A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WARM-UPS AS TECHNICAL EXERCISES FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF CHORAL TONE: A CASE STUDY OF THE EASTERN CAPE CHILDREN'S CHOIR

by

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In memory of Deon van der Walt (1958-2005), my most celebrated chorister
PREFACE: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# CONTENTS

Summary

Key Words

Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1: Literature study: A functional definition of choral warm-ups</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Defining the choral warm-up</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. An overview of the selected sources on choral warm-ups</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Selecting and implementing suitable warm-ups</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Distinguishing between different kinds of warm-ups</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 The relationship between the conductor, voice teacher, and singer</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Considering time constraints</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Communicating the purpose of the warm-up</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conclusion</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 2: A profile of the Eastern Cape Children’s Choir

| 1. The ECCC from 1986 to 1992 | 33 |
| 2. The ECCC after the first democratic elections in 1994 | 35 |
| 3. An insight into the choir members for whom these warm-up exercises are devised | 36 |
| 4. Disposition of the current ECCC | 38 |
| 5. The mission statement of the choir | 39 |
| 6. Rehearsals | 39 |
| 7. Contact with other children’s choirs | 40 |
| 8. International concert tours undertaken by the ECCC | 41 |
9. Concert and occasional repertoire 42
10. Projects past and present 44
11. Discography 45

Chapter 3: Proposed warm-ups for the children’s concert choir: Their aims and results 46

1. Exercise 1[a] and [b] 46
2. Exercise 2 48
3. Exercise 3 [a]: The chromatic scale in unison 50
4. Exercise 3[b]: The chromatic scale in three parts 51
5. Exercise 4 52
6. Exercise 5 54
7. Exercise 6 as suggested by Deon van der Walt 55
8. Conclusion 56

Bibliography 57

Appendix A: Vocal Exercises used by the ECCC 61

Appendix B: Recorded Vocal Exercises 63
SUMMARY

This is a research project based on the author’s experience of more than 20 years as conductor of the Eastern Cape Childrens Choir. It investigates the effectiveness of technical exercises - with special reference to selected “warm-up” exercises - in creating a superior choral tone in the children’s choir. The investigation is motivated by the fact that it is an ongoing challenge to effectively overcome problems with intonation and poor choral tone, problems which are mostly caused by lack of attention to pure vowel formation. Toward this end, a practical “tool box” of vocal exercises for the children’s choir is ultimately proposed. The toolbox is based on one single exercise with different variations. Each variation is designed to address multiple vocal needs and to correct vocal production during singing. In this manner a great many technical aspects are covered with the simplest of means and in the shortest possible time, bearing in mind that the rehearsal session allows limited time to focus on such matters to the exclusion of all else.

- KEY WORDS-

Eastern Cape Children’s Choir; vocal warm-ups; choral tone; intonation; www.eccchoir.com
INTRODUCTION

This research project investigates the effectiveness of technical exercises - with special reference to selected “warm-up” exercises - in creating a superior choral tone in the children’s choir. The investigation is motivated by the fact that, as so many experienced conductors of children’s choirs would agree, it is an ongoing challenge to effectively overcome problems with intonation and poor choral tone, problems which are mostly caused by lack of attention to pure vowel formation. Toward this end, a practical “tool box” of vocal exercises for the children’s choir is ultimately proposed. The toolbox is based on one single exercise with different variations. Each variation is designed to address multiple vocal needs and to correct vocal production during singing. In this manner a great many technical aspects are covered with the simplest of means and in the shortest possible time, bearing in mind that the rehearsal session allows limited time to focus on such matters to the exclusion of all else.

Why children’s voices, and why specifically the Eastern Cape Children’s Choir\(^1\)? This treatise is the result of my direct involvement with children’s choirs for the last 28 years, first as director of the Drakensberg Boys’ Choir from 1973 to 1981, and then as director of the ECCC since 1986. As such it may be seen as the culmination of my ongoing action research over many years into the challenges of achieving the desired choral tone: testing different approaches and solutions, adapting these to the needs of the choristers in question, assessing the success of the intervention, adapting my strategies accordingly, and then beginning the testing process all over again. In this regard the ECCC is therefore a natural choice as case study. Not only have I spent at least four hours a week in rehearsals with them for the past 20 years, but they may also be seen as an adequate research population in that their 65 members comprise a cross-section of children

\(^1\) Hereafter referred to as the ECCC.
from different communities in the Port Elizabeth area, who enter the choir with different levels of prior musical learning.

The treatise is designed in three chapters. In chapter one I address my first research objective, which is to present the reader with a critique of a mere selection from the vast amount of literature available on the subject of vocal warm-ups. This selection and critique is informed by the specific needs of the children’s concert choir, such as reliable intonation during *a capella* singing, creating *legato* lines in choir music, and extending the range of the choir. Toward this end, I begin by considering how best to define the ‘warm-up’ as a multi-purpose activation exercise, after which I attempt to distinguish between the different kinds of warm-ups, e.g. those for solo singers and those for ensembles, those for children and those for adults, etc. The relationship between the conductor, voice teacher, and singer – often a turbulent one – is interrogated, with suggestions offered as to how to diffuse tension between the different parties. Communicating the purpose of the warm-up needs explanation to prevent it from becoming mechanical drill without a definite purpose.

In chapter 2 I provide the reader with a profile of the ECCC from 1986 to the present, wherein reference is made to how the typical ECCC choir member has changed over the last 20 years, from the advantaged child who enters the choir with the ability to read music with a fair fluency and an already well-developed ear, to the disadvantaged child from the townships with no prior formal musical learning and no prior exposure to standard concert repertoire.

Given the contexts provided by the critique in chapter 1 and the profile of the choristers in question in chapter 2, chapter 3 presents the final objective of this research, namely, my suggestions for the ‘toolbox’ itself. These are the vocal exercises I have found to be least time-consuming, but also most effective in terms of the extent to which they enhance the choir’s timbre, secure reliable intonation, and address most of the musical and technical demands of the standard repertoire of the children’s concert choir. Along
with each proposed exercise I set out its aims, together with suggestions on how it should best be taught. I also provide observations and comments regarding my own experience of these exercises, from which I hope other directors of children’s choirs may benefit. The exercises proposed in this chapter are all notated in Appendix A. Appendix B is an accompanying compact disc on which they have been recorded, allowing the reader to follow Appendix A with better understanding.

The pages which follow must not only be understood as my attempts to share whatever wisdom has been gained from my experience, but I hope the reader will also be able to glean the motivation which lies behind it: the desire on my part to pay tribute to the many young singers with whom I have had the privilege of working over the years. Hearing their beautiful voices raised in song has been my inspiration and my reward.

I cannot agree more with the words of Thomas Carlyle (1795 - 1881), Scottish author, essayist and historian, who remarked: “Music is well said to be magic - the speech of angels.” However, this magic needs to be shaped. In this respect, the words of Martin Luther (1483 - 1546) – the German religious reformer - are, in my experience, very relevant: “Choir music is a discipline, a mistress of order and good manners. Practising music makes the people milder and gentler, more moral and more reasonable.”
CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE STUDY: A FUNCTIONAL DEFINITION OF CHORAL WARM-UPS

1. DEFINING THE CHORAL WARM-UP

The term “warm-up”, as encountered in the literature for both solo singers and choral music singers, is a somewhat loose description of what comprises much more than an exercise to merely “warm up” or “loosen” the voice prior to performance. It is also an informal description for vocalise or technical exercise. The vocal warm-up is in fact an exercise or even a group of exercises aimed at the enhancement of numerous aspects of voice production:

- Technical dexterity
- Uniform vowel production
- Tone colour
- As well as various other technical and interpretative components, such as correct breathing habits and legato singing.

Briggs deliberately avoids use of the term “warm-ups” because of the limited and somewhat negative association it holds for his choristers.

These exercises should be as varied as the members of the choir themselves. Perhaps a better term for the warm-up exercise might be activation exercise, because this term relates to engaging the singer’s physical and mental powers to sing choral music. You will convey more accurate information to your singers if you say, “Let's do some exercises to activate our voices and brain power,” rather than “Okay, we now have to do warm-up exercises” (Briggs 2000:36).
Titze\(^2\) on the other hand, makes this provocative challenge:

> Why can’t choirs warm up like an orchestra? Why is the choir warm-up typically executed platoon-style? (2000:31).

Titze supports this argument by stating that warm-ups in ‘group fashion’ totally disregard the individual nature of human physiology and psychology. In answer to this Byrom stresses that, unlike orchestral musicians’ warm-ups for a choir are intended to get choristers thinking together as an ensemble, not as individuals. The choral warm-up is not intended solely to warm up the individual voice (2001: 57). To his credit Titze concedes this point. He admits that he is unaccustomed to the idea of warm-ups which focus on ‘blend, balance, colour matching, timbre control and group articulation (2001:57).

Katz responds by lamenting the fact that Titze fails to suggest any ways of accommodating the individualised warming-up of each singer within a group situation. He continues by reminding Titze that this dilemma – the needs of the individual vis-à-vis the needs of the group – is one of which those concerned are all too aware, and that ‘authors of choral method textbooks have already tried to solve the problem’ (2001:4).

Most choral directors would agree that warm-ups are important. However, if they are not a regular part of each rehearsal and if they do not have ‘connectivity’ to the rehearsal or eventual performance, then what we say and what we do may be two different things. What the choral director should do, is to establish (or re-establish) the importance of choral warm-ups in each rehearsal. Robertson stresses the following points:

- Warm-ups establish focus
- Warm-ups prepare the voice for singing
- Warm-ups allow singers to hear themselves and each other
- Warm-ups establish physical readiness for singing
- Warm-ups establish proper breathing habits

\(^2\text{Ingo R. Titze is Distinguished Professor of Speech Science and Voice at the University of Iowa and Executive Director of the National Center for Voice and Speech at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts.}\)
• Warm-ups achieve unification of vowels
• Warm-ups establish intonation melodically and harmonically
• Warm-ups establish a connection with the music to be sung in the rehearsal.

The successful warm-up period will therefore not only establish the mood of the rehearsal, but also serve functionally to prepare the singers and their voices for singing (Robertson 2003:5).

Bingham sets definite goals for the choral warm-up.
• Establish, cultivate, educate and affirm the necessity for the singers to respond to the conductor’s gestures. The ensemble needs to learn the conductor’s gestures and what they mean.
• Physically warm up the vocal instrument of the singers. Every voice is a bit different, and there are many ‘correct’ ways to sing. For most choristers, the conductor is the only voice teacher they will ever have. It is important that the warm-up time also be a ‘vocal technique teaching time’ with the conductor as the teacher.
• It is important to establish ensemble technique during the warm-up period. It is during the warm-up that uniform vowel sounds are established, where the individuals singing and the ensemble as a group learns to listen and adjust to the desired quality of vowel requested by the conductor.
• Begin promptly with standing and stretching. It is important not only to begin the rehearsal exactly at the appointed time, but to do so by standing and stretching as to begin to loosen the muscles. This will draw the attention of the singers and encourage them to mirror the movements of the conductor (2003:5)3.

