

## James Manwaring

### Introduction

Music classrooms are always full of one of the most powerful instruments available to us – voices. No matter how well resourced our departments are, we can – and should – always get students using their voices to learn more about music.

In this resource, I'll look at some of the ways we can use singing to help with learning, giving practical suggestions and ideas. Singing isn't something reserved for trained vocalists, musicians or professionals. It's something that we can all use, and a tool for every student.

Rather than looking at singing songs in a choir, we'll focus instead on using singing to teach music and engage students in the classroom. Using these ideas will help to get less engaged students using their voices and developing their musicianship along the way.

### The importance of singing in the classroom

Singing is important: we hear that all the time. It not only helps to develop students as musicians, but it also has a range of health benefits. Sing Up ([www.singup.org](http://www.singup.org)) is a national organisation whose aim is to promote singing in school. Its website points to a number of key benefits to singing:

- ▶ Development of fine motor control in the vocal system – basis for lifelong vocal identity.
- ▶ Respiratory and cardiac function – singing is aerobic.
- ▶ Neurological functioning – connecting different areas of the brain.
- ▶ Communication skills – voice reflects mood.
- ▶ Enhanced sense of social inclusion – choirs can provide positive group identity.
- ▶ Realisation of musical potential – understanding phrasing, structure and tone colouring.
- ▶ Increased knowledge, understanding and skills about the world around us.

There's more information on these benefits on the Sing Up website:

[www.singup.org/blog/article/1390-the-benefits-of-singing/](http://www.singup.org/blog/article/1390-the-benefits-of-singing/)

The health, social and musical benefits of singing should be clear to teachers. But it's worth sharing them with students, to help them understand why they're singing in school. They don't question physical education, so hopefully once they're aware of the benefits, they won't question singing either.

Our goal should be to get students singing as much as possible – not just singing songs, but also singing to learn and understand more about music.

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## Singing technique

### Warm-ups

Warm-ups are an important part of the singing process. Before they actually begin singing, students should learn how to prepare their mind, body and voice.

Just like in a PE lesson, a warm-up should take place before anything else. As students develop their singing, this will become even more important to maintaining a healthy voice. Embedding warm-ups in our singing practice will help students to do the same. As they embark on their own solo singing and performing, they will need to have a strong personal warm-up routine to ensure they are not damaging their voices.

Warm-ups can be grouped into three broad categories, but those categories are not entirely separate. It might, however, be helpful to think about these three general areas, and then look to see if you are covering them in your warm-ups.

### Physical and fun

Start your warm-ups by focusing on the whole body – singing is, after all, a whole-body activity. Ask your students to stand up, find space and get ready to warm up their body. Space is important, but obviously they will be likely to be behind a desk in a classroom.

Here are a few ideas for physical warm-ups to get you started:

- ▶ Big stretch combined with a big yawn – this will get everyone yawning!
- ▶ Reaching up to the sky, down to the floor, and off to the sides.
- ▶ Gentle neck rolls, changing direction and not rushing – be aware of the body.
- ▶ Rising up onto tiptoes and back down – think ballet dancing, or along those lines.
- ▶ A gentle head massage, working fingers right into the top of the head.
- ▶ Run fingers over the face to wake up the muscles.
- ▶ A big frown and an even bigger smile – smiling is a crucial component of singing.
- ▶ Scrunch up the body by crossing legs, arms, clenching fists and pulling the body in. Then release and feel all the tension leave the body.
- ▶ Pretend to hug a big tree, looking right up to the top of it.
- ▶ Pretend to chew on something, exaggerating just how big the thing is, and how hard it is to chew.

Starting with something physical and fun will help to engage students, and get them ready for singing. The age of the students is likely to affect what you choose to do, although all ages can enjoy some fun warm-ups.

### Vocal preparation

Now that the whole body is ready to sing, we need to focus on the voice and the vocal cords. This is a really important stage, and helps us keep our vocal cords healthy. These warm-ups will help to loosen the vocal folds, and we can use the analogy of an athlete warming up before a big race.

