MOVEMENT IN THE CHORAL REHEARSAL:  
THE SINGERS’ PERSPECTIVE
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Students imitate playing Latin American instruments while rehearsing an intricate rhythmic section in an unaccompanied Venezuelan song.  
Photo by Norm Maves.
The use of movement in the choral rehearsal has yielded enthusiastic support from conductors, producing numerous studies, presentations, and articles demonstrating movement’s effectiveness as a teaching technique and encouraging conductors to include movement in their rehearsals. “Movement” refers to the use of any part of the body in addition to the muscles normally employed while singing, and the use of such movement as a teaching technique to transfer abstract concepts of music and vocal pedagogy to a physical, tangible rehearsal activity for singers. It does not refer to choreography or any movements that would be presented in a performance or concert setting. Examples of movement’s use in rehearsal include swaying the body or waltzing while singing a song in ¾ time, stepping or walking to the beat, sweeping arm movements representing phrasing, various hand shapes in front of the mouth representing vowel formation, leaning forward on stressed syllables, lifting the heels while singing a descending half-step. These are only a few examples. Movement’s use in rehearsal is limited only by the conductor’s imagination, experience, and understanding of the pedagogical rationale behind movement’s effectiveness. However, a conductor’s success with movement exercises is also heavily dependent upon the singers’ attitudes and perceptions regarding movement in the choral rehearsal, and their active participation in movement while singing.

Research about movement in the choral rehearsal has focused primarily on its theory, rationale, and effectiveness, with anecdotes, observations, and interviews revealing mostly positive attitudes toward the use of movement from singers. Though research indicates the majority of singers enjoy movement in the choral rehearsal, it seems there have been no specific studies regarding the reasons for high-school aged singers’ attitudes, negative or positive, toward movement activities, or research on the singers’ perceptions of what they are learning through movement.

Singers’ attitudes in rehearsal are a key ingredient to group morale and choral success. In her Music Educators Journal
MOVEMENT IN THE CHORAL REHEARSAL:

Those aspects that students enjoy and perceive as fun contribute positively to their musical literacy levels, choral singing experience, and experience of trying to sing as a result of using movement in rehearsal. Do they perceive an improvement in their individual singing as a result of using movement in rehearsal? Do they perceive an improvement in the performance of the choir as a result of using movement in rehearsal? Do they enjoy the use of movement in choral rehearsals? Does age or grade level affect attitudes and perceptions, or other variables such as music literacy levels, choral singing experience, size of the ensemble, and rehearsal time? It is the goal of this article to shed some light on these questions.

As conductors, if we understand our singers’ perceptions and attitudes regarding the use of movement in rehearsal, we can use that information to change those aspects of movement in rehearsal that cause negative feelings, and build upon the positive perceptions. Those aspects the students enjoy and find beneficial. In discovering how singers perceive the use of movement in rehearsal and understanding their attitude toward the activities, we have useful information that may be applied to creating lessons and rehearsals tailored to the students’ taste, providing musically productive and enjoyable rehearsal experiences.

When examining movement in rehearsal from the singers’ perspective, we may ask: Do singers understand the musical objective of using movement in rehearsal? Do they perceive an improvement in their individual singing as a result of using movement in rehearsal? Do they perceive an improvement in the performance of the choir as a result of using movement in rehearsal? Do they enjoy the use of movement in choral rehearsals? Does age or grade level affect attitudes and perceptions, or other variables such as music literacy levels, choral singing experience, size of the ensemble, and rehearsal time? It is the goal of this article to shed some light on these questions.

Research addressing high school students’ attitudes and perceptions regarding movement in the choral rehearsal took place at St. Mary’s Academy—a private, Catholic, all-female college preparatory school in Portland, Oregon. The subjects of this study were 139 female students in grades nine through twelve who voluntarily participated in completing a survey. The subjects were from two separate choirs—a non-auditioned, beginning level, ninth through twelfth grade choir, and an auditioned, advanced, tenth through twelfth grade choir. Students ranged in choral experience from having several years in community and school choirs, to students who enrolled in choir for the first time. The non-auditioned choir enrolled approximately 110 singers and rehearsed three times a week before school between 7:10 and 7:50 A.M. The auditioned choir consisted of 48 singers and rehearsed twice a week after school between 3:00 and 4:30 P.M.

