

A Kinesthetic Approach to Choral Techniques

Jim Henry, IES 2008

Suggested Gestures to Accompany Various Aspects of Choral Technique*

Gesture	Description	Application
Posture/Support		
Body shaking	Shake limbs and torso	To relieve tension in preparation for singing
Pull string	Imagine string coming from the crown of your head, and give it a gentle pull upwards	To elongate body (a la Alexander Technique)
Blossom gesture	Without bending over, pass hands upward along the sides of your body and end by blossoming hands above and in front of your head	To lift the body from the ground up.
Recline position	Lie on back and feel the action of the abdominal muscles upon exhalation/inhalation.	To engage breathing muscles fully; to help singers become aware of location of breathing apparatus.
Golf backswing	With right hand only, pretend to do a golf back swing	To encourage a full deliberate inhale.
Accordion	Pretend to play an accordion. Keep it below the chest.	To encourage a low inhale and a supported exhale (with or without tone)
Spiral gesture	Rotate index fingers around each other in front of the body or in the area above or on the sides of the head. Make continuous circles with both hands	To keep the sound moving; to keep air, line moving forward; to create energy in the sound.
Bend a candle flame	Pretend to blow on a candle flame—your finger can represent the candle—so that it bends and does not flicker.	To sustain a steady stream of air under the tone and phrase; to aid in singing legato.
Row boat	Imitate a rowing gesture with both hands	To sustain a steady stream of air under the tone and phrase; to aid in singing legato.
Draw or paint	With an imaginary marker or paint brush, make a strong line	To sustain a steady stream of air under the tone and phrase; to aid in singing legato.
Spread peanut butter	Pretend to spread peanut butter on a large slice of bread.	To sustain a steady stream of air under the tone and phrase; to aid in singing legato.
Football pass (or golf swing)	Throw an imaginary football, paying attention to: the breath preceding the tone; a complete extension of the arm; and the follow-through as pass is released.	To project the sound; to sing with supported tone; to prepare with a full body breath before singing.
Basic throwing gestures	Use a one- or two-arm throwing gesture.	To project the sound; to sing with energy; to get the body under the sound.
Frisbee toss	Throw an imaginary Frisbee; watch it fly upwards and soar far before gracefully landing.	To create a line with an arch to it; to sing with energy and support; to project the sound.
Arm cross and press	With elbows bent, make an X with the wrists in front of the chest; press down, out, and up in one fluid motion that extends the length of the phrase. Must feel resistance with this gesture, as though moving through water.	To sing with support throughout the phrase; to keep energy in the sound throughout the phrase.
Growth gesture	Start by creating a small space with the hands, gradually making it a larger space; keep hands below chest height to ensure proper breathing.	To create a “large” sound; to create a full, supported tone; to create space in the tone.
Hold/lift pitch	Use one or two hands and hold or slightly lift the pitch in (he palm of the hand.	To support the final pitch in a phrase; to lighten up a pitch; to reinforce sustaining a pitch.
Initiation/Release		
Dart throw (or throw the note)	Send an imaginary dart to a focal point ahead (may use two hands in successive and repeated throws).	To achieve clarity on entrances; to be on time with an entrance to create a good unison sound as a section; to focus tone.
Pick note out of the air	Pick an imaginary note out of the air—lightly, but cleanly.	To sing a precise entrance without glottal attack or accent
Clap and release	Experiment with different ways of making a clap; a flat clap; a sliding clap (hitting lightly and moving away from the base hand); clapping close to the body vs. farther away from the body.	To become aware of the quality of the release of sound; to apply these qualities (resonant vs. clipped) to vocal releases.
Finger releases	Tap index finger of one hand into the palm of the other at the moment of release; quickly touch thumb and index finger of one hand together at the moment of release.	To create a precise release, especially of consonants.

