



# CHORAL SINGING ORIENTATION

CHORAL WARM-UPS  
VOCAL TECHNIQUE  
SCORE MARKINGS  
MUSIC READING  
MUSIC SYMBOLS  
GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL TERMS

by Dr. Gabriel Statom  
Director of Music

## CHORAL WARM-UPS

I begin each rehearsal with a regiment of exercises which are intended to help the voice connect to the body, increase range and vocal production.

- We usually begin with a light sigh or siren, which is to help get air moving in the head register of the voice.
- We then go right into the infamous lip trills. This exercise not only develops range, but also forces the voice to use a deep and supported breath. This exercise only works when the voice is properly using healthy breath support. For some, this exercise may take a while to master. The nose and lips will tingle!
- Next, we will usually work on an exercise that will emphasize legato, pure vowels, and moving with ease into the lower range.
- Last, we will do a series of exercises to expand range, rehearse dynamic range, work on long phrases, and flexibility of the voice.

## VOCAL TECHNIQUE

### I. Diction

Unlike other kinds of music, choral singing marries sound to words to intensify the meaning of each. Our charge is to tell the story the author and composer want told. Words are the coin of our realm; they matter. Diction begins with properly formed vowels and properly articulated consonants.

#### Pure Vowels

ah (psalm)  
eh (set)  
ee (see)  
aw (saw)  
oo (soon)  
ih (sit)  
ah (sat)  
uh (sung)

#### Diphthongs

a eh + ee (say)  
i ah + ee (sigh)  
o aw + oo (so)  
w oo + uh (one)  
ie ee + oo (view)  
ye ee + eh (yes)  
ya ee + ah (German "ja")  
yaw ee + aw (yawn)

#### Medial Vowel

ah (task)

[JFW]

Vowels are sounded on the beat; consonants precede the beat slightly [RLS]. The vowel in any unaccented syllable has the basic sound of "uh" in "sung" with a tinge of the vowel that is printed [JFW].

Sing "tall" vowels, never "wide" ones – especially "ee," "eh," and "aw." Keep vowels "on top of" the tongue, never along the side edges. Make maximum space above the tongue when singing, particularly on "ah," "aw," and "uh." "Ah" is often easiest to sing with a high arch (raised soft palate) and a low floor (released base of the tongue). Diphthongs split their energies and emphasis in a 95-to-5 ratio (95% sustained vowel, 5% vanishing), except for "w" and "y" at the beginning of a word, which reverse these proportions (5% / 95%) [JFW].

#### Vocal Consonants Having Pitch (VCHPs)

l	th (thine)	z
m	n	zh (azure)
v	ng	

VCHPs that open a word or syllable take the pitch of the vowel that follows; VCHPs that close a word or syllable take the pitch of the vowel that precedes them [JFW].

[JFW]

Shape the mouth and throat for the vowel that

follows a VCHP while singing the VCHP (so thee ≠ thy ≠ thou ≠ this ≠ the, etc.).

## Pure Explosive Consonants

p  
t  
k  
f  
ch

## Voiced Consonants

b (≠ p)  
d (≠ t)  
g (≠ k)  
v (≠ f)  
j (≠ ch)

[JFW]

Pure explosive consonants are made with the lips, teeth, tongue and the breath in the mouth [JFW]. Articulate consonants with a loose jaw and an active tongue [JFW].

The ideal singer is a genius from the eyeballs up and an idiot from the eyeballs down [HVP].

Voiced consonants require a neutral vowel ("uh") after they are sounded – essentially like adding a quick extra syllable [JFW].

Explode consonants, don't implode them. Audiences may love us for our vowels, but they respect (and pay) us for our consonants. "D" has sound, "T" ton't.

## Sibilants

s  
sh  
th (thin)

## Aspirate

h

Sibilants are like garlic – use them sparingly. A little "s" goes a long way. Pronounce sibilants 50% softer than the other sounds around them [FW]. R at the start of a word is normally flipped if the word is passive, rolled if the word is active [JFW].

If you can't flip an "r," insert a quick "d" (think of a bad Dracula imitation). So "cry" = kuh + dah + ee. R within a word is normally sung as "uh." So: "Lord" = Law + uh + duh ("Lord" ≠ "lard") [JFW]. Sing all the sounds in all the words, all the time, at the right time – every time [FW] with beauty and meaning [RLS]. The right note at the wrong time is still the wrong note!