Mike Brewer gives the following definition of the warm-up:

Warm-ups are a series of activities that get the body and brain into gear and introduce healthy and effective singing

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practice at the same time. Whether you are a solo singer, chorister or conductor, warm-ups will enable you to use your voice more effectively and therefore transform your sound. By warming up properly, you will find rehearsals and concerts easier to manage and a lot more fun (2002:2).

Brewer reminds us that we all learn in different ways and that each singer will respond to different stimuli. Some people need to understand the physical process before enjoying the action, whilst others respond instinctively and are less interested in the techniques involved. Brewer states – a little too vaguely for my liking – that ten to twenty minutes is an appropriate length for warming up. However, he is most sensible in warning conductors who do not know enough about the muscular activity involved, to ask the advice of an expert in order to avoid causing any vocal damage. Also that, if the singer makes any sounds that in any way hurt the voice, to immediately refrain from further singing (Brewer 2002:2).

Peter Hunt stresses that just as athletes warm up before strenuous activity to maximize effectiveness and prevent injury, so the singer, also being an athlete of sorts, has to do both physical warm-ups to prepare his/her body, and vocal warm-ups to loosen the voice before singing. He continues:

Between 20% and 25% of the rehearsal time, whatever the length, should be devoted to this as it makes a vital contribution to the work that follows. Many problems can be avoided altogether (such as bad tuning, poor tone quality, unmatched vowels sounds, damage to the voice) if the warm-up work is constructive, because it is here you are encouraging correct posture and good vocal habits that should become second nature. Also you are building a repertoire of techniques that you can refer to and draw on when rehearsing actual music. Any physical warm up to suit the mood and the age of your group can be used, but be more selective about the vocal exercises so that they prepare voices for the work ahead. A good warm-up session will link with the main work of the rehearsal by practising a technique that will be needed (e.g. long phrases requiring
Finally, in giving a general definition of the warm-up, Hunt underlines that vocal exercises or warm-ups are a focusing activity. Focusing will take the form of listening carefully or concentrating on one specific technique, for instance vowel sounds, tuning, phrasing, dynamics or singing a particular part (xiv).

Taking all the above into consideration, we might therefore define the choral warm-up as an activation exercise (Briggs) that - apart from its obvious function to prepare the voice for singing – serves to instil healthy vocal habits and act as a ‘tone purification’ exercise to correct vowel sounds, encourage legato and sostenuto lines, dynamic variety and many other purely musical aspects. If the warm-up is one dimensional, only warming the voice, the choir conductor shows no musical imagination and a poor mental picture and understanding for vocal beauty/excellence. Too often has the author judged choirs purely by listening to their warm-ups, and is yet to be proved wrong. ‘If the choral director does not have a good ear for the potentials of the human voice, he or she is working with the wrong musical instruments’ (Brown 1983: 159).

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE SELECTED SOURCES ON CHORAL WARM-UPS
As conductor of a children’s choir, the challenge I face when confronted with the vast amount of available material published on the topic of vocal warm-ups, is not only to find amongst this material suggestions that are both useful and sensible, but to ensure that these are suited to the voice of a child. Given the intended brevity of the scope of this treatise, the overview presented here provides but a select representation and critique of literature which is available in this field.
One such source is *The Choral warm-up Collection*, wherein contributions from various authorities in the field are brought together. In a tongue-in-the-cheek review of this collection, Matthew Greenall writes:

> This is a book for choral conductors and singers to take note of. It is edited and compiled by the apparently tireless conductor, composer, educator and clinician, Sally Albrecht. Warm-ups can also be a source of useful training and mood setting in rehearsal, and a protection for some singers against their own vocal habits. As a conductor once put it to me, how many athletes would participate in their sport without warming up? Albrecht’s book has been compiled from suggestions by 51 US–based choral conductors, totalling 167 exercises in all. Pretty much every aspect of breathing, diction, vowels and intonation is covered somewhere, with each exercise accompanied by helpful notes as to its why and wherefore. Although not dull, the overall content is nothing like as much fun as Michael Brewer’s publication along similar lines, which generated a genuine feel of creativity around potentially mundane, even ridiculous content. However, there is plenty of material here for the resourceful conductor looking to freshen up his or her act, or for the choral singer looking to build technique (2003:35).

The first section of this book, with heading “Beginning warm-ups”, contains twenty-one different exercises, ranging from physical warm-ups (for example stretching exercises to create focus and energy within your group), warm-ups for equalising vowels, breathing exercises, to exercises aimed at extending the range of the voice. For young singers, I believe, these exercises are too technical and contain too little vocal work to keep their attention and interest.

However, exercise no 21 by Lois Fiftal, under the heading: “Beginning warm-ups: Diction, Phrasing”, appears to be the most user-friendly. This exercise comprises a four-bar phrase on the text: ‘alleluia, sing alleluia’. The open vowel sounds contained in the word ‘alleluia’ makes this an effective warm-up for phrasing, diction and intonation. The exercise could also be effectively
repeated in ascending semitones, serving to practice extension of the vocal range.

The next section of the publication in question concentrates on breathing and non-vocal exercises, suggested by Timothy Seelig, Janeal Krehbiel and David Stutzenberger. Although these exercises may well prove to be effective with individual singers, they are, in my experience, less useful when working with a large group. Having tried them out with my own choir, I found I spent more time reprimanding them for their lack of attention and having to endure their funny breathing noises than obtaining any worthwhile results. However, when these exercises were combined with actual phonation, they had the desired effect.

The exercise I particularly favour is no 27, by Alan Raines, a three-bar triplet exercise that combines breathing, articulation and flexibility. This exercise proves very suitable for the more advanced children's choir and also encourages legato singing. Breathing exercises are often misunderstood by singers because they believe they must inhale large amounts of air instead of just enough to complete a phrase. Once the phrase structure is understood by the singers, breathing becomes more natural. Such understanding can be developed by instructing them to sing only towards the end of the phrase. It is important too that the singers are told not to try to control the breath, but rather to focus on controlling the tone.

The section of the book dealing with “Chords, blend and vowels” is provided by Jay Althouse (exercises 152-158) and is aimed at the SATB choir. However these exercises can easily be transposed or adapted to suit equal voices. In my opinion these exercises are pretentious and too time consuming. Only a choir that can read music fluently might find these exercises useful. The ‘ordinary’ chorister would need to learn them from notation, which is unnecessarily time consuming. The conductor might select a four - part passage from the choir’s existing repertoire instead and obtain the same results.
In all fairness to this publication as a whole, the examples do generate some good ideas, but, in order to be workable, these ideas would need to be adapted to each choir’s specific needs. At €36.00, this collection is one that few South African choirs will be able to afford. More worrying than the cost factor, however, is that the technical aspect of singing is stressed too much, leaving the interpretative side untouched.

Another recent publication is *Warm-ups*, by noted British composer and arranger, Mike Brewer. In reviewing this publication Matthew Greenall writes:

> As anyone who has attended a Mike Brewer workshop will know, it is always fun and never dull. There are few, if any, more enthusiastic or gifted communicators with choirs of all levels than Brewer who, as well as his work with the National Youth Choir, travels word wide coaching and sharing his unique skills as an *animateur*. Thirty-six distinct sessions are outlined in some detail, each exploring through a sort of serious play aspects of posture, breathing and sound-making including range, resonance, flexibility and blend, with a further set of mind-teasers entitled ‘Body, mind and spirit’ to top off the mix Brewer’s approach is to link each exercise, which could seem dry in itself, to a playful idea, catchy tune or unlikely association (‘imagine you are holding imaginary chest expanders whilst doing this exercise’; ‘hold the reigns of a horse and pull them gently as you sing’). If you are in charge of a choir that is sniffl about vocal exercises (and many are), then Brewer has the ideas to help you bring them round, while many a singing student will also find much to think about. Attractive and clear in lay-out, this publication really does live up to its billing as ‘The indispensable handbook for singers and choir directors’ (Greenall 2003: 35).

In contrast with *The Choral Warm-up Collection* which might easily be seen as somewhat of a hotchpotch of different and at times confusing ideas, the orderly nature of Brewer’s collection is distinct, focused and methodical, one which the choir director can use without any adaptation or changes.
Accompanying suggestions on how to use the book are well thought through and as imaginative as the different sections themselves. For example, under the anagram S T R E T C H, Brewer summarises those principles that apply to all warm-ups and their use in rehearsal.

**Stamina** is as important in singing as in sport. Good muscular balance will make singing for longer periods easier and keep the voice healthy.

**Total involvement** of the body takes pressure off the vocal apparatus, increases control and flexibility, and improves awareness.

**Reinforcement** of every activity in warm-ups and in rehearsal encourages the singer to perform instinctively.

**Extremes** are worth visiting. Do an exercise that takes you further than you need in the music; this will then improve control in the normal range.

**Tune up** not only the ears, but also the muscles. Relax the jaw, neck and shoulders and calm the mind – create a balanced and comfortable posture.

**Change** things often, because variety improves flexibility and the ability to respond.

**Harmony** is the centre of music making, so link each aspect – posture, breathing, sound-making, expression and communication – into one art (Brewer 2002:2).

Since Brewer’s proposed warm-up sessions are arranged progressively, all aspects of technique are touched upon a bit at a time. By working through them gradually the choir is faced with a new technical challenge in each session. The conductor can also select activities from the collection to address specific technical demands that the choir might encounter in their repertoire. Brewer suggests the following icons to indicate the specific technical aspects targeted in each warm-up.
In testing Brewer’s ideas on my own choir, the results were very positive. I elected to wait for the second term of the year, once the choir had settled into a working routine, and then informed them that they were going to be part of an ‘experiment’. I proceeded to introduce to them the first ten of Brewer’s proposed sessions over as many rehearsals, with each member being handed a copy of the exercises for the week. The choir members enjoyed the challenge and the playful fashion in which ‘serious vocal work’ was presented, whilst the visually appealing icons took the dullness out of vocal drill.

For the more advanced children’s choir Brewer is indeed a valuable source. It contains a wealth of material, of which the examples on how to improve legato singing, mezza di voce and velocity are especially useful and musically pleasing. In addition, they enhance the sight-reading ability of the choir and take up no more than ten minutes per session. The collection is so comprehensive and every exercise so effective that any conductor is bound to find in it a selection of exercises suited to his/her choir. Thus it provides the added advantage of sparing the conductor the trouble of having to sift through numerous editions in search of suitable material.

4 Taken from Brewer 2002:2.
Another source, *The Complete Choral warm-up Book*, published by Rideau Music, is by far the most superior of all literature I have encountered.