Gesture	Description	Application
Resonance		
Rubber band stretch	Stretch an imaginary rubber band in a vertical position.	To create a long vowel; to create space.
Hands on face	Use hands to help shape jaw and mouth opening; e.g., back of hands, fingers pointing down on cheeks; or index fingers pushing cheeks in slightly.	To create relaxed, open vowels; to form vowels into desired shape; to create space; to change color of vowel (from dark, pulling down on cheeks, to bright, with a back-of-hands, fingers downward gesture).
Directional pointing (tone placement)	Point forward from the forehead; point along the side of the face, arching up and forward.	To give focus or point to the sound.
Focus in the mask	Place hands, palms down, near the ears, ringers resting on the area just below the cheekbone; focus on a spot in front of the room. Imagine singing from above the fingers.	To sing from the mask; to focus sound forward.
Flat hands to point	Start with hands, palms down, chest high and a body width apart. Gradually point forward as you sustain the tone.	To move from a spread to a focused tone; to move from a darker to a brighter tone.
Barrel	Hold arms in front of you as if you are holding a barrel. Fill the barrel with sound.	To achieve a richer, rounder tone.
Warm air/cold air	Blow into your hand, first with “cold air” (pucker lips like blowing out a candle), then with “warm air” (open mouth like creating condensation on a window). Sing with Warm Air	To relieve tension and encourage a headier tone.
Vibrato/no vibrato	Vibrate hand or create a smooth brush stroke.	To create vibrato in tone; to smooth out or eliminate the vibrato in tone.
Growth gesture (see under “Support”)		
Spinning fingers (see under “Intonation”)		
Intonation/Tuning		
Looking down (vs. chinning up)	Look down on the note (as if looking over a wall) vs. chin up to the note (as if doing chin-ups)	To go from one note to a higher note cleanly, on top of the pitch, and without strain
Pitch-O-Meter	With one hand make a “C” shape with thumb and index finger. With the other hand make a pointer with the index finger. Pointing to the middle of the space represents where the note is on the keyboard. Just above the “C” shape is the half step above the note. Slowly glide pointer up from center to the half step above. Note all the gradations of pitch in between. Learn to settle somewhere between the center and the upper half step.	To raise awareness of gradations of pitch, and to encourage singing on the higher side of the note.
Spinning fingers	Spin the index fingers of each hand on either side of your face.	To put spin in the tone and release the tension (heaviness) that causes flattening.
Palms up/palms down	While sustaining a note, hold your hands in front of you with palms down. Continue to hold the note but turn the palms upward. Notice the lift in pitch.	To encourage singing to the high side of the pitch.
Stack onionskins	Explain that onionskins are extremely thin. For repeated or returning notes, use your hands to represent the onionskins. With each successive note, stack one hand on top of the other to illustrate that successive notes should feel slightly higher.	To resist the temptation to flat successive notes.
Tepee	While sustaining a note, make a tepee shape with your hands	To encourage singing to the high side of the pitch.
Shaking arms	Shake arms, releasing tension.	To release tension, especially that which causes sharpening problems.
Directional pointing (intonation)	Point upwards while singing a descending line.	To assist intonation; to prevent a dead tone
Ladder climbing	Climb an imaginary ladder, using hands on rungs as you climb.	To move cleanly and firmly from note to note or chord to chord.
Stair climbing	Take a step up on an imaginary stair	To move cleanly and firmly from note to note or chord to chord.
Toe lift	Rise up on your toes as you sing.	To assist in intonation, especially ascending leaps.
Pulling up/picking up	Pull up the pitch as though picking up a small object.	To assist intonation; to lift pitch.