## II. Phrasing

Just as individual sounds (phonemes) are combined to create words, words are combined to make phrases. Emotion resides in words and sounds, but meaning is conveyed by the phrases we sing and the way we sing them – with line, energy, and shape.

Any word with more than one syllable has shape, and this shape can only be achieved by conscious, deliberate, and intentional changes in volume and vowel [RLS].

**Word shape is created by stress and release.**

**(FAH-ther) Any note longer than the shortest note has direction – either crescendo or diminuendo. Sound is dynamic: always in motion, either going to or from somewhere. It's never static, never sits down [RLS].**

To create a smooth legato line, sing vowels only until the vowels align with the beat. Then add the consonants back in "on top" of the vowel line [RLS].

Choral music is a combination of sound and non-sound (silence). Every sound and every non-sound has its own discrete place in time, its own unique rhythmic slot, its own specific duration. Each must be a deliberate decision consciously chosen and consciously enacted by the singer [RLS].

Two consonants in succession (p/l, d/b, t/f, etc.) require a neutral "uh" vowel to be rhythmically inserted between them. Two words, one ending in a consonant and the next beginning with one, frequently require this neutral vowel (or "schwa," or "shadow vowel") for clarity of articulation – and again, this is a sound with defined duration [*RLS*].

Don't have events – make lines. Have events in the delivery room at the hospital. This is America: even the little notes get a vote. Each note one vote [*RLS*].

Connect short notes to the long notes that follow them (think "pick up" all the time). No orphans! [*RLS*].

Lift on the dot in dotted rhythms. Keep thinking motion to the right [*RLS*].

Phrase by subtraction, not addition. When taking a breath, shorten the note you leave, rather than adding extra time before the note that comes next. It's like getting small children ready to go to church: the more you have, the earlier you have to start. In general, the idea is "leave early to arrive on time."

Dynamics are always relative, never absolute: they are a neighborhood, not a destination [*RLS*].

Almost every phrase has a dynamic arch (crescendo/diminuendo), what the medieval and renaissance theorists called "arsis et thesis."

Crescendi and diminuendi are created by deliberate decisions to add or subtract volume, and these decisions are made over time, aligned with the subdivision of the beat [*RLS*].

Regular beat (pulse) is a sign of physical – and musical – health. It's not slapped on from the outside: it springs from within.

Conductors don't, and can't, "keep" the beat. Only the singers can [*RLS*].

Suspensions are like cows – milk them, by leaning into the suspended note (normally the tied one). Bar lines are an arbitrary convenience created for conductors who can't count. They are weightless transparencies: never let the audience hear them.

Time is music's canvas. Paint all of it with sound, unless the composer wants a rest or the conductor asks for an articulation (consonant, breath, staccato, etc.) [*RLS*].

### III. Vocalism

Choral excellence is grounded in vocal health. Good singing is good singing, no matter where it happens to take place. While individual vocal study is always best, the following items are also helpful to recall:

- **LISTEN LOUDER THAN YOU SING**
- Never sing louder than your vibrato. If your voice suddenly goes "straight," you're over-singing: back down, no matter what the conductor demands. He'll figure it out eventually.
- Close "ah" forward to make a tall "ee" and "aw" forward to make a tall "oo." Don't close the jaw up for these vowels – close the sound forward and keep as much space between your molars as you can.
- At approximately G in the alto/bass voice and C in the tenor/soprano, the proportions of resonance and the lengths of the vocal cords change to produce an identified as the "passagio" [*FL*], the "break," or the "lift of the breath" [*HW*], sometimes called a "register shift" or passing from "chest voice" into "head voice."
- Four things need to happen in coordinated fashion at the lift: a) less breath, b) more space, c) darker vowel, d) higher focus. At the lift, begin to modify vowels as follows:
  - "ah" to "uh"
  - "aw" to "uh"
  - "eh" to "ay"
  - "oo" (soon) to "oo" (soot)
  - "ee" to "ih"
- In general, as pitch ascends, open vowels (ah, aw, uh) close and closed vowels (ee, oo) open [*JFW*].