A survey was developed to measure students’ attitudes and perceptions regarding the use of movement in the choral rehearsal. Survey statements were developed based on the researcher’s personal observations of singers during rehearsals and from a review of related literature and research by Chagnon, Ehmann, McCoy, Wis, and Tkach-Hibbard about the use of movement in the choral rehearsal. The survey included four questions to categorize singers into subgroups based on the students’ grade levels, choir in which they were enrolled, years of choral singing experience, and experience with the use of movement in the choral rehearsal with other choirs and conductors outside of the school. The remaining twenty-five questions were scaled-choice, forced responses (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) to statements addressing the following topics: understanding of movement exercises in the choral rehearsal, perceptions of individual musical improvement as a result of movement exercises, perceptions of the ensemble’s overall musical improvement as a result of movement exercises, and the enjoyment of movement exercises. Respondents were also given the opportunity to share written comments, thoughts, and personal opinions on using movement in the choir rehearsal.

All singers who participated in the study were regularly exposed to a number of varied movement exercises in choral warm-ups and in rehearsal of their choral literature as a part of their normal rehearsals throughout the school year. During the study, each choir’s movement exercises and their purpose were documented in a daily journal. Students who chose to participate in the study were asked to thoughtfully and honestly respond to statements on the survey, and a list of the movement activities in which the students had participated during rehearsals over the past semester was presented to them to

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refresh their memories as they completed the survey. The surveys were administered to singers during a choir rehearsal near the end of the school year and required no time outside of regular class to complete.

**Singers’ Awareness of the Musical Objective of Movement in Rehearsal**

Hibbard’s, Wis’s and Chagnon’s studies on movement in the choral rehearsal all conclude that the successful conductors had a rationale for using a movement-based choral pedagogy. Movement activities in rehearsal could be viewed as a gimmick or waste of time by singers if choral directors lack a solid rationale for using it. When singers are unclear about the purpose of an activity or participate with indifference, movement has little to no effect on the sound of the choir. Chagnon contends it is critical to the success of a movement-based pedagogy that the majority of the singers perform physical activities with purposeful effort, and reported at one of his observational sites not all students understood the purpose of the movement activities, and as a result were reluctant to participate. However, as Ehmann writes, if a choir director succeeds in convincing a choir of the value of movement exercises, one may open up new fields of opportunities for creative music-making, which may otherwise remain inaccessible to the conductor and the choir.

Data collected in this study indicate that the students surveyed understand singing to be a whole-body activity and understand the purpose of movement exercises in the choral rehearsal. Ninety-six percent of the students agree or strongly agree that singing is a physical activity during which they use their whole body, not just their throats and mouths, and ninety-six percent agree or strongly agree that physical activities during warm-ups are important to singing well. A tenth-grade student with only two years of singing experience commented: “All the physical movements help me to visualize what is going on inside my body when I sing.” An eleventh-grade student in the advanced choir with several years of singing experience wrote: “I believe that because singing uses the entire body, doing movements that engage many parts of the body help the overall tone and sound, and also keep the singer healthy. By using the whole body, and not just the throat and vocal box, they do not become strained.”

Singers appreciate knowing why they are asked to participate in any activity, and will better understand the benefit of a movement exercise if their conductor makes a point to explain the rationale for it. Ninety-seven percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that their conductor explains in rehearsals how the movements are intended to improve their singing, and ninety-five percent of the students surveyed indicated they understand how the movement exercises help them to sing better. One student was interested in learning more, having commented: “St. Mary’s was the first place where I learned about movement, and I really do think it serves to benefit the choir. But can you explain more to us why exactly it works? Like, what is the ‘science’ behind it?” [Italics and quotations in original]

The surveyed students understand the musical objective to the movement exercises in rehearsals, resulting in a high level of participation in movement exercises and successful musical experiences.