Here are some ideas for vocal warm-ups:

- ▶ Take a deep breath in, hold it, and then breath out. Aim to stand tall, relax the body, and bring the air deep into your diaphragm. It might be good to get students holding their hands on their hips so that they can feel the air filling from their diaphragm.
- ▶ Add to the deep breathing by adding a hiss sound as you exhale.
- ▶ A gentle hum going up and down a scale.
- ▶ Use an 'ng' or 'ooh' sound to go up and down a scale. Start at the bottom of your range and move up from there. This is sometimes called a siren sound as it sounds a bit like an ambulance.
- ▶ Lip trills help to remove tension, and they also make a fun noise. Relax the lips and then form a bit of a pout. Then breathing through the nose, make a sound a little bit like a boat starting up or a motorbike riding past. This sound can then be used to go high or low. Students will enjoy gradually increasing the pitch until they reach their highest possible note.
- ▶ Similar to the lip trills, do a tongue trill where you pass air over your tongue making it rapidly vibrate on an 'R' syllable. Think of a cat relaxing and gently purring.
- ▶ Use one of the following sounds and sing either one note or a scale – ma, pa, la, ta, mee, may, mi, mo. You can obviously extend this list, and you can include short staccato versions and really long versions. You can even add in the dimension of sounding like an opera singer, a disgruntled teenager, a wicked witch or the Queen. Using simple syllables like this in different ways is a fun way to warm up.
- ▶ Now try a tongue twister to get the tongue moving and start the move towards singing. This could use just one note, or you may know a tongue twister with a short melody attached. You could try 'A proper cup of coffee from a proper copper coffee pot'.
- ▶ Use open vowel sounds like an 'oo'.
- ▶ Exhale on a 'hiss', varying how long each hiss lasts for.

It's worth mentioning to students that warming up the voice is important, not just for singing, but also for public speaking, acting and presenting. We use our voices in all walks of life, not just singing. Shouting and straining the vocal cords is never a good idea.

### Musical and mental warm-ups

The body and vocal cords should now be ready for some singing, but it's good to add in one more layer of warm-ups. These ideas should help get the brain working, and the students engaged – if they're not already:

- ▶ Sing a scale using numbers. You could start with one to five and then move on to the full octave. You could switch between a major and minor scale to add variety.
- ▶ Now, swap the numbers for letters and get them singing the alphabet. It's easy on the way up, but who knows the alphabet backwards? You could even try it in another language.
- ▶ Swap scales for arpeggios and use different words or vowel sounds to keep it interesting.
- ▶ Singing intervals is a warm-up that will also embed some good musical understanding (this will be covered in more detail later). Use numbers and gradually work up the scale – 1, 121, 12321, 1234321, and so on.

On top of this list, you can also try out any short songs, rhymes, poems or rounds that you already know. The more fun they are, the better. This section will complete the warm-ups, and you can now start to work on the song or activity that you had planned.

But in fact, even the warm-up can teach students something. Stick to a routine, and your students will keep that with them for life, ensuring that they're always ready to sing.

## Singing elements

### Melody

The obvious place to start with melody is to get students singing melodic patterns that they can then analyse. You can consider not only the melodic shape, but also the intervals and patterns that are included in the melody.

An easy way to start is to get the class to sing 'Happy Birthday' to whoever has had the most recent birthday. There are a few things you can then point out to students about melody:

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the melody of 'Happy Birthday' in 3/4 time, starting on a treble clef with one flat (B-flat major). The melody is written on a single line. Callout boxes with lines pointing to specific notes provide the following explanations:

- They start with an upbeat or anacrusis:** Points to the first two notes (F4 and G4).
- An interval of a major 4th is sung here:** Points to the interval between the second note (G4) and the fifth note (C5).
- The interval changes here to a perfect 5th:** Points to the interval between the fifth note (C5) and the sixth note (F5).
- They have just sung an octave:** Points to the interval between the first note (F4) and the eighth note (F5).
- There is a semitone between these two notes:** Points to the interval between the eighth note (F5) and the ninth note (F5).
- The tune ends of the tonic in F major:** Points to the final note (F5).