- Above G in low voices and C in high voices, roll the shoulders slightly forward (not up!) and tuck the pelvis under – both help to open the lower back [JFW]. Or try hugging a tree, holding a beach ball under water, or allowing your spine to lengthen.
- Singing above the lift is about power, not pressure. We use less breath, because physics tells us "as frequency doubles, intensity squares" [HVP].
- It takes less work, not more, to move a lighter object than a heavier one.
- Move all the resonance, but not the weight. Never use more resonance than you can move in tempo.
- Fast singing is like Indiana basketball – it pays to be mobile, agile and a little bit hostile.
- The softer you sing, the richer your vowels must be. Soft singing is just loud singing sung quieter.
- Always keep the breath behind the sound, never at it (strident) or in it (breathy) [FL].
- When breathing in, breathe in the vowel, the volume and the mood – silently. This allows the mouth, throat and other resonators to set themselves automatically [HVP].
- Don't "take" breaths unless you plan to give them back. Instead, let the bones hold you up and let the air fall into your body space [JJ].
- Begin the sound as the last element of the inhalation part of the breath cycle. Don't suck air and then hold it; this only builds tension in the throat and increases the likelihood of a hard glottal attack.
- Singing is, in a real sense, exhaling on pitch. It is about release, not "production" or "projection."
- Begin the sound from where the breath went – NOT from the throat.
- Sound can only be produced by vibration. If I can hear you breathe, something's vibrating that shouldn't be – probably the sides of your throat.
- Physical support is dynamic tension achieved by a balance between the inhaling and exhaling muscles. It's a feeling of poise, not rigidity.
- Muscles exist to move bones, not the other way around. "Posture" and "pose" share a common root – one of stiffness, so think "stature" rather than "posture." Music is by definition sound in motion – we should allow our bodies to support this and to reflect it.
- There are no "high" notes or "low" notes – only faster and slower frequencies. All the notes on the piano are the same distance from the floor [HVP].
- The further "up" you sing, the "lower" in the body you must work [FL].
- Focus "brightens" (comes forward, approaches speech) as pitch descends. Snarl a little bit as you approach the bottom of your range [HVP].

#### IV. Interpretation and Miscellany

Vowels convey emotion, consonants communicate data. Emotion without data is self-centered wallowing; data without emotion is robotic. Both are essential for communicating meaning – which is our job. Choral music always tells a story. Anything less is just mechanical precision – and less than human.

The object of art is expression. The medium of art is technique [HW].

But technique without meaning is merely the act of a technician, and is ultimately sterile. Be artists, not technicians! Make loud mistakes – that's what rehearsals are for. We can't fix what we don't hear. If you're going to sin, sin boldly! Progress, not perfection, is our goal. Get the small things right and the big ones will follow. Ask yourself what – in a single word or phrase – is the message you're trying to convey? Write it at the top of your music; reference it before the piece begins.

The voice is the servant of the sound; the sound is the servant of the text; the text is the servant of the meaning. The only "right" sound is the one that expresses the full meaning of the text [RLS]. Our business is recreation and resurrection – when we sing, we bring the dead to life [RLS].

#### Sources

RLS: **Robert Lawson Shaw** was the founder and director of the Robert Shaw Chorale, and for the second half of the twentieth century was the driving force in choral music in America.

**FW: Fred Waring** was a popular big band leader in the swing era who decided to branch out into choral singing. His first assistant conductor was an unknown college student named Robert Shaw.

**JFW: John Finley Williamson** was the director of the Westminster Choir and the founder of Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey.

**HVP: Herbert Vincent Pate** was one of Williamson's first students and spent 45 years as professor of voice and vocal pedagogy at Westminster Choir College.


**JJ: James Jordan** is the conductor of the Chapel Choir and professor of conducting at Westminster Choir College, and author of "Evoking Sound," a provocative text on choral conducting.

**HW: Herbert Witherspoon** was one of the leading basses of his day and the first American selected as General Director of the Metropolitan Opera. John Finley Williamson was one of his students.

**FL: Francesco Lamperti** was one of the first teachers to describe the principles of what has come to be called the "bel canto" style of singing.