**Singers’ Perception of Individual Musical Improvement as a Result of Movement in Rehearsal**

Students responded that they perceive movement exercises in the choral rehearsal to be beneficial to themselves as individuals in the following ways: keeping themselves alert and attentive, feeling more “awake” and ready to sing, improved breathing technique, improved singing technique (tone, posture, breath support), improved accuracy in singing (pitch, rhythm, intonation, balance), and singing more expressively (dynamics, emotion, phrasing, tone, energy, staccato/legato, overall musicality, etc.).

Over ninety-five percent of the students agree or strongly agree that movement keeps them alert and attentive, and feeling physically ready to sing. Non-auditioned choir students, who rehearse before school at 7:10 AM three days a week, shared comments about specific exercises they perceive as beneficial. One student commented: “[Movement exercises] are very helpful for making me more alert.” Another wrote: “The [movements] get my body ready to sing and really help me with vibrato.” A third student commented: “Movement is a great thing to wake me up, plus improve my singing!” An advanced student, who is a member of the auditioned choir which rehearses at the end of the school day, commented: “I really enjoy doing the movement activities because it wakes me up from a long day of school and also because they help me improve my singing—fixing my errors, and visualizing the music.”

Students overwhelmingly agree that movement exercises help them individually improve tone, singing technique, posture, and breath support. Ninety-two percent agree or strongly agree that movement exercises during warm-ups help them to breathe better; and ninety-six percent agree or strongly agree that movement exercises improve vocal tone, posture, and overall singing technique. A beginning choral student in tenth-grade commented: “The movements we do in rehearsal help me to learn because they help me know what the sound I should be making looks like. I have not had a lot of choir experience, and I am a visual learner; so the movements help me learn about what is happening and/or what needs to happen to create lovely singing!” [Quotations in original]

An advanced student in twelfth-grade wrote: “I think several techniques—vowels with hand shapes, lifting our hands to emulate the lift of the soft palate, and spinning arms are especially helpful for me. Movement helps me remember things better as well.” The last comment supports Piaget’s and Montessori’s, among other theories that the combination of effort associated with muscular movement and tactile stimulation enhanced both recognition and recall by students.

Students also perceive movement activities to enhance their ability to individually perform music more accurately. In response to the statement: “The movement activities help me to sing more accurately (improve-
movement in one or more of the following areas: pitch, rhythm, intonation, balance, etc.), nine-five percent of the students agree or strongly agree. An eleventh-grade student wrote: “Moving really helps me keep a beat, even if it's just stomping my foot.”

Some of the most enlightening survey comments were in reference to students’ perceptions of the ability of movement to enhance their own musicality and expressiveness while performing. Ninety-two percent of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement: “The movement exercises help me to sing more expressively” (improvement in one or more of the following areas: dynamics, emotion, phrasing, tone, energy, staccato or legato, overall musicality, etc.) One student responded: “I like doing the movement exercises because they allow me to visualize the music in a more physical way which enhances my ability to sing it correctly/expressively.” An experienced twelfth-grade singer commented: “While it was tiring to stand for the full hour and a half rehearsal, the day that we spent working on Thompson’s Alleluia in a circle was probably the most productive rehearsal for me. According to quizzes we took in psychology, I’m a kinesthetic learner, which is why I found it so helpful. When we were singing the song on later dates, I could still feel myself stepping in on ‘lu’ or stomping accents, even though I wasn’t actively doing it, which reminded me what I was supposed to do. I wish we could have done that with more of our songs.”

Data and student comments from the survey provide evidence that high school students do perceive an individual benefit from movement exercises, enjoy multimodal VAKT (visual, audio, kinesthetic, and tactile) teaching and learning while rehearsing, and understand the benefits of movement exercises in relation to their own learning styles. Findings agree with Chagnon’s research with students at the collegiate level, in which singers agreed that after learning a work of music using physical movement to enhance the process, they believed they could sing as effectively while standing still, often reporting having kinesthetic sensations when standing on the risers.