The ideas shown on the image above can be used with any other melody that you might choose to sing with them. It could be a nursery rhyme, or a popular song. Remember to keep the focus on musical knowledge, because that will give the students a sense of purpose.

Once they're confident with singing, you could start a lesson with a melody on the board. It's advisable to choose something that students might already recognise. As they enter the classroom, ask them to start singing it through and then see if they can work out what the tune is. This should get them signing without them even realising. Here's a tune to get you started, can your students work out what it is?

The image shows a single staff of musical notation for a mystery melody in 3/4 time, starting on a treble clef with one flat (B-flat major). The melody consists of the following notes: F4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The melody ends with a double bar line.

### Melodic intervals

Intervals are mentioned in the first music example above, and they're obviously a key component of melody. They're also worth considering separately, and singing intervals can help hugely with understanding them. Intervals are simply much easier to understand when they are sung, a fact that can help students who take on melodic dictation tasks at GCSE and A level. Using well-known songs to help identify particular intervals is a helpful way to remember them. Here are some examples:

- ▶ Major 2nd: 'Happy Birthday', between the second and third notes of the tune.
- ▶ Major 3rd: 'When the Saints Go Marching In'
- ▶ Perfect 4th: 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing'
- ▶ Perfect 5th: 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star', between the second and third notes of the tune.
- ▶ Major 6th: 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean'.
- ▶ Major 7th – 'Take On Me', first two notes of the chorus.
- ▶ Octave: 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow'.

Basing a lesson around singing intervals is almost an extended vocal warm-up. Once you have students confidently singing different intervals, they will then be able to use them for their own warm-up routine.

- 1 Ask pupils to stand around the room in a semi-circle and get ready to sing. You might like to take them through some brief physical and mental warm-ups, but the intervals task is basically a vocal warm-up in itself.
- 2 Start by establishing a suitable starting note – this will depend on the nature of your class. If it's a mixed class of broken voices, then pick a starting note that will work for everyone. Now sing a scale up from this starting note using numbers 1 to 8.
- 3 Now that students have the scale in mind, you can start to sing intervals. Start with 1-2, then go up from there – 1-3, 1-4, 1-5, and so on.
- 4 Use your fingers: hold up one finger indicating that students should sing the starting tonic note. Now choose a different number and hold up the corresponding number of fingers. This will get the class singing different notes and intervals. Keep returning to 1, and get them waiting in anticipation to sing the next note.
- 5 Now split the class in two and use the finger technique to get them singing different intervals at the same time. Ask for a student volunteer to help and get each side of the class singing different intervals.
- 6 From this point, you can start to incorporate minor, diminished and segmented intervals to get them developing their ears. This will of course depend on their age and stage.

At the start of your following lessons, set students a challenge to sing a selection of intervals. These can be on the board as they arrive, and they can start to sing the intervals to themselves. It will sound a little chaotic, but students will also be able to listen to their own voices and internal ears. When they're in a GCSE or A level exam, they'll benefit from a developed internal voice when it comes to dictation exercises.

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You might consider 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean' if you're looking for a fun vocal warm-up. Every time students sing a word beginning with 'b' they must stand up. The next time they sing a word beginning with 'b' they sit down again.

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## Harmony

Singing can also be a valuable tool in helping students understand chords and cadences. The lesson focus will be harmony, but you can use singing to help students build the necessary knowledge and understanding. And of course, as with melody above, they will all be singing, and thereby building their own internal understanding.

In simple terms, you'll get your class to sing a chord. Start with a major chord, and then consider how to turn it into a minor chord:

- ▶ Split the class into three groups and assign each group a note from the chord.
- ▶ Then instruct the middle group to lower their note to make the chord minor.

This is a simple technique, but one that helps embed understanding of harmony.

