

Using International Phonetic Alphabet as a Teaching Tool in the Choral Rehearsal

It is always a challenge to teach students a language other than their own in the choral rehearsal. One of the greatest tools we can teach our students is the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Once singers have a basic working knowledge of IPA, you can reference specific sound throughout the rehearsal.

Most choir directors learn IPA through rigorous diction courses in college. Although we are not afforded the same length of time as the college courses, there is a way to utilize these symbols to create efficiency in the high school choral rehearsal.

When I begin a piece in another language, I always start with the musical elements (i.e. pitch, rhythm, phrasing, etc...). I want to make sure students are secure in these musical components before I introduce the language.

My Process for Teaching a Foreign Language in the Choral Rehearsal

1) Teach pitches and rhythms without the language

My students learn most of their repertoire through solfege and count-singing prior to beginning our work on text. This way, when we begin adding text, we are isolating the language.

2) Introduce IPA vowel sounds

Once I have translated a piece into IPA, I introduce the necessary vowel sounds to the class. For example, if we are studying a piece in German, I will discuss the difference between open [E] and closed [e]. I also provide a reference word in English to remember the appropriate vowel sounds i.e. the word "pet" is a good reference for the open [E] sound. Once I introduce the vowels, I find that most of the consonants are similar to English. (I teach the consonants as we work through the entire text.)

3) Introduce all of the text in IPA

After I review the various necessary vowel sounds, I write the IPA of the entire piece on the board. I review the IPA as a class and then ask students to write in the IPA in their music above the corresponding text.

4) Pronounce the text together

I find it is helpful to work phrase by phrase and ask students to write the IPA in their music. Initially, I pronounce phrases out of musical context. Once the sounds of the language are established, I select a rhythm from the piece and ask everyone to sing the text in that rhythm. Here are some methods I use to continue the transition into the music:

- chant the text in rhythm without pitch
- intone the text on a chord
- sing a theme from one voice part together on the text

Helpful ideas:

- create a musical warm-up using the text of the language in place of neutral syllables
 - Begin the class with IPA written on the board and ask students to write it in their scores as a “do now.”
- This is a great way to begin the class with a quiet focus as well as engages students in the language process.