Apart from the exercises themselves – 211 in all - the section on how to utilise this book is inspirational. While each warm-up is set out on the right-hand side of the page, its explanatory text is provided on the left facing page, making it easy for the reader to see at a glance both the warm-up and accompanying rehearsal suggestions. Dipping into a book that is set out in such a user-friendly manner is immediately gripping, ridding the reader of the boredom and bewilderment often experienced when confronted by hundreds of warm-up possibilities. The opening remark: ‘For too many years we have seen too many warm-ups without a purpose’ (Robinson/Althouse 2003:3), challenges each choir conductor to analyse the validity and purposefulness of his/her own warm-ups. In addition, dozens of excellent photographs are included portraying good and poor posture, good and poor vowel formation, and suggestions for physical warm-ups.

Another unique feature of this publication is that permission is granted by the publisher to photocopy the exercises with accompanying explanatory notes and hand [it] these to the choir members. However, it is preferable that warm-ups should rather be taught by rote and sung from memory, leaving choristers free to focus their attention on the choir director. The book focuses on the following kinds of warm-ups:

- Physical warm-ups
- Warm-ups to begin the rehearsal
- Transitional warm-ups\(^5\)
- Chordal warm-ups

\(^5\) After initial warm-ups, move to warm-ups with more specific purposes.
• Warm-ups featuring interval training

• Jazz/pop/swing warm-ups

• Warm-ups suited for church/children/middle/high school/adult and community choirs.

It has long been my own practice with the ECCC to have the children perform their warm-ups in three parts. Chordal warm-ups enhance choral blend, tone production, unification of vowels, dynamics, phrasing and intonation. Robinson and Althouse concur with this belief when they state:

> When your choir begins to warm up in parts they move into the realm of true choral singing (Robinson/Althouse 2003:65).

Their own suggestions for chordal warm-ups for the SSA choir in this publication (2003: 85-87) are easy, melodic and quick to grasp for the young singer, whilst at the same time offering exposure to a surprisingly wide ‘harmonic vocabulary’. The exercises featuring interval training - from a second to an octave - are very melodic and easy to memorise, and can also be used as general-purpose warm-ups. Two of the chordal exercises act to familiarize choir singers with the sounds of jazz/pop and swing. The warm-up considerations for different age groups are explained in great detail.

Robinson and Althouse’s book is full of useful advice for any choir director, new or experienced. The philosophy that underlies it, with which many – myself included – who have devoted themselves to the task of directing children’s choirs would agree, is eloquently articulated in the following statement:

> Build sound vocal fundamentals and habits that will remain throughout the students’ singing development in middle school, high school, and throughout their adult lives (Robinson/Althouse 2003:70).
Despite the vastness of the literature on vocal warm-ups, as is clear from the discussion of the above sources, literature specifically devoted to warm-ups for children’s voices is sparse. One such source is Shirley W. McRae’s *Directing the Children’s Choir*, published in 1991. This source is described by the publisher, Schirmer Books, as ‘an indispensable resource for all children’s choirs directors.’ Chapter 6, “Working with the Child’s Voice”, is the book’s only reference to technical work and warm-ups for children. Here McRae touches on technical aspects such as posture, breathing, production of sound, and intonation. What is evident from the vocal exercises/warm-ups she suggests, however, is that these exercises are aimed at the children’s church choir who perform during worship services rather than as a concert choir. As such this source may well be useful to novice choir directors, but I find it wanting in terms of a more extensive and in-depth discussion of technical work suitable as preparatory exercises for advanced repertoire in the case of the ‘semi-professional’ children’s choir. The latter type of choir is challenged with a programme which requires advanced vocal skills and an ability to handle polyphony. This publication includes a lesson in elementary method of singing that is generally suitable for the enhancement of singing in children’s choirs, but that is not suitable for the technical and interpretative needs of the concert choir, such as is the case with the ECCC who are the subject of this research exercise. For the ordinary primary school choir, however, the examples are interesting, imaginative and easy to sing, compiled with obvious understanding of the young singer’s vocal apparatus. There are, furthermore, a number of points made by McRae which, in my experience, are most valid, irrespective of the level of the repertoire performed. For example, she proposes that material from existing repertoire should be used as warm-up exercises, and she stresses the importance of making the children aware of various aspects of their singing technique, such as diaphragm action (1993:136).

In my case a most useful and valued source on the question of warm-ups, particularly for children’s voices, was what I learned in a personal interview with Sir David Willcocks at Kings’ College in Cambridge in 1980. At the time
he was personally responsible for the training of the treble and alto voices of
the boys of the renowned Choir of Kings’ College. In the repertoire they were
required to sing - Bach, Gibbons, Holst, Bruckner, Allegri, Palestrina, and the
often complex writings of contemporary composers - vocal exercises had be
aimed at addressing the specific technical demands of the music in question.
He therefore suggested:

- Vocal exercises which aim at improving a capella singing, such as
  material in two, three and four parts, often chosen from existing repertoire
- Exercises to habituate a good legato line
- Exercises that aim at a beautiful and cultured sound
- And, finally, that the choir director must ensure the children have a very
clear sound picture of the tone they want to produce⁶.

In a later publication, Willcocks provides useful information for the choir that
frequently performs. Although aimed at the adult choir, some of these
exercises can easily be adapted to suit a children’s choir. Willcocks
suggests a number of imaginative exercises, for example, those to be sung
in two parts and in contrary motion, or those based on the chromatic scale,
the Dorian mode and the whole-tone scale (1983:247). For Willcocks the
warm-up exercise may take many forms - scales, arpeggios or other
technical exercises hummed on different pure vowels - all of which are
beneficial at the start of the rehearsal for the cultivation of good tone, for
blend and for the development of good intonation (Willcocks 1983:242). In

⁶ Given the wealth of recorded music Willcocks left in his legacy, he is arguably one of the most knowledgeable
scholars of the boys’ voice. As such I shall always treasure the following, written at the time of my meeting with him
in 1980 when I was conductor of the Drakensberg Boys’ Choir:
one example, which focuses on the importance of blending the different voices, he stresses:

Good blend is largely dependant upon the cultivation of types of tone that are compatible with each other and upon securing uniformity of vowel treatment. As an exercise this may be sung by the choir, the conductor (i) listening for deviation from the pure vowel sounds and (ii) checking on the position of the lips (forward and rounded for oo etc.) (Willcocks 1994: 242).

Another reason Willcocks gives for poor blending in ensemble singing is that singers are not always able to control their vibrato, or they fail to realise that the degree of vibrato needed to give vital warmth and intensity to the singing of a solo line may be disturbing in a choral group (1994: 242). However, vibrato or any excessive tremolo sound is not usually common in children’s voices, and is thus less likely to cause blending problems in the case of the children’s choir. A useful exercise for enhancing good intonation – one that may easily be adapted to suit the vocal range of children - is to practise chromatic scales in contrary motion, pausing on the half-way mark to check tuning (183:247).

Ashley-Botha and Trofimczyk notate an interesting and musically imaginative warm-up, introducing major, minor, augmented and diminished triads. This exercise is ideally suited to the more advanced children’s choir. The chord changes from one type to the next by means of a semi-tone change in one or two voices at a time. Since it is sung in parts, this is not only a good exercise in intonation, but also serves to encourage the children to learn to identify the different chord types. It therefore simultaneously acts as an exercise in aural training, in good vowel formation, in intonation and breathing, the latter because it is suggested that the chords be sung in a sostenuto style and that staggered breathing be used (1991:175).
Apart from only preparing the singer's vocal instrument in warm-ups, Clayne Robison, in an aptly named article entitled “Beautiful singing: What it is and how we do it”, firmly believes that it is necessary to involve the whole body - and not only the vocal apparatus - in the warming-up procedure.

It is recommended that any series of warm-up exercises start with whole-bodied postural flexibilizing activities followed by full-hearted “Halloween ghost” moans up and down the scale and then vigorous elongated “stage speaking” of the text before actually singing phrases on pitch. Warm-up vocalises should make rhythmic sense in the body and alternate quickly between “speech-song” staccato onsets, simple connected runs on the same vowel (coloratura), connected runs on alternating bright and dark vowels, and lyrical-legato passages - all the while checking the body posture to be sure that it remains erect and flexible (Robison 2001:16).

Peter Hunt's *Voiceworks – A Handbook for Singing*, is another source worthy of note. In reviewing this book, Sandy Chenery writes:

Choosing appropriate repertoire is crucial and this book provides a huge bank of material. Peter Hunt provides in this book guidance on voice production, choir training and motivating singers, and then gives 61 songs from a huge variety of styles: sacred, secular, pop, African, native American, gospel, spiritual, to name a few. As well as old favourites a large amount of material will be completely new to most people (all pages with choral parts are photocopiable.) Every piece is accompanied by comprehensive advice giving background information, help with presenting the song, points of technique to watch out for and a variety of ways in which the material can be used to make sure it is tailored for your particular group of singers. On the accompanying CDs there are performances of each piece and supporting tracks for many of them which single out different harmonic lines to enable those leaders less confident with reading music to learn each part individually. This is an excellent resourse for anyone involved with young people's singing. The pieces are presented in a way which makes them flexible enough to suit
Voiceworks is primarily a publication of a wide variety of choir repertoire with accompanying performance suggestions, suited to most amateur choirs and singers, and not solely concerned with warm-ups. However, since much detail is given about posture, correct vowel formation and general vocal care with which the singer and choir conductor should be familiarised, I thought it fitting to include a critique of this publication here. The vocal warm-ups notated here are informative, useful, and aimed at the choir often confronted with a rigid rehearsal schedule, such as a performing concert choir. To ensure good choir tone, the importance of uniform vowel formation is given the most attention. To make it more accessible to the young singer, words, rather than the pure vowel sound, are used to clarify this point. For example, ‘Clare’s rare bear snares hares’ gives ample practice of the eh-vowel. Similarly, ‘Ah, there’s Pa’s fast car’ casually introduces a healthy ah-vowel. These exercises are performed using repeated notes (2001: xxiii). The use of words instead of pure vowels in cases such as these simultaneously makes the exercises useful for stressing the consonant’s crisp and brisk function, focusing the children’s attention on the importance of the intelligibility of the words they sing. Vowel exercises - not extending the interval of a fifth - are sung in a descending fashion, first in the major and then in the minor. Hunt suggests that major and minor descending exercises should not be done in immediate succession as this might lead to confusion for some singers, a statement which indicates that this publication is aimed at the less informed chorister.

The rest of the warm-ups are a combination of major and minor (harmonic and melodic) exercises, skilfully combining vowels, consonants, legato singing and rudimentary aural training. Hunt introduces arpeggio exercises that serve both to ‘stretch the voice’ and to practice dynamic variety. The book includes some interesting Latin rounds that span the interval of an octave, for instance a ‘Jubilate Deo’ by both Mozart and Preatorius. For the
more adventurous and advanced singers, these exercises are a novel means of focusing on the pure vowel sound produced by the simple and repetitive Latin text.