When singers understand the purpose of the movement activities and also perceive them to be beneficial to their individual learning they are willing to participate wholeheartedly. Understanding and active participation are key components to movement exercises successfully resulting in an improvement in choral performance.

Singers’ Perception of Movement’s Effect on Choral Performance
Surveyed students perceive the movement exercises to be beneficial toward improvement of the choirs’ performance by improved singing technique (vocal tone, posture, breath support), improved accuracy in singing (pitch, rhythm, intonation, balance), and improved expressivity (dynamics, emotion, phrasing, tone, energy, staccato/legato, overall musicality, etc.).

Ninety-seven percent of students agree or strongly agree that movement activities in rehearsal improved the choir’s singing technique. A choral student in the ninth grade commented: “I think movements are really valuable to the choir as a whole, because our energy, pitch, and focus seem to improve when we do them. I know when I wake my body up with motion, my voice becomes more accurate and stronger: The whole choir has much more power when using movement.” A tenth grade student wrote: “I really think movement helps improve our skill in singing and our understanding of what techniques are needed to sound better.” Another added: “I think the movements have definitely improved our choir’s sound.”

Students perceive movement exercises to be beneficial toward improving accuracy of pitch, rhythm, intonation, and balance, with ninety-four percent of the singers agreeing or strongly agreeing with the survey statement. A twelfth grade student in the advanced choir wrote: “I think using movement helps improve the choir and myself, especially for pitch and rhythm.” Another eleventh grade student admitted: “I don’t always like moving in the morning, but I think it helps us as a choir to be more in sync.”

Ninety-three percent of students agree or strongly agree that movement activities improve both choirs’ abilities to perform expressively, and ninety-seven percent of students agree or strongly agree that movement exercises in rehearsals enhance eventual performances. A ninth-grade student shared: “I think the movements are extremely helpful not only to me individually but to the choir as a whole. It helps us to have better pitch, tone, and be more expressive.” A twelfth-grade student added: “I think [movement] especially improves our rhythm and energy.”

Ehmann states that when singers associate movement with musicality in rehearsals,
the benefits transcend to performances during which movement is not a part of the concert. Data collected for this study suggest that high school students perceive Ehmann's claim to be true. Although conducting technique was not included in the scope of this study, it can be used by incorporating modified movements from exercises in rehearsals into the conducting pattern during performances—a technique developed by Rodney Eichenberger. Hibbard and Wis both report that singers will respond to such conducting gestures when seen in the performance by recalling the sensation or concept related to it.

Students' understanding of the rationale of the movement exercises, perceptions of the movement activities as being beneficial to them as individuals and to the choir equates, again, to their active participation in movement exercises which results in musical growth and learning, and enhances the choir's overall level of performance.

Singers’ Enjoyment of Movement in Rehearsal

Study results reveal that students have positive attitudes toward the use of movement in the choral rehearsal. Ninety-seven percent of students agree or strongly agree that they enjoy the physical stretches during warm-ups, and ninety-one percent agree or strongly agree that back rubs in particular were enjoyable. One student commented: “I like all of the movements except ‘scrunch.’ I sometimes fake it, but I know it helps me stretch. I enjoy choir immensely.” (“Scrunch” refers to tightening all of the shoulder, neck and facial muscles, and then releasing them into a big stretch.) Ninety-six percent of students agree or strongly agree they enjoy exercises in which they used their arms, hands, legs, and bodies while singing, and ninety-six percent agree or strongly agree that movements are fun. Although students may not like each of the movement exercises, overall they agree movement is enjoyable and beneficial in rehearsals. Samples of such comments include:

I think some exercises like “scrunch” and “swing” are unnecessary, but I do really think most of the others are VERY helpful. (ex: hand on belly, clapping, and the tall hand!”aw”)

I really enjoy using movement with our songs. I feel it helps me more than just doing movement with warm-up exercises. However the warm-up exercises help quite a bit too.

