



12 Simple Rehearsal Tips for a Better Middle School Choir Experience

Dear friends,

Like any middle school choir director, my rehearsal tips change, grow, and adjust as the days pass. Here are twelve tips that have worked consistently for me over the years as I've taught and rehearsed thousands of middle school singers. My hope is that there will be one or more suggestions here to help you in your work with this most challenging and most rewarding group of singers: middle schoolers!

Sincerely,
Greg Gilpin

1 Plan your rehearsal. Don't enter that room until you know what you are going to do during every five-minute interval in the rehearsal. Put together a formula or "menu:" posture, breathing and gentle vocal warm-ups as your appetizer; more involved exercises and warm-ups that apply to your first piece in rehearsal as your salad; the choral repertoire you'd like to rehearse as your main meal; and then something fun to sing or an activity to share at the end for dessert. Remember, you want your class singing and happy as they leave the room! You can also have dessert in the middle of your main meal, if you'd like! Dr. Tim Seelig taught me this wonderful idea, and it works!

2 Proper warm-ups are important, and vocal exercises should be incorporated throughout the rehearsal as needed, not just the beginning. Middle school singers can get bored with singing the music! You can also adapt the piece that you are practicing into a vocal exercise while rehearsing it. As an example of this idea, try only singing the vowels—no consonants—to achieve more *legato* singing.

3 Discipline—keep them busy! If you look down at your music, trying to figure out what you want do next, then you've already lost them! Refer to #1. I tend to work quickly to keep them very engaged throughout the rehearsal.

4 Also, do not give them too much information. Sometimes, as leaders, we try to be funny, tell a joke, and give way too much information about the goals for rehearsal, what is expected for an upcoming trip, etc. We do this without realizing that ten minutes have past, and your choir is looking at you with glazed eyes or carrying on another conversation the whole time. **Stop talking, more singing!**

5 Dynamically speaking, **don't over sing**. Middle school singers think that energy and excitement equal *forte*. Teach them the opposite. You will be rewarded with fuller, more beautiful and controlled singing, especially from your guys.

6 While rehearsing, **work on diction and cut-offs**, and demand excellence here. It makes all the difference with young singers and their performance. Most of the time, you can do this through your conducting. Teach your choirs to watch your conducting, and this will teach YOU to conduct well for them. Remember, each choir may demand you to conduct a bit differently. Know your choir and make sure they know you! I like to create warm-ups that use my conducting skills (and "signs") to help my choir learn what I do for cut-offs, dynamics, and diction. I find that most choirs sound the way that their conductor appears conducting. Be wise and careful!

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7 One of my secrets for good, round sound with middle school singers is “**lips forward, please.**” What a change in sound when I have them sing with their lips forward on vowels. Oh my! They sound two years older, *and* the singers HEAR the difference and immediately embrace it! Remember, THEY want to sing well too, even though they tend to hide that fact more often than not.

8 **Give them a break!** I realize that rehearsal time is sometimes short, few, or far between. Regardless, make sure you give them a break. Do an activity—even if it’s only for five minutes—that lets them learn about each other, laugh, and think. YOU might need the break as well. Everyone will work better when given a break for dessert during rehearsal. Just make it worthwhile.

9 **Repertoire**—first, you need to enjoy the repertoire. Your audience also MUST enjoy the repertoire. Your students should enjoy most of it, but there will always be times when you need them to learn a choral work that may not be their favorite. Make sure that you select something that balances that particular work so that they feel fulfilled each rehearsal.

10 **Programming**—wow, this is quite an issue, as we have all sat through many concerts in a daze or holding our ears and looking at our watches. In addition to the repertoire tips in #9, be prepared to work very hard to find new pieces to program so that you are challenged and so that the parents who have several children come through your program are not bored because they can guess what’s on the concert! Program so that there are powerful moments, multicultural moments, language and poetic moments, patriotic moments, and just plain FUN moments that can come from including movement or popular selections. Always include an encore. When you program an exciting concert, guess what? You’ve just programmed some exciting rehearsals!

11 To get the most out of these tips, **gather your tools.** By tools, I mean books, articles, workshop notes, etc. There are so many wonderful resources to help create outstanding rehearsals for you and your students. There’s just no excuse for not knowing some great warm-ups, solid rehearsal techniques, and glorious repertoire that teaches and inspires. My shelves are filling up with wonderful books from great educators, and I refer to them constantly.

12 Finally, remember that **your concert is simply an EXAMPLE of your rehearsal.** You spend most of your time in rehearsal and the least amount of time in concert. Make those rehearsals count, as those are the times that your kids will remember and the places where they learn the most!