For a publication that aims to supply the choir conductor with usable and interesting repertoire whilst at the same time not to neglect the ‘vocal care’ side of the choir, the amount of warm-ups it includes are sensible and adequate. Imaginative harmonised accompaniments are notated, and are also provided on the accompanying two compact discs supplied with the purchase of this book. For its comprehensiveness this is a noteworthy addition to any school or community choir where the emphasis is on encouraging people to sing for pure enjoyment, and where vocal excellence is not the first priority. By South African standards it is an expensive purchase at € 106. However, in its defence it can be argued that all the pages are allowed to be photocopied by the publisher.

3. SELECTING AND IMPLEMENTING SUITABLE WARM-UPS

From the vastness of available warm-ups available in sources such as the above, it is the task of each choir director to select warm-up exercises most suited to his/her choir. Christy reminds us that surprisingly few vocal exercises are needed to develop technique, and that exercises for vocal development should involve exercises for four essential types of singing:

- Sustained tones
- Scale progressions
- Arpeggio progressions and
- a combination of the foregoing (1961:95).

In order to most effectively achieve all the aims of the warm-up or ‘activation exercise’, as previously defined, a number of factors need to be borne in mind.
3.1 Distinguishing between different kinds of warm-ups

Many warm-ups described in the literature previously discussed, are clearly designed for solo singing and not suited for ensemble work. Miller (1986: 42-47) suggests a whole range of complex vocal exercises and also distinguishes between the male and female voice, for instance, exercises for embellishments and bravura singing required in the coloratura repertoire. A whole collection of exercises are given for unifying the registers of the female voice (1986:133-147) and the totally bewildering exercises for developing the flageolet range, the very highest female range, often used by the coloratura and soubrette. Miller however cautions that these exercises should only be attempted after other areas of the voice have been vocalised. In his chapter on unifying the registers of male voices, exercises are suggested for achieving an evenly registered scale in the lower and middle voice (1986:127).

For the voice pedagogue this is very useful and stimulating information, but the choral conductor whose main aim is to make a group of heterogeneous individuals perform with sufficient vocal technique to sing, for instance, a Bach cantata, has little use for such specialized vocal drill.

Another great voice specialist, Orel O. Brown, claims that the first ten to fifteen minutes of the choir rehearsal should be devoted to warm-ups ‘as this discipline saves time later on’ (1996:155). Although the exercises in this book are aimed at the solo singer, Brown suggests that a large number of these are equally suited for groups (1996:155). Without touching on the anatomy of the singing instrument, he suggests that high voices should sing the low notes of the exercises more softly than low voices. Another interesting aspect is his remark on encouraging the young male voice to develop a falsetto range. ‘This should be done lightly, with the larynx resting in a low, relaxed position, but never pulled down’ (1996:155).
Nel, also a specialist of the solo voice rather than of choral singing, admits there is some difference between the two types of singing and therefore attempts to distinguish these on the following basis:

- The solo singer is busy with a serious, concentrated study of vocal technique training, encompassing all the different facets of vocal art.
- The choral singer is almost without exception the amateur singer, in possession of a fair voice, who’s technical and musical abilities differ from the next singer.
- For the choral singer, the joy of singing lies in singing with the rest of the group, and the vocal challenges encountered by the solo singer is of little interest and concern to him/her.
- The choir must be distinguished from the solo voice as a compound instrument with different vocal timbres, vocal faults and technical/musical abilities.
- Choirs are ready for performance after only a couple of months training, whereas the solo singer needs a number of years before he/she can face an audience with confidence (Nel 1991:25).

Nel recognises that choir directors often shy away from intense vocal training due to their questionable knowledge in this specialised field. He has therefore devised his article in such a way that choir directors can obtain some insight into the treatment of the voice. Therefore, although he makes it abundantly clear that the article is focused first and foremost on the solo singer, it contains useful information which can be applied successfully for choirs or choral singers.

Like most other sources, he then proceeds to deal with posture, the mechanism of breathing, vocal registers, resonance and tone production (1991:28). His explanation of the anatomy of the singing mechanism is clear and not complex, and may thus be understood by the choir trainer who has no specialized knowledge in this field. A few selected exercises are notated and their usefulness explained.
Nel does not intend that these exercises be sung by a group of voices at one time. Rather that they may be used in the case of the individual choral singer who has an urge to improve his/her own vocal abilities. In my opinion, however, some of the exercises suggested by Nel can certainly be implemented as group warm-ups for choral singers. The choir conductor can easily adapt them - for instance change some of the consonants - to suit his/her choir. However, these exercises will prove useless unless the choir director understands which vocal problems they address, and the choir members fully understand their value. Nel does in fact provide an explanation of the purpose of the exercises he proposes (1991:44). It also should be kept in mind that article was written by a voice specialist and not a choir specialist.

It is clear from the above that an abundance of material on warm-ups is readily available. In the face of this abundance, the choir director may easily lose his/her way. It is important that he/she should work at developing the discretion necessary in order to select material useful to his/her choir. Two factors appear to distinguish the warm-up suitable for the solo voice from the warm-up suitable for the choir, namely tessitura and the degree of technical complexity. But it is also clear that many aspects of this distinction are as yet difficult to define. Much is currently dependant on the discretion of the choir director. Titze expresses the hope that greater clarity will be forthcoming:

> As more and more is discovered scientifically about the physiology of warm-up, a system of exercises will emerge for specific muscle groups, specific joints and tendons, and specific deficiencies in the voice at a given moment in time (2000: 35).

Katz⁷ remarks on this statement:

> Aren’t we, as voice teachers, already engaged in using specific warm-ups for various deficiencies in our studios

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⁷ Dr. David Katz: Assistant Professor of Voice, Wartburg College, Iowa.
and, to an extent, in the choral situation? In fact, before modern vocal science, didn’t the great teachers of the Italian school seek to accomplish just that? Doesn’t modern vocal science seek to supplement, reinforce, and clarify what the great Bel Canto teachers had already conjectured? (2001:4).

3.2 The relationship between the conductor, voice teacher, and singer
Tension between the voice teacher and the choir conductor is not uncommon. In cases such as these the choir conductor is seen as a poor musician, without any knowledge of the voice, and frequently voice teachers persuade their students not to enrol in any choir programme.
Jeffrey Ballard⁸ writes:

The need for open discussions and regular meetings involving all voice and choral personnel are essential, if the department wishes to have a healthy and productive voice-choral programme (2001:23).

Furthermore:

Occasionally, philosophies are so divergent that compromised solutions cannot be worked out, but often either or both parties have not tried to communicate about these matters. Communication and mutual respect are critical (2001: 23).

In short, communication, conflict management, and collaboration equal collegiality. Robert Edwin⁹ gives an example of the often over possessive voice teacher who refuses her students permission to take part in any choral activities lest they be corrupted by ‘inferior training’. As he rightly points out, this is less a problem of personality issues than of issues related to pedagogy.

Although there are many well-trained and competent choral and voice teachers bringing honor and acclaim to our profession, there are far too many, to paraphrase a well-

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⁸ Dr. Jeffry Ballard: Assistant Professor of Music Performance at Ball State University.
⁹ Mr. Robert Edwin served on the Voice Faculty of the New Jersey School of Arts.
known colloquialism, who "don’t know their larynx from a hole in the ground" (Edwin 2001:54).

Any conductor who is serious about selecting the right warm-ups for his/her choir has a responsibility to ensure that s/he is adequately informed in matters of vocal health.

We believe that the director of a choral group should know the technique of voice. No dean of music or school principle would think of putting a choral director in charge of the training of an orchestra or band, but it is common practice to place the chorus under the direction of a band leader, orchestra conductor, organist or pianist who has no technical knowledge of voice.

Today there is an abundance of literature available from which to learn, so that, even for Christy’s band leaders, orchestra conductors, organists and pianists, there is simply no longer an excuse for pleading ignorance.

In an effort to defuse the tension between choir conductors and voice teachers, the American Academy of Teachers of Singing recently revised an earlier document of 1964 entitled: Choral Singing and the Responsibilities of the Choral Director, significantly changing its title to Choral Singing: Responsibilities in the relationship between the conductor, voice teacher, and singer. The revised document highlights the benefits of a voice student singing in a ‘fine choir’. Naturally, a ‘fine choir’ implies that such an ensemble also has an informed choir director. The following obvious benefits are noted:

• Young singers first learn their love of singing and discover their vocal gifts by singing in a choir
• The choir director is often the first musical model encountered by the young singer
• Choral singing is one of the most effective means of musicianship training

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10 Quoted in Christy 1997:17 with permission of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing.
• Aural training, sight singing and listening skills can be taught most effectively in a ‘fine choir’
• A ‘fine’ choir conductor gives his/her singers a basis in musical style and performance practice, phrasing, and sensitivity to tonal colour
• The young singer is introduced to foreign language diction
• The opportunity of singing for the first time, often the only time with an orchestra, is provided by participation in choral singing (2005: 7).

Tension between voice teachers and choir directors arise when the singer who is both a voice student and a chorister is asked by the choir director to do solo parts ‘in a tessitura, dynamic range, or vocal colour that is excessively taxing (and) can cause damage to an inexperienced singer’ (2005:7). Informed choir conductors will avoid tension between themselves and the voices teachers if:
• They have studied voice themselves and have an understanding of the vocal mechanism as a continually developing process
• They understand the importance of and skill required for preparing and warming-up a choir prior to performance
• They select music of the finest quality, keeping in mind the vocal capabilities of their singers
• They are open to the voice teacher’s suggestions for their students’ voice placements (2005:8).

The responsibilities of the singers, in turn, should be:
• To bring to the choir rehearsal and performances all of the technical and musical accomplishments they have learned in voice study
• To discuss vocal and musical problems in their choir repertoire at their voice lessons
• To feel free to speak with their conductor if there are any vocal problems in the rehearsal
• To take their responsibilities as important members of the choir seriously and to avoid putting themselves in situations that require curtailing their participation (2005:8).

In conclusion, the authors of the document propose that:
• Conductors should develop relationships with voice teachers, seek their advice, and be open to their insights about the vocal health of their students
• Voice teachers should establish a dialogue with choral conductors with whom their students sing
• Mutual attendance of performances or rehearsals can be very helpful in fostering good relationships
• The highest professional behaviour and respect must accompany each of these relationships (2005:8).