Gesture	Description	Application
Word Sounds		
Violin playing	Play an imaginary violin with a long, down-bow.	To stress a particular word or syllable with a weighted, non-accented feel.
Candle blow	Blow out an imaginary candle.	To pronounce aspirated consonants strongly.
Use hands to illustrate vowels	Use hands to help find good vowel shapes: With index finger, draw a circle around you lips for and “Oh” vowel; draw out the pucker of an “Oo” vowel; Pretend to pull your face up and back to brighten the “Ah” vowel, etc.	To purify vowels.
Small circles	Draw small circles with the index finger in front of mouth; make two circles using the thumb/index fingers of both hands and extend these circles from the face forward (or start with hands extended and bring circles toward you).	To create a round, hollow “oo” vowel.
Finger to palm	Place the index finger of one hand into the palm of the other hand.	To place the “target vowel” (the primary, sustained vowel sound) at the point of the beat. Preceding consonants and/or diphthong sounds are sounded just before that point.
Pull a string	Pull an imaginary string, like you might find on a toy.	To add support and volume to singable consonants and diphthongs.
Clock	Circle a clock shape with your finger and practice turning the diphthong at different numbers.	To help the choir to turn diphthongs together. For quick notes the diphthong will turn earlier (at 6- or 7 o’clock); for slow notes the diphthong will turn later (at 9-, 10-, or even 11 o’clock).
Interpretation/Musicality		
Karate chops	Create a rapid chopping motion with two hands, placed vertically in front of the body; may choose to start gesture on a higher plane and move it downward during the phrase.	To sing in an articulated or staccato, separated style.
Foot stomp	Stomp foot on the particular beat desired.	To emphasize an entrance; to create an accent; to account for a rest.
Clapping/tapping	Clap or tap lightly to the smaller subdivisions within the phrase.	To keep intensity or energy going by feeling subdivisions within a phrase that has a slow tempo or long note values.
Body with the phrase	Move the whole body (e.g. turn slowly in a circle) with the phrase.	To create a consistent <i>crescendo</i> or <i>decrescendo</i> ; to sing a long, legato line.
Tap your neighbors shoulder	Tap the beat (or subdivisions of the beat) with one finger on your neighbor’s shoulder.	To aid in synchronizing a metered phrase
Conduct	Use a conducting gesture.	To sing together; to feel the stress points of a phrase.
Modified Conducting	Conduct two downbeats (the first one close to the body and the second away from the body) with arch in between.	To feel the stress points of a rubato phrase or non-metered phrase.
Standing on cue	Stand when your section sings its opening phrase or when your section sings the motive in this fugal passage, etc.	To call attention to section entrances by the singers’ own section and others.
Brush stroke (or palm raising/lowering)	Paint a long, fluid brush stroke horizontally or vertically in front of the body.	To create a legato line.
Magic marker dots	As if there were a big tablet of paper on an easel in front of you, make quick dots with a large magic marker on each word.	To aid in staccato phrasing. Can also be used as an example of what NOT to do when trying to sing a legato line or sustain a steady stream of air under a phrase. In this case you would exaggerate the dots and then draw a solid line (as described in “Draw or paint” under “Support”).
Turn over a card	Turn an imaginary card over as if you are dealing.	To perform a pickup.
Karate chop/Release a dove	Use a violent karate chop motion while beginning or ending a note to demonstrate the “attack” and “release.” Now begin or end the same note with a motion that resembles releasing a dove to demonstrate “initiation” and “release”. The latter version is usually preferable.	To help make the beginnings of phrases gentler and to bring more carrying power to the end of a held word (particularly a dramatic release at a climactic point or end of a song). Helps remove glottal attacks and releases.
Four functions of the beat	Refer to Rodney Eichenberger’s concept of the four functions of the beat (Downbeat, Away-from-the downbeat, Off beat, and Into-the-beat) as found in his “What They See Is What You Get” video (Hinshaw Music, VH101).	To feel appropriate phrase motion.
Spiral Gesture (see under “Support”)		
Frisbee Toss (see under “Support”)		

*Many of these suggestions are found in Ramona M. Wis’s article, “Physical Metaphor in the Choral Rehearsal: A Gesture-Based Approach to Developing Vocal Skill and Musical Understanding” (*Choral Journal* 40/3 [October 1999]). Used by permission.

Bibliography and Resources

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Web Sites

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