note, concentrating on keeping the consonants at the front of the mouth. Speed up the repetitions.

8 Ninga ninga

An “ng” sound is good for gently encouraging a resonant tone. Try ascending then descending scales, singing “ninga ninga” on each note, ending with “ning” and holding the “ng” sound for an extended note. Really feel the resonance in the face, particularly in the nasal cavity.

Step 5 - Team-building

Whatever the style and genre of your choir, it's essentially a musical team, and it's vital that the team members work well together.

At Total Voice, we like to get our singers mixing up and interacting with each other with some easy songs and silly games. Here are few ideas to get you started.

1 Rhythm game

Divide your singers into groups (4 to 6 sections will work best) and give them a rhythmic pattern, like 4/4. The first group comes up with a bass riff; the next group builds on that with a counter-rhythm, melody or even just some spoken words. Anything goes!

Each group adds their own improvised line and keeps repeating it. Once you've got all the parts working together, play around with dynamics and "soloing" one part at a time.

Top tip: To help with inspiration, give the choir a topical theme on which to base their improvisation.

2 Grand Old Duke

This is one of our favourite ice-breaker games. Sing the nursery rhyme *The Grand Old Duke of York*. Then repeat it, replacing the word "up" with a clap. On the second repeat, replace "up" with a clap and "down" with a stamp. Finally, sing it one more time very fast, with the claps and the stamps.

Top tip: Another of our favourites is "Papa's got a head like a ping-pong ball" sung to the tune of the William Tell Overture. This also works well with a clap on "ping" and a stamp on "pong".

Step 5 - Team-building

3 Silly voices

Pick an easy song or round (nursery rhymes work well). Sing it through to remind the choir how it goes, then ask them to sing it again using a variety of silly voices, such as circus ringmaster, Broadway star, shy five year old or squeaky mouse. Yes, it's childish, but it gets the choir laughing and creates a great atmosphere.

4 Singing to each other

It's easy for choral singers to get into the habit of singing from the same position in the choir at every rehearsal. Sometimes, singers are even assigned a place. It's helpful to give your choir an idea of how they sound overall.

If your choir is small enough, finish a rehearsal by mixing up your singers and having them stand in a large circle, facing inward. Sing something the choir knows well, and encourage your singers to really listen to the way the different parts and harmonies intertwine.

If your choir is too big to have everyone in a circle, try simply asking them to face towards the centre of the choir. If you can mix them up before you do it, all the better. They'll get a whole new experience of the sound of the choir.

Step 5 - Team-building

5 Singing on the move

This is a similar exercise to the previous one and, again, you need a bit of space. Either pick an easy round or a song that the choir knows confidently. Ask your singers to sing their parts while they “mingle” - just an easy walk around the room so that they are continually on the move and they hear lots of different voices and parts moving towards and away from them.

This is a great way to encourage your singers to embrace and enjoy the different harmonies going on around them, rather than trying to block them out.

6 Birthday rounds

Sometimes, with a large group, you want a simple way of assigning parts for a round so that the voices are mixed up. If you don't have the space or time to move people around, this is a great method of creating random groups.

For three parts, ask those with birthdays from January to April to sing the first part, May to August to sing the second and September to December to sing the third. For four parts, choose three-month blocks etc.



Total Choir Resources is a website dedicated to giving choir leaders the tools they need to start, grow and inspire successful, happy choirs.

You'll find help with every aspect of leading, conducting and managing choirs plus resources to help you boost your skills and confidence.

And when you're ready to take things to the next level, check out our membership options to get the training, resources and support you need to be the best choir leader you can be.

Find out more at
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