Another point of some contention surrounds that school of thought that believes it is better for the singer to be unaware of the mechanism of the voice, as it can cause muscular interference and confusion. This point of view is defended by arguing, for example, that pianists need not study the anatomy of the hand in order to improve technique. However, the position taken by William Vennard is more plausible:

Some teachers take the position that, since much of singing is still unexplained scientifically and since it lies below the level of direct conscious control anyway, it is better for us to avoid these discussions, to admit that we are unscientific, and let it go at that. They feel that knowledge of the anatomy of the vocal instrument only makes the student self-conscious, and that any knowledge of the physics of its operation tends to make him mechanistic when he should be artistic. It is true that singing can entirely be taught by abstract more or less emotional appeals to the entire personality of the student, but I cannot escape the conviction that many times more direct methods bring quicker and better results (1967:1).
3.3 Considering time constraints

Notwithstanding the fact that warm-ups or ‘activation exercises’ fulfil multiple functions, it is important that they be so designed and selected as not to take up too much rehearsal time. Few busy performing choirs can spend more than fifteen minutes on technical work, warming up the voice prior to the singing of choral repertoire. The final decision in this regard must again be left to the discretion of the choir director, but twelve to fifteen minutes warm-up time seems to be the norm.

One way to economise on time spent with the warm-up in the choir rehearsal is to select for this purpose a passage from the existing repertoire, as is frequently done in solo singing. Such a passage would be for one voice group at a time, for instance a long legato passage mainly on one word such as “Kyrie” or “Gloria”, stressing the good legato flow if the vowel is elongated and sung in the same way by all the voices. Willcocks (1994:241) and Hunt (2001:5) are unanimous in propagating the use of carefully and sensibly chosen passages from the existing repertoire as warm-ups. Christy reminds us that many vocal authorities agree that a few highly select basic vocal exercises, chosen carefully and used intelligently for what they will do to the voice, are highly desirable and quicker and better in developing vocal technique than extensive use of numerous published vocalises, no matter how excellent (1997:17).

A single warm-up can, if carefully constructed, serve a multiple of functions in order to economise on time. In the last chapter of this treatise I shall attempt to point out how a single vocal exercise can serve most of the following vocal needs:

- preparing the choir for a performance
- practising legato singing
- creating a pleasing choral tone
- improving and securing intonation
- habituating correct breathing
• informal aural training
• introduction to *a cappella* singing
• extending the range or the choir
• ensuring uniform vowel production
• improving diction and articulation.

### 3.4 Communicating the purpose of the warm-up

Titze has remarked of his experiences as chorister:

> For me, the most bizarre behaviour in the rediscovered choir world was the group warm-up. Here, the conductor (or choir master) sat down at the piano and played scales or arpeggios. We all joined in, men and women, one octave apart, repeating the exercise in half-steps up and down. No mention was made about what the exercise was to accomplish in our voices (2000: 32).

This, quite obviously, is not the ideal. The warm-up or “activation exercise” must be useful, meaningful and sensible. It must have a definite purpose of which the singer must be aware. Christy states:

> To avoid meaningless practice, it is important that every vocal exercise has an express purpose or purposes which the student understands. To mechanically plod through an exercise as a mere routine can achieve no advancement and do very little good except in the mechanics of warming up the voice (1997:7).

Wilson adds:

> In the teaching of singing there is a place for exercises, but they should be functional to the student and not abstract drill, the meaning of which he fails to see (1941:5).

Along the same lines Nesheim also remarks:

> Vocalises, long an integral part of vocal training, are considered by many conductors to have an application in choral singing that surpasses that of simply preparing the voices to perform the music at hand. In order to be effective,
however, the purpose of particular vocalises must be understood, and they must be presented in such a way that their usefulness is maximized (1997:56).

On the importance of regular vocal warm-ups and other developmental exercises for choir singers, Willcocks continues:

It is recommended therefore that all choir members should, if possible, receive some individual instruction concerning posture, breathing and tone production from an experienced teacher; and that time should be found each day for vocal exercises designed for the development of tone, the extension of the range and the cultivation of flexibility and control. It is taken for granted that those who aspire to play in orchestras require individual tuition followed by regular practice, but the need is just as great for choralists (1994:241).

Carlo Lamperti’s remark concerning the purpose of warm-ups is frank and to the point:

Benefit from an exercise comes as the result of persistent intelligent use after it goes well. A fine vocal exercise is like a good tonic – very little benefit is likely to be derived from the first dose. There is no value in itself in any exercise; benefit is derived only through persistent correct usage. All the vocal exercises in the world will not help a pupil one iota, unless those exercises are done correctly (1954:40).

In answering the question ‘What presents a good daily balance between technical work and that directed to the performance literature?’, Miller replies that in the early stages of the student’s understanding of good voice function, it is sometimes necessary to allow more lesson time for technical work. Yet no voice session should be ‘devoted solely to vocal technique separated from music making’. Unless technical work is quickly joined to actual music they ‘remain largely extraneous pedagogic gestures’. If not
transferable to the performance tasks presented by the literature to be sung, technical exercises are pointless (2002:318).

5. CONCLUSION
In the ensuing pages of this treatise, I shall attempt to draw from the literature discussed in this chapter those principles applicable to the concert choir in the particular case of children’s voices. My findings in this regard will be based upon an ongoing action research project involving my position as conductor of the ECCC. In this context, I shall explore the effectivity of selected ‘activation exercises’, based upon the following criteria:

- Their suitability for the children’s choir in general, and the ECCC as concert choir, in particular
- Given the limited amount of rehearsal time that it is possible to devote to warm-ups, the extent to which these are able to fulfil the multiple functions at which the vocal warm-up is aimed.

Before embarking on this, however, the following chapter provides some background on the type of child who is selected as member of the ECCC, against which background the above criteria are subsequently implemented, their success measured, and from which general conclusions are ultimately drawn.
CHAPTER TWO

A PROFILE OF THE EASTERN CAPE CHILDREN’S CHOIR

The Eastern Cape Children’s Choir (ECCC)\(^{11}\) was established by Anna du Plessis\(^{12}\) in 1980 to serve as a preparatory choir of the Eastern Province Youth Choir, of which she was also director. Junita Lamprecht\(^{13}\) took over from her in 1983, and remained director of the ECCC until 1985. I was appointed in this position in 1986, at which time I was also director of the UPE Chorale.\(^{14}\)

1. THE ECCC FROM 1986 TO 1992

During these first years of my involvement with the ECCC, the choir consisted of white members only. In addition, only children who could read music with some fluency and who were successful in the vocal audition were allowed into the choir. As former director of the Drakensberg Boys’ Choir (a post I held from 1974 until 1981) much publicity was given to my appointment as new ECCC director in 1986. Due to this favourable publicity, many turned up for the audition, and the choir boasted with an enormous waiting list.

At that time, the audition form was devised in such a way that the choir director could scrutinize the financial status of the parents. In retrospect, I admit that some gifted children during the period 1986-1993 were not

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\(^{11}\) From 1980 to 1985 the ECCC was known as the Eastern Province Children’s Choir

\(^{12}\) Anna du Plessis was for many years music lecturer at the former Port Elizabeth Teachers’ College, Port Elizabeth.

\(^{13}\) Junita Lamprecht was then music teacher at Framesby High School in Port Elizabeth, and is now director of the NMMU Chamber Choir.

\(^{14}\) The choir of the former University of the Port Elizabeth, now the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.
selected, not for want of vocal talent, but purely on the basis of the financial status of their parents. It was argued then that, with so many aspiring members, the conductor could hand pick gifted children who were not only familiar with staff notation, but whose parents could also afford expensive tours and other luxury extras such as choir track suits and new uniforms. This seemed at the time a perfectly natural thing to do. It was reasoned by the choir director and committee that children coming from less affluent areas of the city have behavioural problems that might jeopardise the ECCC’s pristine and ‘lofty’ reputation. The fact that the choir was referred to as a ‘snob en rykmanskoor’\(^{15}\), only seemed to strengthen the status quo.

During this time the choir committee consisted of a chairman - normally a senior member of the Education Department who, from 1987 to 1990, was in fact the Head of the Education Department in the Eastern Cape - a secretary, the choir conductor and a repetitor/accompanist.

In 1992, when the ECCC organised its first European tour to Italy, the choir encountered it first problems due to the obvious lack of cultural diversity as far as members were concerned. Most Italian organisers enquired why no black children were included in the choir, some refused to host the choir, whilst other impresarios involved in concert arrangements leaked our visit to the press and caused a media sensation. The choir was hailed as the ‘white propaganda choir from South Africa’. This negative publicity, however, caused a great deal of curiosity amongst the Italians, ensuring that most of the concerts were sold out. In a few cities students staged protest marches and minor incidents of picketing occurred. Many letters were written to the press by music lovers, complaining bitterly that innocent children with beautiful voices had become the victims of an unjust society.

\(^{15}\) Choir for the rich.
2. **THE ECCC AFTER THE FIRST DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS IN 1994**

During the period 1994 to 2006 a number of changes occurred. Now the choir began recruiting its members from all racial groups and financial backgrounds. New members were selected on the basis of a successful voice audition only. The audition procedure itself was adapted to accommodate children with no formal music training. But although the choir succeeded in losing the image of a ‘snob and rykmanskoor’, it has maintained its reputation as an important musical export product of the Eastern Cape. The most dramatic change was the introduction of development programmes aimed to accommodate and support choir members from disadvantaged communities.

These changes in policy - despite their merits - posed major musical and financial challenges to the choir, and with little expertise on how to address these changes within the choir body itself. Intonation problems seemed to be more prevalent than before. More time had to be spent on vocal warm-ups to ensure uniform tone production. This, however, has led to a more studied and ‘sympathetic’ way of assessing and developing skills of especially the new members from the ‘townships’. Consequently, special care is taken to monitor the progress of these children. Once a term they are individually recorded so that any problems they are encountering with their vocal technique or with the particular musical demands of the repertoire can be properly identified, and that measures can be put in place to address these problems. The number of applicants who turn up for auditions has also become significantly less, so that often children of lesser skill and talent must be admitted simply to ensure the balance of the ensemble. I ascribe the latter phenomenon to the additional financial burden that membership of the choir places on the resources of the family.

These challenges, and the ability to address and overcome them with a reasonable amount of success, have had the effect of making the choir committee a stronger, more efficient and organised body. Some of their duties include finding sponsorships for members with financial problems,
raising money for tours, organising lift clubs, and planning a detailed programme for the choir year. Financial experts from the parent body take care of financial matters. Another constant aim is to involve the special skills, talents and expertise of all choir parents, and not to rely on the committee members only.

Despite the declining numbers, the standard of the choir has improved. My decision to further my own studies as conductor at postgraduate level at a late stage of my career has had a positive effect on the choir, as my approach is more focused, organised and methodically more sound. My willingness to be humbled, taught, criticised and encouraged by peers and colleagues during this period of study, has brought about a lasting bond of collegiality and mutual respect.

3. AN INSIGHT INTO THE CHOIR MEMBERS FOR WHOM THESE WARM-UP EXERCISES ARE DEVISED

As described above, choir members in the period from 1986 to 1993 were - by nature of the laws of the land - a homogeneous group. All members were familiar with staff notation and received formal musical training at their respective schools. Intonation problems were few, as the children’s aural skills were already reasonably developed before joining the choir.