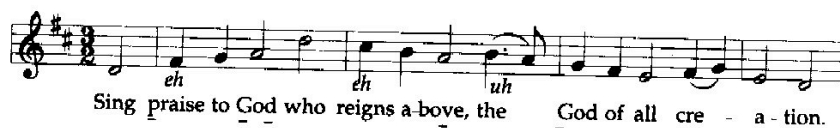
## SCORE MARKINGS

One of the most important things you can do as a choir member is to always have your pencil at hand! An important aspect of choral singing is our effort to do things together. Marking places to breath and not to breath, syllabic stress and other important reminders is important. This section will show some of the various markings I will ask you to use.

◆ Take a breath.     

◆ Do not breathe.     

◆ Diction



- Notes
  - ◆ Circle passages you usually miss.
  - ◆ Indicate the melodic direction on a page turn.
  - ◆ Use an arrow (pointing up or down) for intonation corrections (sharp or flat).
- Your voice part
  - ◆ Place an asterisk, arrow, or check by your voice part if it is difficult to find.
- Rhythm
  - ◆ Write in the beats on difficult rhythmic passages.

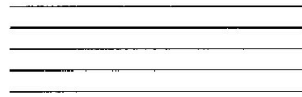


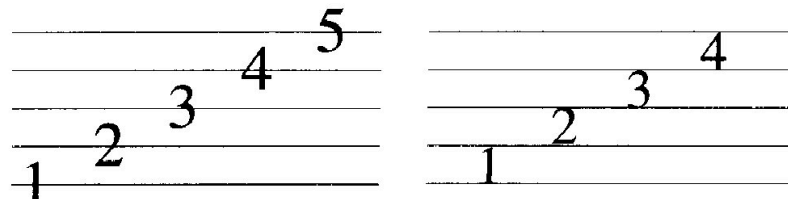
- Circle meter, tempo and key changes that occur within the music.
- Circle musical directions you may overlook and note the page you should turn to next.
  - ◆ Mark repeat signs, coda signs, first and second endings.
- Circle dynamics you tend to overlook.
- Write in anything your director specifically requests.

*M*usic is a language consisting of symbols much like the alphabet. As a language student must learn the sounds of each letter (symbols), how to spell and speak words, and how to organize words into sentences in order to communicate, so too the musician must learn symbols and what each represents, and practice the “language” as written music to achieve musical communication. This basic “musical language” remains the same regardless of the final product.

The following symbols are fundamental to reading music. You should develop proficiency with these terms, symbols, and meanings. You will enjoy singing even more when you have a mastery of the components of music. (Additional terms are located in the “Glossary of Musical Terms and Symbols.”)

### **The Staff**

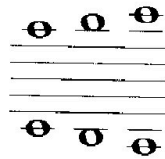
 **Musical Staff (pl. staves):**  
Used to identify pitch notation.  
The musical staff has five lines and four spaces.



MUSIC READING



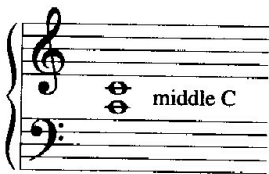
The staff may be extended up or down by using ledger lines.



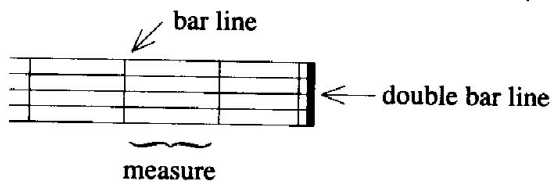
**Treble Clef (G clef):** Indicates pitch by identifying the G line (line 2). This clef is used by treble singers (soprano, alto, and children with unchanged voices), the upper register of the piano, and all high instruments (such as flute, oboe, and violin).

**Bass Clef (F clef):** Indicates pitches by identifying the F line (line 4). This clef is used by bass singers (tenor, baritone, bass), the lower register of the piano, and all low instruments (such as the tuba, trombone, and double bass).

**Treble Clef with subscript 8:** Indicates pitch similar to the regular treble clef but sounding one octave lower. This clef is used by tenors.



**Grand Staff:** Combines two staves, one treble and one bass, for musical notation. (Middle C lies between the two staves and can be attached to either.)

