

Feed the Meter

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How do you prioritize the following for rhythmic vitality?

- A. Note values
- B. Tempo
- C. Time Signature
- D. Meter

Meter is often neglected in the choral rehearsal, yet meter inspires momentum, secures tempo, and drives rhythmic vitality. We often lose sight and sound of meter in our efforts to secure note values, maintain tempos, and explain time signatures. Developing a sense of meter in our singers propels musicality. Making meter come alive can transform choral performance.

Meter is not defined by time signatures or conducting patterns, but by the strength and pattern of weight given to beats. A regular pattern of weight that defines strong beats, (macro beats), divided into three beats of lesser weight, (micro beats), establishes triple meter, whatever the time signature or conducting pattern. Performance in any meter without weight that defines the meter is unmusical, even if with beautiful tone and precise intonation.

“Counting” beats does not guarantee their relationship to meter, to weight, nor to musicality. Weight in meter is best manifest physically through body weight. Rehearsing a song in any meter with singers moving both macro and micro beats, with appropriate distribution of weight, sustains momentum, secures tempo, and propels musicality. Swaying or moving only macro beats will rush the tempo, as weighted micro beats in relation to more heavily weighted macro beats are essential for singers to sustain tempo. Moving only micro beats will not define the meter, as without stronger, weighted macro beats, all beats sound alike. Both macro and micro beats are necessary, with appropriate weight distribution, in order for singers to perform rhythm precisely and musically.

Techniques that weight syllables to clarify text cannot be generalized to the next piece of music, whereas weighting macro and micro beats can be applied to all choral music. A strong sense of meter propels performance, providing for text to fall into place, for shifting meters to be easily navigated, and for syncopation to play against the expected weight. Proper weighting of macro and micro beats is as important to achieving rhythmic vitality as vocal technique is to achieving a beautiful sound.

Choral warm-ups can be designed to develop a sense of meter through experience with a variety of meters in movement, including unusual meters in five and seven as well as duple and triple meters, each with its own pattern of weight in macro and micro beats. Select one meter to use as a warm-up in each rehearsal, rotating meters through

successive rehearsals. Orally deliver a handful of rhythm patterns in the meter for singers to chant repeatedly on a neutral syllable while moving both macro and micro beats with appropriate weight distribution. Without interrupting the meter by talking, improvise more difficult patterns for singers to chant while moving in the meter, extending the meter experience for several minutes. Chanting and moving in a variety of meters, without melody or text, stimulates the perception of relationships between macro and micro beats, the easy placement of challenging patterns within the matrix of macro and micro beats, and the discrimination between meters—not in theoretical definitions, but in the *sense* of meter.

Weighted movement applied directly to any piece of choral music will spark a dramatic difference in performance. As a sense of meter develops in singers, overt movement for meter becomes covert movement—momentum. Choral performance takes on new vitality when propelled by meter.

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