In the period from 1994 until the present, the typical choir member of the ECCC has changed considerably, with few receiving formal musical training at their schools. Although some members continue to fit the profile described above, the new composition of the choir is both challenged and enriched by two additional, distinct musical traditions. On the one hand there is the group who have had some exposure to the western musical canon¹⁶, and, on the other hand, there are black children in the development programme who

¹⁶ Here I refer to black children who attend schools previously designated as ‘white only’, where they are exposed to so-called Western music.
have only been exposed to township choral music\textsuperscript{17}. The challenge of the conductor in this case is to draw choristers from such contrasting musical backgrounds together to the benefit of the choir as a whole. Although many have fine vocal instruments, they have never been exposed to the particular musical and technical demands of the repertoire typical of the concert choir. An added problem is their lack of knowledge of staff notation or ability to read music. With the slightest exception, no new choir member has ever been exposed to \textit{a capella} singing in more than two parts (apart from those proficient in the township choral music tradition) or to any original Western music for equal voices from the various style periods. They have not been introduced to foreign languages. Vocal health and voice care\textsuperscript{18} are foreign to them, and the discipline which fine music making requires, not explained. They enter the choir without a clear ‘sound picture’ of a good choir sound, since a formal listening experience is an unknown concept to them. New choir members have limited or no knowledge of simple musical terminology.

To counter these challenges, great emphasis is placed on a varied and rich listening experience during their first choir camp to ensure that they form a mental picture of a cultured choir tone. This listening experience continues throughout their choir career. Any formal lecture about musical styles is replaced by a listening experience. In order to make the listening experience fruitful, I include repertoire which was recorded by the finest choirs available, for example, the \textit{Misse Basse} by Fauré\textsuperscript{19}, from the recording: \textit{The Boys’ of King’s College Choir}, conducted by Stephen Cleobury, and Caplet’s \textit{Missa à}

\textsuperscript{17} For more on the hybrid nature of township choral music, and on the extent to which it is distinct from the predominantly western music repertoire of the ECCC, the reader may refer to Zelda Potgieter and Vuyani Mazomba: ‘Liberating voices: narrative strategies and style in township choral music with specific reference to selected works by three Xhosa composers . In \textit{Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa}, 2006: 2: 23-54. For more on the challenges of achieving the western ‘dream sound’ in the case of choristers predominantly exposed to township choral music, the reader may refer to Margaret Barlow: \textit{The significance of the warm-up for an optimum choral tone: an exploratory analysis of various approaches, with specific reference to the ethnicity of South African choirs.} Unpublished M.Mus treatise, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 2006: 73-74.

\textsuperscript{18} Warming up prior to singing or using the vocal instrument with the respect it requires (that is, avoiding vocal abuse by shouting, or using the wrong register in singing).

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Heavenly Voices}. EMI Records Ltd., 2004.
trois voix\textsuperscript{20} sung by Les solistes des Choers de Lyon. In my experience, a combination of listening experience, emphasis on correct posture and correct vowel formation secure a beautiful and cultured choir tone in an amazingly short time. ‘As in all other singing, a choral member’s voice responds to a mental concept’ (Brown 1996: 156).

Care is taken during rehearsals that correct music terminology is used and explained, and that only music of the highest quality in included in the repertoire. The importance of the latter cannot be overemphasized. The author has come to realize why children’s choirs excel in music composed by, for instance Caplet, Fauré, Britten and most of the Hungarian composers such as Kodály, Bardos and Bartok. It is not only the melodic interest, but mostly the careful construction of a composition with highly singable parts. One example which comes to mind is Kodály’s effective - but difficult – Angyalok és pásztorok. Because it is so well written, this composition can be easier to sing than, for example, an easy folk or hymn tune that has been poorly arranged by an amateur musician with little knowledge of harmony or melody.

4. DISPOSITION OF THE CURRENT ECCC

The present choir consists of 68 members between eleven and fourteen years of age. They are recruited from primary schools and high schools in the Nelson Mandela metropolitan area as a whole, but in the city of Port Elizabeth in particular, by means of an annual audition held in October. Members are allowed to continue singing in the ECCC until grade 9. At the discretion of the choir director, boys whose voices have not yet changed may continue for an extra year.

The choir is administered by a choir committee, chosen from the parent body, who serves the choir on a voluntary basis. The activities of the choir are financed by a fee which covers the cost for a compulsory choir camp at the beginning of the choir year. Other expenses include a grant for the choir

\textsuperscript{20} André Caplet, Collection Musique Française, LC 00280.
director and repetitor (who also acts as rehearsal pianist), sheet music, and renting of the choir’s permanent rehearsal venue. Also paid from the choir fees are telephone accounts, postage, paper, and the costs of recording sessions and the making of compact discs.

5. THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE CHOIR

After the experiences of its first international concert tour, discussed above, and its subsequent resolve to embark on a new road, the following mission statement was formulated by the committee in 1994, at the time when the second international tour was in its planning stages.

- To introduce the members of the ECCC to choir repertoire which demands a degree of excellence to perform
- To develop their technique and vocal range to enable them to sing different musical styles, and to introduce them to foreign languages
- To teach them to develop a discerning musical taste at a young age
- To develop team spirit and group loyalty
- To teach them healthy vocal habits, stage deportment, general musicianship and the confidence to appear on local and international platforms
- To expose them to other artists of repute who appear as soloists or guest artists with the choir
- To develop them eventually into a critical and informed concert-going public
- To encourage and acknowledge other fields of excellence within the choir, such as scholastic and sporting achievements
- To identify children with solistic possibilities, both vocal and instrumental, and to create opportunities for them to display these skills.

6. REHEARSALS

There are two rehearsals per week of two hours each. Once a term the choir has a choir day - normally a Saturday - to spend extra time on interpretative detail in preparation of forthcoming performances. Extra rehearsals are also
scheduled if the choir is invited to perform with the Eastern Cape Philharmonic Orchestra or to rehearse with invited soloists, for example, organists or orchestral players who accompany them in repertoire that requires an instrumental ensemble. Toward this end a great number of additional rehearsals had to be scheduled in 2005, when the choir’s repertoire consisted exclusively of music with instrumental ensemble.²¹

7. CONTACT WITH OTHER CHILDREN’S CHOIRS
Numerous international concert tours by the ECCC over the years have resulted in the formation of healthy relationships with many children’s choirs from abroad. Most of the choirs the ECCC has visited during international concert tours return the compliment, and include Port Elizabeth on the concert itinerary of their South African tours. They are hosted by the families of the ECCC. Previous choir members are informed of these visits and also act as hosts for the visiting choirs. By invitation, the ECCC normally shares in the programme of visiting choirs, and, when possible, the programme concludes with one item as a combined choir. During an international Choir Festival in Shölde, Germany, in 2002, the ECCC was invited to teach African choir repertoire to other participating European children’s choirs. An unexpected compliment was paid to the ECCC’s conductor, by inviting him to conduct all the mass choir items.

Over the years the ECCC has performed alongside numerous choirs, of which the following are the most memorable:

- 1988 The Durban Boys’ Choir
- 1996 The Chicago Children’s Choir
- 2001 The Jacaranda Children’s Choir
- 2002 The Tygerberg Children’s Choir
- 2002 Les Pétites Chanteurs (Monaco Boys’ Choir)

²¹ An examination requirement for the master’s degree of their conductor, of which this treatise is a part.
• 2002 The Vienna Boys’ Choir (by invitation of Sasol who sponsored their tour)
• 2003 Mainzer Dom Knabenchor
• 2004 Tucson Arizona Boys’ Chorus
• 2005 The Halle Children’s Choir
• 2005 Würzburger Domsingknaben
• 2006 Vaskivuori Youth Choir
• 2006 Dresdener Spazen
• 2006 Severacêk Children’s Choir
• 2006 Prazka Cantilena Girls’ Choir.

Sharing a programme with another choir is always an opportunity for a positive learning experience, as choristers learn not only to evaluate themselves and their counterparts, but also to verbalise their assessments, drawn from the way they were taught. Often interesting and valid observations emerge from the ECCC when sharing concerts with visiting choirs. These range from admiration and praise to subtle but sensible criticism, such as: “They look around instead of watching their conductor”, “They sing flat all the time when they sing *a capella*”, “They never smile when the audience applauds”, and “Why is their music not memorized?”. Another frequent observation I encounter, is that individual choristers primarily listen and comment about the voice group they belong to, instead of commenting about the choir as a whole.

8. **INTERNATIONAL CONCERT TOURS UNDERTAKEN BY THE ECCC**

To encourage confidence to appear on international public platforms and to expose the choir to external cultural influences, international concert tours are undertaken once every two years. Since 1992, tours have been undertaken to:
• 1992 Italy
• 1994 France
Apart from the first tour in 1992 - which caused some political controversy due to the homogenous composition of the choir - all other tours were musically well received, and the standard of the ECCC’s performance and choice of repertoire commended. The children of the ECCC are encouraged and gratified by the musically better informed and cultivated European audiences as a whole. This is especially apparent in the appreciation such audiences show towards the serious sacred programme during the fist half of the performance. What choir members also marvel at is the wonderful spaces and acoustical splendour of the cathedrals and concert halls that they are exposed to. On the other hand, what I, as their conductor, find annoying is their total lack of culinary imagination when confronted with dishes they are not used to!

9. **CONCERT AND OCCASIONAL REPERTOIRE**
Since 1986 the choir has presented a balanced concert programme consisting of sacred and secular music. The duration of the first half of each programme is normally 45 minutes, consisting of original sacred compositions for equal voices. The second half of the programme is normally 20 - 25 minutes in duration and comprises secular classics as well as ‘popular music of the day’, in most cases original compositions.

In choosing original music for “equal voices” which suit the range of a children’s choir, it must be understood that repertoire may be selected that is ordinarily suited to either female or male voices. “Equal voices” normally refers to the sex of the ensemble, but in the case of the children’s choir this
term refers to a combination of boy sopranos or altos with unbroken voices and girls who for the most part have not yet reached puberty. The timbre of the child’s voice, often described as “sexless” due to its distinctive tone colour, notably unfetted from affections, to the purity, simplicity and the ethereal quality which these voices – when produced correctly – can produce, is the reason why the sound is so moving.

With the choice of sacred music, care is taken to achieve a balance of a capella and accompanied repertoire. The sacred section consists of repertoire which is cyclic in nature, for example, the Messe Basse by Gabriel Fauré, the Messe à trios voix by André Caplet, or the complete Ceremony of Carols by Benjamin Britten. The second, secular half of the programme is also grouped to create a cyclic effect, rather than randomly selected repertoire ‘to fill up the time’. It can be a group of Schubert songs, a cycle of Afrikaans songs, such as the Boerneefliedere by Pieter de Villiers or Les pétites voix by François Poulenc. In 2005 the choir performed in their secular section Vier Lieder op.17 by Brahms for choir, 2 horns and harp. Finding repertoire of a cyclic nature, but that is also suitable and challenging, is rare. The compositions of Benjamin Britten, for example his Missa Brevis or his already mentioned Ceremony of Carols, are some of the few.