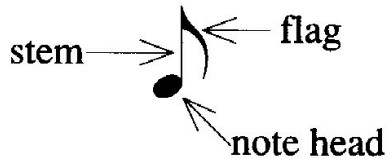


**Bar Line:** Organizes the beats (counts) of music. Located throughout the entire piece to indicate measures.

**Measure:** The contents between two bar lines.

**Double Bar Line:** Identifies the end of the music.

### Pitch Notation



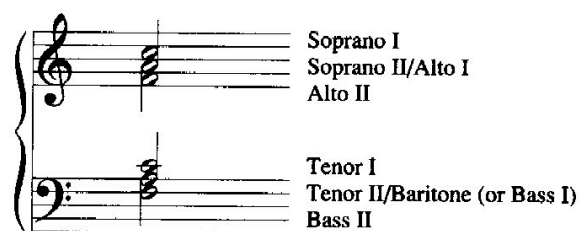
**Note Anatomy:** Each note has a head. Most notes have a stem; some have a flag (or flags), which may appear as a beam to make reading easier.

**A B C D E F G Musical Alphabet:** Music uses only seven letter names for pitch. The letter names repeat as you move up (sounding higher) and down (sounding lower) the scale/staff.

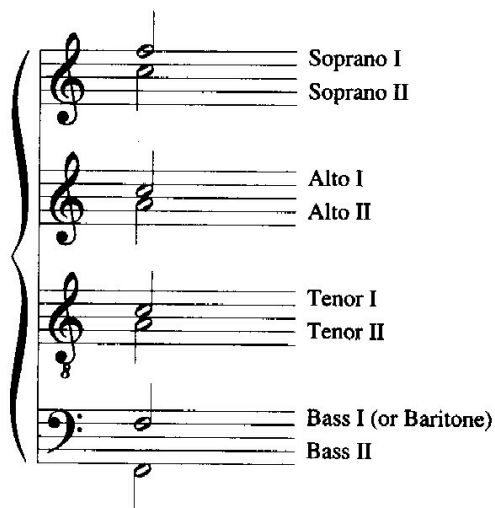
**Pitch Notation:** Each tone is indicated by placing a note on the musical staff. Notes may appear with a line dissecting the note head (line note) or between two lines (space note). The clef determines the pitch order on the staff. Notice that when you combine the line and space notes of one clef the pitches are in musical alphabet order.



**Closed Score Notation:** Music written on the grand staff with each voice part identified by the direction of the note stem (e.g., bass clef stem up = tenor).



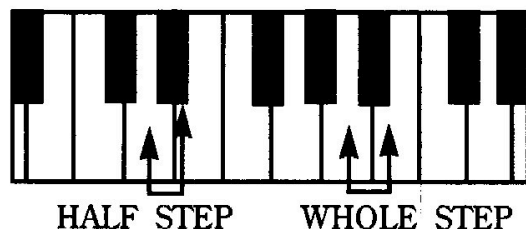
**Open Score Notation:** Music written on many staves. Each voice part has its own staff (e.g., top staff = soprano, and so on).



**Note:** To conserve space and printing costs, a composer/publisher may alternate between open and closed scoring in one piece. This often occurs when the accompaniment is alone or when a soloist is singing. It is easy to overlook these changes in an anthem, so look ahead!

**Half Step:** The smallest distance between two pitches.

**Whole Step:** The distance of two half steps combined.



**Accidentals:** Symbols that alter the tone of a note by moving it by half steps.

**# Sharp:** Raises the pitch a half step.

**b Flat:** Lowers the pitch a half step.

**n Natural:** Returns the pitch to its original tone.

**Pitch Movement:**

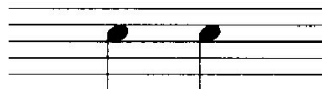
When a pitch moves up on the staff the tone is raised:

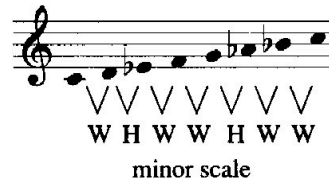
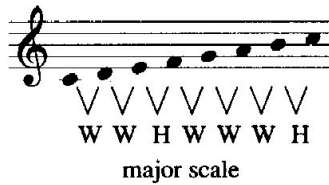


When a pitch moves down on the staff the tone is lowered:

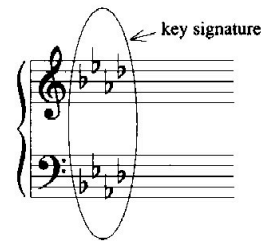


The pitch remains the same when notes are repeated:

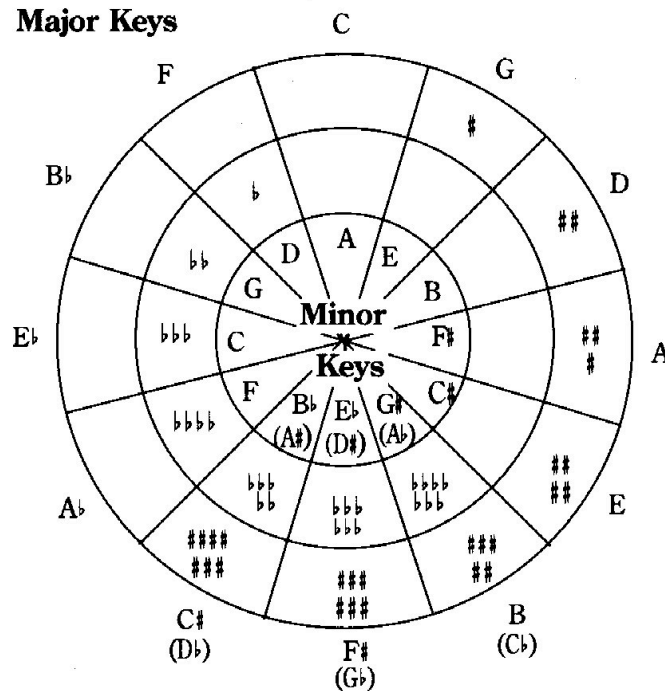




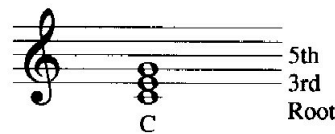
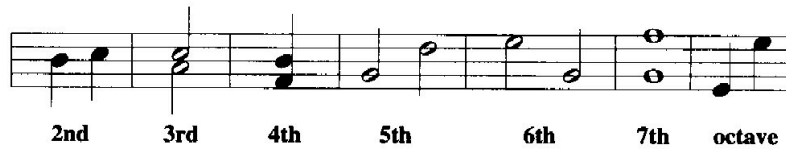
**Key Signature:** Appears on the grand staff after the clef symbol. It may contain sharps, flats, or nothing at all. The key signature tells the musician on which scale the piece is based.



The **Circle of Fifths** is a quick-reference chart to determine a key signature. To find a minor key, locate the major key signature and lower it by three half steps. (For example, if the key signature contains one flat, the related major key is F, and the actual minor key is D.)

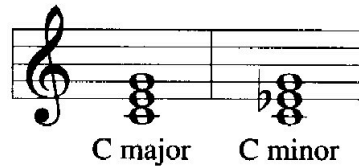


**Intervals:** The distance between two pitches. An interval may be measured on the musical staff or by its tone. To identify the interval, count the given pitches and all lines and spaces between them. Note: notes may sound together (stacked on top = harmonic interval) or individually (one note after the other = melodic interval):

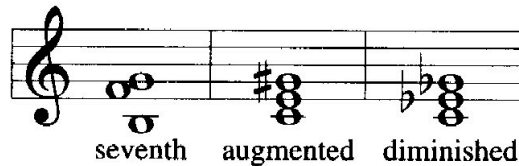


**Triad:** A chord made of three ("tri-") tones. It is built on a root note (which names the chord), a 3rd above the root, and a 5th above the root.

**Chord:** Three or more notes that sound together. Chords may be consonant:



or dissonant:



**Scales:** Almost every piece of music (or section of music) is based on a scale. Musicians learn to sing/play scales as a basis for all music. Two types of scales dominate Western music: major and minor. Each scale is based on a pattern of whole (W) and half (H) steps. Note: the minor scale has several forms; the illustration is one example called "natural" minor.

*Ritardando (rit.)* and *Rallentando (rall.)*: Gradually slowing.