With a more able class, you can then move on to singing a chord progression. This might seem like a challenging task at first, but if you plan to sing a four-chord progression, each group only needs to sing four notes in order to contribute. If we want to sing a I-V-vi-IV progression in C major, here are the notes that each group will need to sing:

Although the tuning and the singing should both be of a good standard, the focus here is more to learn about chords and chord progressions. Encourage students to stand with good posture, breathe correctly, and sing with confidence.

You can add variations by asking students to make each note staccato or accented. This will give the chord progression a different feel, and they'll start to feel like an a cappella group. There are, of course, numerous videos on YouTube of professional a cappella groups (one particularly good example is Pentatonix: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4VGPIZ\\_ww0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4VGPIZ_ww0)). Inspire the students by showing them how groups themselves build up chord progressions.

Once students can confidently sing the chord progression, you can then move on to focusing on some other key components of harmony:

- ▶ Get the class to sing chord V and chord I to emphasise what a perfect cadence sounds like.
- ▶ Create a fourth group, and instruct the singers to stay singing the tonic note underneath the other four groups singing the chord progression. This will show the effect of a pedal note.
- ▶ In a more able group, move on to exploring suspensions: ask one group to keep their note going while the other two groups move on to their next note. Suspensions can be tricky to grasp, but when students sing them, they get to experience them in a whole new way.

## Tonality

In itself, singing scales will help students understand tonality. It's a simple thing to do, but one that again serves to embed singing in the classroom and increase understanding.

Seeing a scale on a whiteboard or screen is one thing, but singing it is quite another. Work through major, minor, pentatonic and blues scales to help students understand the differences between them. Then you might even like to move on to modes, and return to looking at intervals, to emphasise what makes each mode different.

- ▶ When you sing scales with your students, always start on a note that isn't too high – particularly at the start of the lesson.
- ▶ Encourage students to always stand correctly and breathe into their diaphragm. Every time you do any singing, it's a chance to embed good habits and posture.
- ▶ Sing a major scale, and ask spot to spot where they're singing a semitone.
- ▶ Now move on to a minor scale, and ask students to spot the differences with the major scale that they've just sung.

Understanding modes is crucial for students who are going to move on to study GCSE and A level music. Singing modes will help students internalise the modes' patterns. They'll be able to experience how the semitone moves position in the mode depending on its starting note.

You could even start with a random selection of tones and semitones on the board, and see if anyone can sing them. Then start to form them into modes, and ask students to attempt to sing them.

- 1 Pick a mode that you want your class to learn – let's start with Dorian.
- 2 Now pick a starting note that will work for the class you have in front of you.
- 3 Play or sing them the mode and ask them to sing it back to you.
- 4 Now, ask them to identify when they've sung a semitone by raising their hands.
- 5 Move on to a different mode, for instance Aeolian. Repeat the task above, asking students to identify the semitones in the mode.
- 6 To take things even further, ask a student, or small group, to sing one of the modes using a different starting note that you give them from the front.

There are various songs that are modal, and several links to GCSE and A level set works. Once you've completed the above tasks, you might consider moving on to one of them. Here are a few examples:

- ▶ Dorian mode: 'Scarborough Fair' (Simon and Garfunkel: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Jj4s9l-53g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Jj4s9l-53g))
- ▶ Dorian mode: 'Eleanor Rigby' (The Beatles: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuS5NuXRb5Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuS5NuXRb5Y))
- ▶ Mixolydian mode: 'Norwegian Wood' (The Beatles: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y\\_V6y1ZCg\\_8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_V6y1ZCg_8))
- ▶ Aeolian mode: 'Sultans of Swing' (Dire Straits: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofAQhSRLQnM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofAQhSRLQnM))
- ▶ Dorian mode: 'Drunken Sailor' (Irish Rovers: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGyPuey-1Jw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGyPuey-1Jw))

## Conclusion

When students use their voices, they internalise their learning, develop confidence and learn how to express themselves musically. When we're not in a music classroom, we will always have students voices available to use in a lesson. Singing is an essential tool for learning, and I hope this resource has given you ideas and the impetus to get students confidently using their most powerful asset. Building a routine of singing into your teaching will help students to gain confidence, and to see singing as part of their musical learning journey.