

Notes from the Vocal Workshop presented by Charles MacDougall Saturday 12th September 2015

This workshop was well-supported by the membership of Rochester Choral Society and all who attended agreed that it was a very useful, worthwhile and enjoyable experience and one that would be well worth repeating.

The afternoon began with everyone doing physical movements (and casting aside our inhibitions!) to free our bodies of tension and to relax all the muscles needed to produce the voice. The voice itself is our instrument and the whole body is the instrument. The muscles must be relaxed but at the same time, ready to work. Balance is also important and the whole body must be firmly rooted (stance) with the chest raised and open.

The brain and larynx are involved in initiating the sound but the empty spaces in the head (the sinus cavities) are used to provide resonance with the diaphragm providing support for the breathing. Breathing is important to produce the airflow but it should be automatic and natural; we should not have to consciously think about breathing. Today we used co-ordination exercises (like rubbing the tum and scratching the head at the same time) to wake the brain up and improve concentration. I found these were the most difficult for me personally!

Charles stressed how important it is to warm up each time before we start to sing. The physical warm-up is as important as the vocal one, because it is necessary to decrease tension, especially in the tongue. The 'ng' sound focusses the voice in the head and brings the sound forward. It is achieved by placing the tip of the tongue behind the bottom teeth and the tongue on the roof of the mouth, raising the soft palate. Even the primal, 'witchy' sounds are important in focussing the head voice. It is also possible to use the hip muscles for support, especially when holding long notes.

The exercise where we pushed against a partner while singing, was for muscular engagement, to amplify our sound. The 'bow and arrow' exercise was to encourage concentration for legato singing, with the chest open so that we could feel the space. We used the ditty 'My Bonnie lies over the Ocean' as an exercise in communicating emotions and characterisations, and to practise different styles, to show diversity and versatility.

Charles chose the sopranos to demonstrate the technique of 'voicing' to the other parts. Firstly, the sopranos were put in a slightly curved line, similar to how we would be at the Vines and asked to sing an arpeggio. Groups of 3 were then asked to sing the arpeggio again while Charles worked his way along the line. He then experimented by moving people to improve the overall blend, then asked us all to

sing the arpeggio again all together. The audience of altos, tenors and basses (and Scott) were amazed at the difference the blending made to the overall sound we produced.

Finally Charles reminded us that all voices are unique; the single voices in a choir join together to make one gigantic instrument (voice).

Ann Livings
Rochester Choral Society
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