**Slur:** Arched line connecting two or more different pitches. Sing these notes *legato*.



**Fermata (slang: bird's eye):** Watch the director! This indicates to lengthen the note value at the discretion of the conductor.



**Caesura (slang: railroad tracks):** Grand pause dictated by the director.



**Breath Mark:** Take a breath as indicated within the score. If no marks are in the music, insert this symbol (when appropriate) during rehearsal as a reminder to breathe.

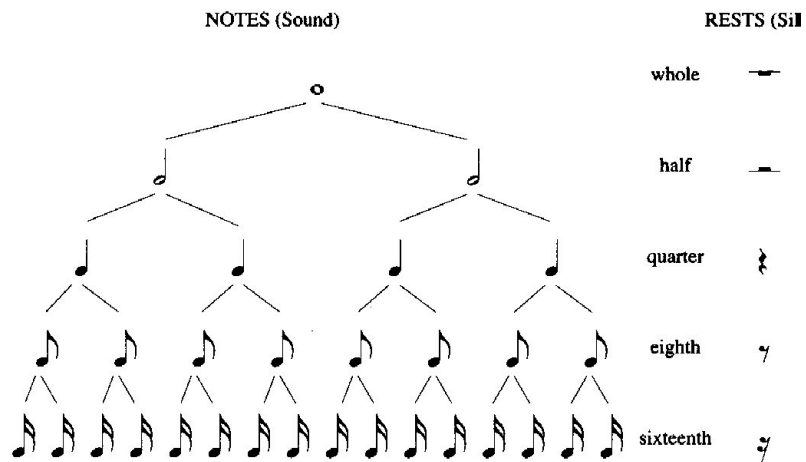


**No Breath:** Sing the musical phrase without a breath. If no marks are in the music, insert this mark (when appropriate) during rehearsal as a reminder not to breathe.

**Rehearsal Letters/Numbers:** Composers and editors use oversized letters or numbers to mark sections throughout a composition. Directors use these symbols to identify specific locations within the music. This allows the director to move quickly during a rehearsal. Be aware of this notation in each piece.

# Rhythmic Notation

**Rhythmic Notation:** Indicates the duration of either sound (notes) or silence (rests). The following diagram illustrates the relationship of each value.



**Dotted Notes and Rests:** A dot may be added to a note to increase its value by one half.



$$\text{♩.} = \text{♩} (1) + \text{.} (1/2) = 1 \frac{1}{2}$$



Examples of dotted notes and their corresponding rests:

♩.	dotted whole note	—.	dotted whole rest
♪.	dotted half note	—.	dotted half rest
♩.	dotted quarter note	♩.	dotted quarter rest
ⅴ.	dotted eighth note	ⅴ.	dotted eighth rest



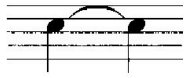
Composers use symbols, terms, and abbreviations to indicate to the performer where to go and what to do. Knowledge of these makes reading easier and enhances the ultimate performance. These symbols may be easily overlooked or difficult to see at first glance. Train your eye to look for the composer's instructions, and highlight anything difficult to remember.

**Repeat Sign:** Indicates to perform a section of music again. When the repeat sign appears alone, return to the beginning and sing as indicated. When the symbol appears with a mate repeat only the material contained between the :  signs and then continue.

1.	2.	<b>First and Second Endings:</b> Sing to the first ending until you reach the repeat sign. Return to the corresponding repeat sign and continue singing as indicated. On the second time through, omit the first ending material, sing the second ending material, and complete the song.
: 	: 	

**Da capo (D.C.):** Sing until you reach this symbol, then return to the beginning of the music and continue as indicated.

## Special Notations



**Tie:** Two identical pitches connected by an arched line. Sing the first pitch and hold it for the combined duration of both note values.

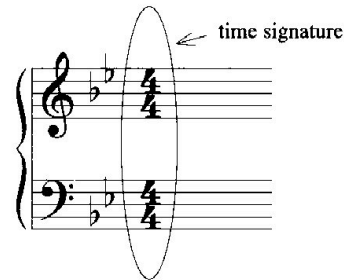


**Duplet:** Two notes sounding in place of three notes of equal value.



**Triplet:** Three notes sounding in place of two notes of equal value.

**Meter:** Indicates the organization of beats/pulses in a given piece of music. Meter may be grouped as sets of two (duple), sets of three (triple), sets of four (quadruple), or as a combination of these.

