COMPONENTS OF GOOD CHORAL SINGING
by Jason Bishop

1) **Attitude**
The attitude we bring into every rehearsal and performance may perhaps be the most overlooked or underestimated component of good choral singing. It is essential that you do your absolute best to come into every rehearsal mentally prepared. Many things happen to us throughout the course of a day, and by the time we get to rehearsal we are a product of the day we have had. If it was a great day, we’re in good shape – but we know that isn’t always the case. I try to take time every rehearsal day to make sure I am in the right frame of mind before I step onto the podium: I ask you to do the same before you step into the room and sit in the chair. We aren’t flawless, but even a little effort goes a long way here.

2) **Energy**
Our attitude certainly can be affected by our energy, and vice versa. Other factors obviously contribute to energy level, particularly sleep, nutrition, and hydration, all three of which I realize are in relatively scarce supply for too many people. While I know it is unrealistic to ask you to get enough sleep, water, and good food every day, I do ask that you try your best on rehearsal days to meet these basic needs. It will improve your contribution to rehearsal, and allow rehearsal to benefit you as well.

3) **Posture**
Often singers think posture is about how they look, which is only partially true. Most audiences aren’t interested in watching slouched, disengaged singers no matter how good they sound. But posture also affects your actual ability to produce good sound. A collapsed torso – or shoulders, necks and chests that are misaligned – make the physical process of singing, and particularly the deep breathing that singing requires, significantly more difficult.

4) **Breathing**
Deep-breathing supports rich, fully developed tone and allows us to access our full vocal capacity. The quality of our breathing also has a direct impact on the quality of our intonation, i.e. whether or not the pitches we sing are actually in tune, flat, or sharp. We are born breathing as singers should (watch an infant breathe from beneath the rib cage), but somewhere along the way the tension, anxiety, and plain old bad habits we accrue will raise our breathing into our chests. Relearning how to breathe from below is essential to good singing, and it will help you relax, too.

5) **Diction**
Good diction consists of **clear consonants** and **beautiful vowels**. Choir who truly engage their listeners – who make audience members leave feeling as if they’ve lost track of time – have mastered at least two essential things: 1) how to sing with *choral* diction, not speaking diction, and 2) how to sing expressively (next component). Regular, daily speaking diction carries with it a substantial lack of clarity for which our brains compensate to an extent. However, this lack of clarity is magnified when many people are doing it simultaneously. Ever been in church and tried to understand what the congregation was reciting without looking at the bulletin? It’s nearly impossible unless you already know the text – and many audiences do not come in with this prior knowledge. How many times have you heard a choir singing in English and could not understand a single word? It is the choir’s responsibility to deliver consonants with a level of clarity that makes the text accessible to the listener, and to use vowel formations that keep the pitches in tune and bring the music’s colors to life.
6) Expression
Delivering the text with clarity is great, but if we do not understand what motivated that text in the first place, or the music that was written to accompany it, then we fall short of creating an intelligible or emotional experience for the listener. As performers, we function as a medium through which the composer communicates his or her intentions to an audience; however, before we can do that, we must understand what those intentions are. Winston Churchill once said, "Before you can inspire with emotion, you must be swamped with it yourself. Before you can move their tears, your own must flow. To convince them, you must yourself believe." You may find yourself singing texts that do not coincide with your own religious beliefs or personal views, but like a good actor, you work towards an understanding of another’s feelings, motivations, or point-of-view, and you deliver that understanding to the audience. Additionally, expression has several dimensions: we are chiefly concerned with the musical, but the visual cannot be overlooked. There is a reason why people come to see choral performances. A technically precise performance is compromised when it is visually disengaging. Our job as choral singers is to create a total artistic package, and we do that in basically three ways: 1) interpreting the composer’s musical choices and trusting that they were motivated by a personal understanding of the text; 2) reconciling the composer’s understanding with our own; 3) overcoming our self-consciousness in order to present a performance in which both the physical and aural elements of the music display compatibly.

7) Elements
Mastery of the elements of music – pitch, rhythm, tempo, intonation, etc. – is of course essential to a high-quality performance. There is a reason, however, that I listed this component after Expression, and after five other components: because it is possible to have a high-quality performance with a missed note, a rhythm that isn’t quite solid, a fluctuating tempo, or intonation that could be improved. The reality is that there is always room for improvement on all levels of a performance, not just in the realm of musical elements. We will devote time to what demands our time in rehearsal, and we will always work towards achieving and maintaining musical literacy. We cannot, however, divorce pitches, rhythms, or other building blocks of the music from the expression that governs them, or the physical and mental capacity required to produce them.

8) Community
For the individual members of any collective to perform at their best, they must feel as if they are embraced and belong to something greater than themselves. Like enrolling in a course or joining an organization, choosing to engage in choral singing is really choosing to become a member of a community. In order to excel at any of the components on the above list, it is important that all singers in our choral community feel welcomed, supported, and validated. To create a community-oriented atmosphere, we must be sensitive at all times to the way we interact with each other. This responsibility includes reliable attendance and preparation; an awareness of the mood or attitude we bring into the rehearsal space (which can be contagious, good or bad); the way we respond to a fellow singer who is weaker or stronger than another; the respect we show to each other, the conductor, the rehearsal environment, or the music; and the behaviors we exhibit whether rehearsing or performing. In chorus we aspire not only to a greater level of music-making at all times, but also to a greater level of humanity. There aren’t many places left where people are wholly dedicated to ennobling, enriching activities that not only make the world a better place but make the people in it better, too – let our choral community be one of those places. You will be astonished at how much better the music will be that we can create with each other if we prioritize our commitment to a strong community, and think in first-person plural rather than first-person singular.