

Sight-Singing For Mastery

Teaching Beginning Sight-Singing

By Dan Davison

Background

For 34 years I've been trying to teach my choir students to sight-sing. As a beginning choir teacher, I started with the old Melodia Sight-Singing book, and then tried 333 Elementary Exercises by Zoltan Kodaly. Finally I wrote my own curriculum in 1989, and completely rewrote it in 1999. Finally, in 2010 I did another complete re-write, and this time I felt like I had a system I was satisfied with. Now I'd like to share these materials with others.

The Format

With my first two sight-singing systems, I stapled all the lessons together into a booklet. What I found, however, was that the booklets began to have pages missing, and they eventually fell apart. Now I find it much easier to simply pass out one page at a time to each student. (one lesson on each side) Since these materials are provided in a pdf format, each educator can print out just the pages that are needed. Also, since the materials are provided on a "site license" basis, each teacher can reproduce plenty of copies so as to always have enough materials for the class. Also, you will notice that this system merely provides exercises. I have faith that any music teacher can introduce the proper rhythms and intervals without the aid of a book

Scope And Sequence

This sight-singing system is not intended to be comprehensive. In fact, the main goal of this system is simply to help students get better at correctly singing major thirds, minor thirds, and fourths. When working with my students, I found "skips" to be substantially harder to negotiate than "steps." For this reason, the first 20 pages of this system are largely devoted to various types of thirds and fourths.

At the same time, I found that there was no need to provide separate exercises for rhythm. In this system, rhythmic elements are gradually introduced so that by lesson 20, the rhythms of each exercises are quite advanced. The gradual increase of rhythmic complexity keeps the students interested so that there can be more practice on the original goal of negotiating thirds and fourths.

Sticking Mostly To One Key

You will see that the first twenty lessons of this system are all in the key of C. This has been done on purpose. In my first two sight-singing systems, I switched keys on every page. However, I found that all of the attention of the students had to be focused on learning where "do" and "re" and "mi" were in the new key. In this system, more of the attention of each student can be devoted to interpreting the pitches and the rhythms.

A Five-Note Range

It is my guess that most of the students using this system will be between the ages of 11 and 16. If that is the case, then there is a good likelihood that there will be changing voices in the class. When changing male voices are present, teachers can often find it difficult to find a “common range” that all boys can sing. This job is made easier if the range is limited to a fifth. For this reason, teachers are encouraged to perform the exercises in whatever key best suits the needs of the class.

A Daily Routine

I found it best in my own classes if I did a little bit of sight-singing every day in my classes. I eventually settled into a pattern where each choir worked on two exercises every day. Also, it is essential to give time to the students to practice silently before performing the exercise with the class. When students perform together, the pace is almost always too fast for some students, and too slow for others. Silent practice allows for each student to work at their optimum rate. It is also possible to have student all sing the exercise out loud at their own speed. These techniques help avoid “flocking”. Flocking is the ability of students to instantaneously copy the stronger students in the class, thereby making it sound like all of the students have correctly interpreted that exercise.

An Easy Reward

I have a comfortable office chair in my office. One day, I took out the chair and said that I would give it to the best sight-singer, and they could sit in it for the rest of the day. Then I said, “please signal to yourself lesson 5C and 5D.” After the class performed the exercise, I had a little ceremony where I awarded the “comfy chair” to one of the best students. After that, the students wanted a comfy chair award every day. It seemed to make them work harder.

Every once in a while, the class would not perform an exercise to my expectations. No comfy chair was awarded on that day. It was a little disappointing, and I think the students realized that it was really done “tongue in cheek”, but they did try harder the next day.

Learning Key Signatures

Lessons 21-36 are “half-page” lessons designed to give students practice in identifying key signatures and then identifying the corresponding new places for the syllables. These exercises are designed as worksheets. The students should fill out the worksheets and turn them in for a grade. Again, the range is kept to just a fifth, but now the fifth spans in different parts of the major scale so that “la” and “ti” are incorporated into the scale.