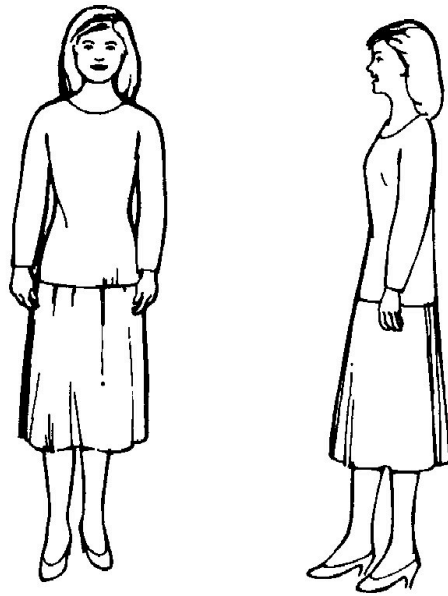


**Time Signature:** Appears on the grand staff following the key signature. Indicates the organization of beats/pulses within a measure.

The time signature contains two numbers, each having a unique role. The top number determines how many beats occur in one measure; the bottom number indicates which note receives one beat. For example:

$\frac{4}{4}$ - 4 beats per measure	$\frac{2}{2}$ - 2 beats per measure	$\frac{6}{8}$ - 6 beats per measure
$\frac{4}{4}$ - quarter note gets 1 beat	$\frac{2}{2}$ - half note gets 1 beat	$\frac{6}{8}$ - eighth note gets 1 beat

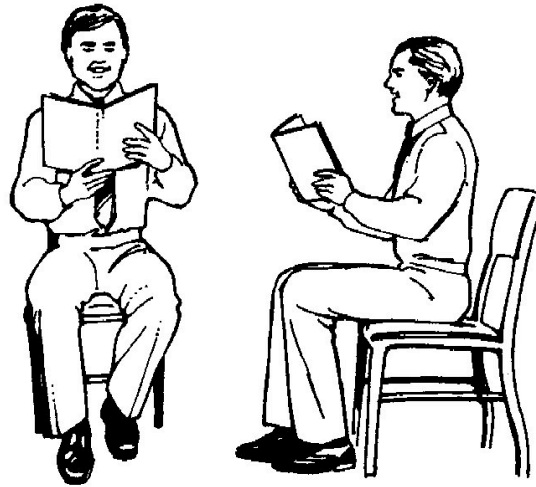
- Shoulders back and relaxed
- Arms held naturally by the side of the body
- Head square on the shoulders as if being lifted by the crown of your head



### **Breathing**

We breathe to sing. One does not happen without the other. As adults we have skillfully trained ourselves to breathe incorrectly. Watch a baby sleeping or observe a dog panting. The inhalation and exhalation are very different from adults; however, they are doing it correctly. Just as a balloon expands when filled with air, our bodies should expand when we inhale. As adults, we tend to draw in our stomachs and raise our shoulders to demonstrate that something is occurring. That “something” is improper breathing.

Although breathing seems natural since we do it



### **Sitting:**

- Feet slightly apart with the weight of the body forward (feel as if you are about to stand)
- Body tall with hips, spine, and head directly in line with one another (feel as if you are standing from the hips up)
- Chest naturally elevated to enhance breathing
- Shoulders back and relaxed
- Arms held naturally by the side of the body
- Head square on the shoulders as if being lifted by the crown of your head

### **Standing:**

- Feet shoulder-width apart with the weight of the body slightly forward
- Knees slightly relaxed (locking the knees creates tension throughout the body and may cause one to faint)
- Body tall with the hips, spine, and head directly in line with one another
- Chest naturally elevated to enhance breathing

## **GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL TERMS**

***a cappella*** singing without instrumental accompaniment.

***accelerando* (*accel.*)** Gradually getting faster.

**accent** emphasis on a note

**accidentals** symbols that alter a pitch by half steps (e.g. sharp, flat)

**accompaniment** musical background to the primary part

***adagio*** slow tempo (slower than andante but faster than largo)

***allargando*** slowing

***allegretto*** moderately fast; slightly slower than allegro