I do not like ‘blowing in the fist’ after ‘Swing Swing.” The tall hand motions in front of the face while singing are the best!

I think the ‘crazy lady arms’ are very helpful and fun. I also like using the ‘laser eyes.’

I absolutely loved choir this year. I think the movements not only help us sing better but also the silly movements make us laugh.

When asked if movement exercises were embarrassing, eighty-nine percent of students disagreed or strongly disagreed. The lack of embarrassment, especially for new students, may be an effect of the single-gender environment of the school. Although not measured by the survey, a conductor’s rapport with singers and their trust in their conductor may also be a reason for their willingness to participate. As Wis quoted in her interview with Tim Haskett, students will not “just throw themselves and trust me completely and do all this ‘silly stuff,” which seem[s] on the outside silly but if someone trusts you and they try to do it, ninety-nine percent of the time they’re going to hear a difference. And that’s going to outweigh the ‘Oh, I’m embarrassed’ kind of thing.”

Ninety-eight percent of students disagree or strongly disagree with the statement “I think adding physical movement is a waste of rehearsal time.” One student partially
agreed, however; commenting: “The movements we use in choir do help improve the overall rhythm and intonation of the choir. However, when we only have a 50 minute rehearsal using 10–15 on exercises is wasteful of valuable rehearsal time.”

Seventy-five percent of students agree or strongly agree movement should be used in rehearsal more often, and eighty-four percent agree or strongly agree they enjoy rehearsals when they use movement more than rehearsals in which they do not use movement. A twelfth-grade student commented: “I think we already use a lot of movement, so more may not be necessary.” In contrast, one student simply wrote: “I wish we would do more movement” and another commented: “I wish we used more movement like stepping to feel the beat. That helps so much.” One student exclaimed: “I LOVE movement during practice. I always move regardless of whether we are supposed to or not!” [Capitalization and underlining in original]

The positive attitudes of the students encourage a safe and enjoyable learning environment. In her article, “Making Music Easy,” Marcia Daft explains, “When a student is in a state of ‘joy’ during learning, the student loses fear and gains love, understanding how he or she learns, creating an individual connection with the music.” Daft believes that when students (both children and adults) are free to move in response to music stimulation, most find the activity—and in turn, the learning—“fun.”

Enjoyable activities result in positive attitudes and encourage participation. Surveyed students understand the musical objective of movement exercises, perceive them to improve their singing individually as well as the overall performance of the ensemble, and enjoy movement, resulting in high levels of active participation during rehearsal and positive attitudes.

The Effect of Grade Level on Singers’ Attitudes Toward Movement in the Choral Rehearsal

Ninety-nine percent of students surveyed disagree or strongly disagree with...
the statement “I am too old to have to do physical movement while singing; it is more appropriate for middle school and elementary choir students.” Sub-group data for all survey statements indicate that responses from each grade level are very similar to the overall response, revealing that grade level, and in turn, age, have very little affect on high school students’ attitudes and perceptions regarding the use of movement in the choral rehearsal.

The data agree with Peterson who writes that conductors who incorporate movement as part of their teaching process can obtain excellent results with singers of all ages, emphasizing that if movements are practiced regularly, one may observe that singers who are initially shy or awkward seem to naturally join in and enjoy the experience. Wis points out, with the studies of Lakoff and Johnson, that the effectiveness of movement is not limited to younger students based on sensorimotor or pre-occupational stages, or on children’s limited language or abstract thinking capabilities. Movement’s potential for effectiveness with adolescent and older learners is related to the abundant use of verbal metaphor already present in choral rehearsal being transferred into movement as metaphor and is a way of projecting the domain of “what we know” to the domain of “what we have yet to learn,” regardless of the age of the learner. This study supports these notions, especially in relation to the somewhat abstract subjects of vocal pedagogy and music, with adolescent students perceiving movement as a way to physically manifest and understand musical and vocal concepts.

