

Practicing Choral Music: Ten ideas for the singer who doesn't think they can practice on their own

Congratulations! You've now been told for the millionth time to practice your music for your next choir rehearsal. But if you are someone who hears that and thinks, "I don't play piano. I can't do this without someone helping me," here are some ways you can practice on your own and improve your singing.

Grab your music and a pencil. Many of these steps can be done in a public place. No need to head to the practice room (stop using that as an excuse).

1. **Start with the text.** Make sure you know what you are singing. Think about the text. Find a translation if it is in another language. Write the poetic translation above/below the lyrics. If you want to go deeper, use a translation site to translate word for word (especially if there's a word that you sing over and over again. You should know what that specific word means). Do you know who wrote the lyrics and why? Can you put the piece into historical context?
2. **Listen to a recording.** We live in a time of unbelievable access to recordings. Find them. Listen to more than one recording and compare them until you find one or two you really like. Follow along with your score. Listen while paying attention to all of the parts. Listen while paying attention to just your part.
3. **Analyze your music.** How is the piece organized? Does it have sections? Are there repeated parts? Does your part occur in another voice part? Are there key changes or meter changes? Is there a repeat sign/first and second ending/coda? How would you describe the organization of this piece to someone who has never heard it?
4. **Find your starting pitches.** For every entrance you have, figure out how you are going to find the starting pitch. Maybe another voice part just sang the note. Maybe it was just in the accompaniment. Do you know what note of the chord it is (e.g. I'm singing the root of this chord)? There is nothing worse than "sheep singing" (blindly following what the person next to you is singing). Take responsibility for being able to enter on your own.
5. **Don't just sing through the parts you already know.** You'll be wasting your practice time. Identify problem areas, analyze why you're having a problem with that spot, figure out ways to solve the problem area.

6. **Solve the problem area.** Break it down to something you CAN do. Then add something to it. Practice with repetition, but only if you're sure you're doing it right! Start with just the pitches slowly (dare I say on solfege syllables?). Then add the rhythm to the pitches. Next, add in the lyrics. Make sure you slow down the tempo each time you add another layer. No need to practice with dynamics, articulations, and breaths until you have mastered pitches, rhythms, and lyrics.
7. **Work backwards to forwards.** How many times have you felt great about the beginning of a piece, but completely unsure of the ending? During your own practice time, work on the ending section and progressively add sections, each time going through to the end. If you think of your piece as "ABCDE," practice E, then DE, then CDE, then BCDE, and ABCDE.
8. **Audiate your part.** Sing your part through in your head. Do this while you are walking somewhere. Do this in your car while you're waiting for someone. Do this before you go to sleep. Do this ALL OF THE TIME. (Friendly reminder: Audiating is virtually impossible if there is other music playing. Carve out some quiet time in your life.)
9. **Use your pencil.** Mark your score while you're in rehearsal so you remember what was giving you problems. This will save you time when you plan out your next practice session.
10. **Just practice.** 99% of the time I don't want to practice. No one does. But 99% of the time, once I start practicing, I get stuff done. I stop when I lose focus or I run out of time. I NEVER regret spending a little time practicing something. Do yourself a favor and make it part of your daily routine.

You have the ability to do these ten things. Do them. You will reap the benefits of being more confident with your part, which will allow you to contribute to the ensemble in a more meaningful way. And your own vocal technique will improve, because you'll be able to concentrate on how you sound instead of always worrying about how your part goes. You've got this.

-Doreen Fryling (lifelong practice avoider)

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