Also included in a typical concert programme of the ECCC is folk music and some popular items of the day\(^{22}\), although I am always careful not to popularise the choir by singing repertoire of a suspect, albeit “popular” nature. Apart from African traditional music, the repertoire is by acknowledged arrangers. In 2005 the choir performed the Carnival of the Animals, an adaptation for equal voices by Gwyn Arch of Saint Saëns’ colourful original score for two pianos and orchestra. This arrangement is a good example of a song cycle that is sufficiently challenging for the more advanced children’s choir.

\(^{22}\) Popular music is normally chosen from the following publishers: Farber ff’ Music, Oxford University Press and Chester Music.
Invitations to perform repertoire for special occasions - music which will be performed once only - often has to be is turned down due to insufficient rehearsal time or when the repertoire is simply not appropriate, such as on one occasion when the choir was approached to partake in a performance dedicated to the music of Freddy Mercury, but where the texts of the songs in question were entirely unsuitable for children. In 2004 the choir accepted an invitation by the Eastern Cape Philharmonic Orchestra to perform Christmas Music at their annual Christmas Concert. In 2005 they accepted a second invitation from the Eastern Cape Philharmonic Orchestra to perform a single performance of Peter van Dijk’s *Selfish Giant*, composed for orchestra, soloists, children’s choir and narrator. This was followed by an opera gala concert in which the choir performed orchestral compositions by Humperdinck and Bizet. In February 2006 the choir was invited by the South African Cricket Board to perform the Australian and South African national anthems for the opening ceremony of the cricket test between South Africa and Australia in Port Elizabeth. This event was televised world-wide. The two national anthems were adapted and transposed to suit the range of the choir. Plans - in an advanced stage - to produce a compact disc of Christmas songs with the renowned South African tenor, Deon van der Walt, in 2006, were interrupted by his untimely death. In September 2006, the ECCC was fortunate to be visited by Van der Walt, at which time he worked on their sound production and suggested warm-ups for a totally relaxed throat, suited to both solo and choral singers (see Appendix A no 6, and the accompanying compact disc, Appendix B, track 8).

10. **PROJECTS PAST AND PRESENT**

A great deal needs to be done behind the scenes to ensure that the ECCC is able to achieve its mission in all respects. Toward this end, ongoing projects include:

- Organizing fund raisers for the various international concert tours
• Inviting and funding Gabriella Thèsz, choral director of the Hungarian Radio Children’s Choir, to perform workshops on Hungarian music with the ECCC
• Working with MMINO (South African – Norwegian Educational and Music programme) to identify gifted singers from disadvantaged communities, and adapting auditioning procedures to enable such children to be taken up in the choir
• Organizing gala events for the launching of new CD releases of the ECCC
• Creating and maintaining the ECCC website (www.eccchoir.com).

11. DISCOGRAPHY
It has become customary that the choir’s programme is recorded at the end of the choir year, and that the best cuts of every second year of recordings are made into a compact disc. This, however, depends on the financial resources of the choir. Each compact disc is dedicated to a well-doer of the choir, and the choir committee nominates a candidate towards this honour. The choir’s latest compact disc, Heavenly Sounds, which consists of sacred music only, is dedicated to two choir members who died tragically in 2005.
• 1995    Eastern Cape Children’s Choir in Concert
• 1997    Sing Happy Child!
• 2000    Kinnerklanke
• 2002    The Eastern Cape Children’s Choir live in Uhldingen-Mühlhofen
• 2003    21 Years: A Portrait of the Eastern Cape Children’s Choir
• 2006    Heavenly Sounds.
CHAPTER THREE

PROPOSED WARM-UPS FOR THE CHILDREN’S CONCERT CHOIR. THEIR AIMS AND RESULTS

The choral warm-up exercises as described in the literature that is discussed in chapter 1 of this treatise; do not comprehensively address the specific requirements of the more advanced children’s choir. As a consequence, this chapter presents a set of ‘tailored’ exercises which, apart from warming the voice prior to singing, also address a multiple of other related functions and enhance numerous aspects of voice production. The proposed implementation of these exercises are the result of my ongoing action research in this field, having developed through a process of ‘trial and error’ over the many years I have devoted to the children’s choir in my capacity both as director of the ECCC and, prior to that, of the Drakensberg Boys’ Choir. Each exercise discussed is notated in Appendix A and recorded on the accompanying CD, Appendix B. Following the proposed implementation and purpose of each exercise, this chapter also provides the reader with observations on my experiences of these exercises in the case of the ECCC, from which I hope other choir directors may benefit.

1. EXERCISE 1 [a] AND [b]²³

This unison exercise, consisting of the first five notes of the major scale, is done at the first rehearsal of the choir year. It can be done on any vowel preceded by the nasal consonants ‘m’ or ‘n’. It is advisable to use these nasal consonants as they help with the correct frontal placement of the vowel. Avoid unvoiced consonants like ‘d’ and ‘p’ as they cause unnecessary jaw movement. When singing the open vowel without any consonant

²³ See Appendix A, no.1[a] and 1[b], and Appendix B, track 1 & 2.
prefixed, it often causes the vowel to loose its ‘anchor’\textsuperscript{24} and is incorrectly produced at the back of the throat, causing a guttural effect.

At first let the choir sing this exercise \textit{legato}, to promote the forward flow of the tone. Alternatively execute the exercise in a \textit{semi-staccato} or detached fashion to activate diaphragm action, which in turn improves and secures a more accurate intonation. Use a pitch that accommodates all the voices comfortably. The choir conductor should encourage the choristers to make simple arms movements, as if beating two beats in a bar, to experience the flow of the tone while they sing the exercise. Always be aware of an upright positive posture. This exercise moves up in semi-tones, keeping the compass of the different voices in mind. As the repetitions ascend, I find I must remind the choristers to guard against lifting their heads in an attempt to ‘reach’ for the higher notes.

The purpose of this exercise is:

- To warm and prepare the voice for singing
- To use their arms to experience the forward movement of the tone, unconsciously introducing a feeling for phrasing
- To act as a breathing exercise by having the choristers sing each group of four bars as one phrase
- To develop aural skills, since the semi-tone requires careful intonation
- To correct vowel placement, since alternating between the dark and the bright vowels enhances the timbre of the choir
- To introduce \textit{legato} singing, since the simple arm movements will ensure that the chorister ‘can feel’ the \textit{legato} flow
- To ensure a good singing posture
- When singing this exercise in a detached or \textit{semi-staccato} fashion, the diaphragm is activated and tonal support is better understood.

\textsuperscript{24} A term used by Prof. George van der Spuy (former professor of Voice at the University of Stellenbosch, and arguably the finest voice teacher in South Africa) to indicate the forward placement of the vowels ‘under the nose’ by slightly lifting the nose as if smelling a flower.
which muscles are involved in singing, and that the rest of the body is in a relaxed state.

Observations:
Although it may appear to the ‘westernised ear’ as a basic exercise with a straightforward stepwise progression from the first to the fifth scale degree, in my experience children from the townships have endless problems with this exercise as far as intonation is concerned. The progression from the first to the second scale degree at the beginning of the choir year is always faulty, as this progression is uncommon in traditional African music. Random examples of African folk tunes from Peter Hunt’s *Voiceworks* will show that, in such music the second scale degree is found in the descending rather than in the ascending pentatonic formations. The semitone ascent in this exercise also causes endless intonation problems for the new black choir member from our development programme.
This exercise is a preparatory exercise for exercise 2.

2. **EXERCISE 2**
Once the choir is familiar with exercise 1[a] and [b], divide them into three voice parts: first sopranos, second sopranos and altos. A major triad is formed as the altos sing C, second sopranos E, with the first sopranos adding the G. All the voices sing simultaneously the first five scale degrees up and down, treating the note on which they commence as the first scale degree. This means that the altos sing the first five scale degrees of C major, the second sopranos that of E major, whilst the first sopranos sing the first five scale degrees of G major. As in exercise 1, use any vowel, preceded by a nasal consonant such as ‘m’ or ‘n’.

Initially the choristers will be confused by this polytonality, but when each voice group forms a circle with the more experienced ones placed between

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25 As teacher of voice at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, I have encountered the same intonation problems amongst those of my students who hail from the townships.
26 See Appendix A, no. 2 and Appendix B, track 3.
the new members, singing towards the new members, they soon grasp it. I always stress to the experienced choristers that it is their duty to teach the new ones, whilst I encourage the new ones to listen carefully to the more experienced members. This group effort - with abundance of praise to the old members for their ‘fine teaching’ – helps to familiarise them with this exercise. Once this exercise is mastered and executed with ‘flawless’ intonation, it replaces the unisons of exercise 1[a] and [b], so that the latter is now always done in three parts27.

The purpose of this exercise is:

- To introduce *a capella* part singing to the new chorister with the help of the experienced member
- To develop aural and listening skills and a renewed concentration on intonation
- All the purposes of exercise 1[a] and [b] are transferred to this exercise.

**Observations:**

- The altos normally experience few problems with this exercise, since for them it is a repetition of exercise 1. However, new choir members do get confused when hearing the first and second sopranos singing against them.
- The second sopranos normally experience the most intonation problems with this exercise, which I find will normally persist for the first few weeks of the choir year.
- The first sopranos seem to have fewer problems, although they can be affected by the intonation problems experienced by the second sopranos.
- I do not introduce this exercise before the problems described in exercise 1[a] and [b] concerning the progression from the first to the

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27 Although not notated as such in Appendix A, since this exercise, once it is familiar to the choir, will eventually be combined with exercise 3. (See Appendix B, cut number 3)
second scale degree, as well as the semi-tone ascent at the end of the first four bars, have not been corrected.

- In my experience the second sopranos eventually develop into more accurate singers than the alto voices, due to the introduction of this specific exercise.
- When sung free of any intonation problems, and especially when performed in a legato style, this exercise has a most pleasing choral effect and choristers tend to experience it with a great deal of aesthetic gratification.\(^{28}\)

3. **EXERCISE 3 [a]: THE CHROMATIC SCALE IN UNISON\(^{29}\)**

Due to the technical and aural demands this exercise entails, it is first done from the first to the fifth scale degree, ascending and descending, starting at a pitch which is comfortable for all the voices. Use the piano to illustrate it to the choir. Play it as musically as possible, making a slight crescendo towards the fifth scale degree and a decrescendo in the descent. After playing it several times at the tempo they will sing it, let them sing with the piano using only the voiced nasal consonant ‘ng’ [ŋ] without any vowel. Since this consonant is voiced, focused and with an intense ‘humming’ effect, correctly placed (anchored) in the ‘mask’ of the face, they can hear and produce the tone more accurately. In my experience, the use of an open vowel in this exercise will spread the tone too much, losing the focused sound and interfering with accurate pitching. Let them sing this exercise at a comfortable moving tempo in one breath. This exercise is introduced at the annual choir camp at the beginning of the year. In subsequent rehearsals through the course of the year, the range of the exercise may be extended to the full octave.