The Effect of Choral Experience and Other Rehearsal Factors on Singers’ Attitudes Toward Movement in Rehearsal

The ensemble in which the singers were enrolled, years of previous choral experience, experiences with other choral directors, and other classroom environmental factors, including the amount of rehearsal space and the rehearsal time, are all variables that may affect students’ attitudes and perceptions regarding movement in the choral rehearsal. Survey results show, however, that these variables appear to have little relevance in participants’ responses.

Only six percent of students agree or strongly agree they did not enjoy movement during rehearsals because of it being too crowded in the choir room. However, twenty percent of the students agree or strongly agree that they do not like to do movement because they are feeling lazy or tired during rehearsals. This response, although not a high percentage, is the highest example in the study of a negative attitude toward movement in rehearsals. These data, albeit a slightly negative student attitude toward movement, enforce the need for its use in rehearsal. Research clearly shows that physical movements tend to raise the activity level of lethargic children, thus creating increased focus and longer spans of attention.

One student commented:

“Often times I am tired and/or lazy during choir but the movement gets me up and moving and it helps me wake up. I also really enjoy the backrubs because when I know I’m going to have a long hard day that helps a lot!”

Sub-group data for all survey statements indicate that response percentages from each sub-group are consistently similar to the overall response percentages, implying that variables such as choral ensemble, previous choral experience, and previous experience using movement while singing, have very little affect on high school students’ attitudes and perceptions regarding movement in the choral rehearsal.

Conclusion

This study provides a view of how female high school students perceive the use of movement in the choral rehearsal. The overwhelmingly positive responses demonstrate not only the students’ perceptions of movement as a worthwhile instructional tool that benefits individual singers and the choir as a whole, but also that students enjoy the activities. The study also suggests high school students appreciate knowing the purpose and rationale that informs rehearsal activities.

When movement exercises are presented well—with the conductor explaining the purpose of the exercise and choir members actively participating—variables such as grade level and other choral experiences have very little to no affect on students’ attitudes and perceptions. Surveyed students respond with positive attitudes toward movement activities because they perceive them to improve their choral skills as both individuals and as a choir and therefore are willing participants in movement activities.

Though rehearsals incorporating successful movement exercises may produce musical improvement and positive attitudes among singers, ill-prepared attempts to add movement may have the opposite effect. The success of movement exercises appears dependent upon many factors, including (1) singers’ understanding of the musical and educational value of the exercise; (2) the conductor’s preparation for, pedagogical understanding, and comfort level with movement exercises; (3) singers’ comfort level with and trust in their conductor; (4) regularity of the use of movement in rehearsals; and (5) overall participation by others in the ensemble. When movement exercises result in musical improvement, singers’ attitudes toward movement exercises are positive, and their perceptions of the movement’s educational and musical value are high. Students who, at first, feel awkward or uncomfortable gradually warm to the theory and use of movement as they see musical results and understand how movement improves their performance. However, when participation, understanding, and leadership are lacking, movement exercises tend to result in little musical improvement, accompanied by less favorable attitudes from and value for singers.

Conductors who may be hesitant to use movement in their high school choral rehearsals might find information from this study, along with pedagogical rationale and rehearsal techniques from the cited articles and research, helpful in engaging their own singers through the use of creative lessons and rehearsals incorporating movement, providing musically productive and enjoyable choral experiences. It is hoped that findings of this study will be of value to conductors and researchers interested in the value and
purpose of movement in rehearsals and the singers’ perspective of movement activities in the choral classroom.

NOTES
2 Ibid.
5 Claire W. McCoy, “The Effects of Movement as a Rehearsal Technique on Performance, Meter Discrimination Ability, and Attitude of Members of High School Choral Ensembles” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Iowa, 1986).
6 Ramona Wis, “Gesture and Body Movement as Physical Metaphor to Facilitate Learning and to Enhance Musical Experience in the Choral Rehearsal” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1993).
8 Chagnon, 96.
9 Ibid.
10 Ehmann, 86.
11 Chagnon, 41.
12 Ehmann, 78.
13 Hibbard, 264.
14 Chagnon, 9.
15 Wis, 285–87.
18 Wis, 17.
19 Ibid.