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28 This exercise is used with great success in all lecture recitals given by the ECCCD. David Hall-Green of the SABC chose to use this as a background sound effect for a television interview with me in 1994.

29 See Appendix A, no.3 [a] and Appendix B, track 4.
The purpose of this exercise is:

- To familiarise the chorister with semitone intervals and attempt ‘faultless’ intonation in a capella singing
- To develop keen listening skills
- This exercise also acts as a breathing exercise, since the ng consonant prevents too much escape of air, making it easier to sing in one breath and thus allowing for a natural feeling for phrasing\(^{30}\)
- To promote legato singing and encourage dynamic variety of tone colour.

**Observations:**

During the audition, each prospective new chorister is required to sing a series of five semitones, ascending and descending, after hearing it played on the piano a number of times. Hardly any applicant ever sings this exercise correctly, irrespective of race. The black child does not seem to be aware of the ascent of the progressive semitones, and reproduces it as a series of repeated notes. In my experience of teaching the chromatic scale to the choir, the ascending part of the scale is normally not too problematic. In the descending section however, the first three semitones are invariably the cause of inaccurate intonation. Thus this is the part of the exercise that requires most care. Establish the tempo in such a way that the semitone intervals are intelligible, the articulation crisp, and the choir can handle in one breath.

4. **EXERCISE 3[b]: THE CHROMATIC SCALE IN THREE PARTS\(^{31}\)**

During the first term the choir sings the chromatic exercise in unison only. In the second term it is done in three parts, again forming a major triad as in exercise 2. I find when this exercise is introduced too soon in parts - before pure intonation is habituated - intonation problems remain. As was the case with exercise 3[a], the ng consonant should be used here instead of a vowel.

\(^{30}\) ‘Staggered breathing’ in this exercise will cause endless intonation problems, omitting an interval in the breath action.

\(^{31}\) See Appendix A, no.3[b] and Appendix B, track 5.
The purpose of this exercise is:

- To enhance accurate pitching and to improve *a capella* singing to a great degree, but it needs constant revision and practice as it is seldom perfect.\(^{32}\)
- To habituate concentration and remarkable listening skills
- To improve breathing, as choristers must sing the complete exercise, ascending and descending, in one breath
- Apart from its other merits, to also instil vocal confidence in the choristers, as they are always pleased when the whole choir manages to sing it in ‘perfect’ intonation.

**5. EXERCISE 4**\(^ {33}\)

By the time that exercise 4 is introduced, the choristers are already accustomed to chordal warm-up exercises, and they automatically form a major triad once the root note is given to the altos. This exercise, in three parts, is sung on sustained notes using the five cardinal vowels. In my experience, it is preferable to start with a bright vowel, for example *eh* or *ieh*\(^ {34}\), because if the choir commences on an anchored vowel such as *ieh*, all the vowels which follow will also be suitably anchored. Sing this exercise at a moderate pace, using a flowing two beat pulse to encourage a good *legato* flow. Sing it with one breath and breathe after the key change. Watch carefully for a good posture and see that no unnecessary or exaggerated jaw movements are employed when singing the different vowels. Once the choir is familiar with this exercise, replace the darker vowels, *oeh* and *ah*, with other problematic vowels, for instance the German *üh* vowel and the notorious English \([æ]\)^\(^ {35}\)-vowel, frequently sung wrong by South African choristers.\(^ {36}\)

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\(^ {32}\) During the recording session of the vocal warm-ups, this exercise was hampered by faulty intonation During the practise session prior to the recording, it was notably better.

\(^ {33}\) See Appendix A, no.5 and Appendix B, track 7.

\(^ {34}\) None of the sources mentioned in the bibliography use phonetic symbols.

\(^ {35}\) \([æ]\) as in ‘and’, ‘cat’, and ‘hat’. 
singers. This exercise also moves up in semitones, and can also eventually be combined with a chromatic scale.

The purpose of this exercise is:

- To habituate uniform and correct vowel production
- To encourage a good legato flow when using a flowing two beat pulse
- To enhance the choir’s intonation, as repeated notes are notorious for causing singers to drop in pitch if they do not consciously ‘think and sing the note in an ascending fashion’
- To emphasise the elongated sound of the different vowels when sung uniformly, creating a pleasing choral tone.

Observations:
The bright vowels *ieh* and *eh* vowels need constant correction, albeit sung correctly in the exercise. Due to South African speech habits\(^{36}\), these vowels are placed too far back, and the jaw normally too low, causing a 'spread' and unfocused tone. The expression “sing as you speak” is not applicable here. The subtleties that need to be practised here are apparent when one compares the following examples:

- Afrikaans: *Ek en Esther*, pronounced ‘Ehk ehn Ehster’
- English: *In every enemy is envy*, pronounced ‘In ehenery ehenemy is ehnvy’
- German: *Das Welt is gelb von Herbstblumen*, pronounced ‘Das Wehlt ist gehlb von Hehrbstblumen’.

Due to our speech habits the *eh* vowel has persisted in being this author’s greatest frustration. But this exercise, in my experience, shows that the problem can be corrected by a simple adjustment of the jaw. However, once it is encountered in actual song material, the same problem invariably re-emerges. Therefore it is a good idea to use some of the actual text from the choir’s repertoire in this exercise in order to practise the vowels in question.

\(^{36}\) Confusing the [ə] as in ‘then’, ‘ek’ (Afrikaans) with [æ] as in ‘canopy’.
A good example would be the words ‘Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son, Chris-ti-e e-le-i-son’.

6. EXERCISE 537
The following exercise is the only unison exercise the ECCC uses in their warm-up routine. Normally the choir commences on the A below middle C. In singing this exercise, only the darker vowels *ah* and *oh* are used. I insist that the choristers conduct this exercise in three beats whilst singing. Especially important is a strong first beat, with the simultaneous bending of the knees. Sing in one breath until the end the second beat of the third bar, that is, breathe at the point where the exercise moves up one semitone. The first three notes must be sung *legato*. Make an exaggerated *portamento* towards the first beat, the highest note, which together with the last two notes of the triplet must be sung *staccato*. When executing the *portamento*, be aware of firm diaphragmatic support. All the voices continue to sing, progressing up by a semitone at a time, and stop at their own discretion once they feel the pitch exceeds their natural comfortable range.

The purpose of this exercise is:

- To enlarge (stretch) the compass of the different voices (stretching the voice)
- To use the same vocal register throughout the entire exercise
- To make the chorister aware that when singing these dark vowels, the jaw hangs down relaxed and does not alter its position
- To ensure that no tension exists in the throat, by means of the use of arm movements, the strong downward beat and bending of the knees on the first beat of the second bar (highest note)
- To think the high note ‘down’, and not reach for it by lifting the head
- To practise the diaphragm unconsciously when the *portamento* is executed
- At a brisk tempo this exercise also develops agility and vocal technique.

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37 See Appendix A, no.5 and Appendix B, track 7.
Observations:
This is the last warm-up exercise done at the start of each rehearsal. Because of the arpeggio-like design of this exercise, each voice warms up over more than two octaves. Take care that the first sopranos (especially the boy sopranos) do not commence this exercise in the ‘chest’ register, as they will start forcing the voice and have to change to the head register as the exercise progresses upwards. The conductor must keep in mind that the essence of voice production is the ability to sing from the lowest to the highest note with freedom and ease, employing the same register throughout. Choristers tend to enjoy the challenge of this exercise and will eagerly inquire whether they have managed to ‘sing higher today that last time.’

7. EXERCISE 6
In addition to the exercises notated and described thus far, I include exercise 6 as one of special significance because it is one introduced to the ECCC by the late Deon van der Walt during a workshop he conducted with the choir to familiarize himself by their tone production while we were rehearsing some Christmas Music with him for the envisaged compact disc we would produce together. The voiced consonant ‘l’ is used with quick fluttering motions towards the top of the front teeth. He suggested the choir use either the three-part chords of exercise 2 or the unisons of exercise 1[a].

The purpose of this exercise is to experience a totally relaxed throat while singing. Thus sound production is of secondary importance here. Upon further enquiries from me concerning this exercise, Van der Walt responded as follows:39

38 See Appendix A, no.6 and Appendix B, track 8.
39 This passage is a verbatim extract from an e-mail I received from Van der Walt on 27 October 2005.
Ivm met daai oefening oor die oop-keel- sensasie wat ek met jou kinderkoor gedoen het. Laat hulle hul tong teen die boonste tande plaas. Gebruik die konsonant ‘L’, en gebruik daai 3-stemmige oefening van jou wat so mooi klink. Laat hulle dit ook die ‘L’-konsonant met die ‘flutter’ vd tong doen. Die klank sal nie so hot wees nie, maar die keel bly heeltyd oop en geen styfheid of spanning sal plaasvind nie. Dit werk soos ‘n bom. Doen dit self elke dag.40

8. CONCLUSION
In this treatise I have shown that, although the conductor would be well advised to avail him/herself of the available literature on a topic such as the choral warm-up, ultimately the particular context of the individual choir – whether adults or children, whether equal or mixed voices, whether ethnically diverse or homogeneous, etc. – must be taken into account before any particular warm-ups are selected. I have also endeavoured to show that the least possible number of warm-ups or ‘activation exercises’ can be selected for the greatest possible number of purposes, purposes that way exceed the mere ‘warming-up’ of the voice. But the eventual success (or failure) of the warm-up session lies in the hands of the conductor, in how s/he selects exercises with discretion (keeping their many potential purposes in mind), in how s/he proceeds to implement the exercises in question, and, finally, in the extent to which s/he thus succeeds in instilling in the choristers an innate sense of the many technical and musical facets of singing that will make their performance of choral music truly great.

40 To maintain an open throat, use that three part exercise (Appendix A, no 2) Let them place the tongue on the top teeth and sing the exercise on the voiced ‘l’ consonant. Use the same consonant, but do it staccato, fluttering the ‘l’ consonant on each note. Although the sound is not very interesting, the throat remains open constantly. I do it myself every day.


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In Falkner, K (ed): *Voice*

Wilson, H. 1941. *The Solo Singer.*
New York: Carl Fischer
APPENDIX A
Vocal exercises used by the ECCC

1 [a] legato

moe
mio

moe mè
mio mo

1 [b] non legato

nie nie nie nie nie nie nie nie nie nie nie nie nie
nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù

nie nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù nù

no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no

non legato

moe

3 [a]

ng
APPENDIX B

Recorded Vocal Exercises