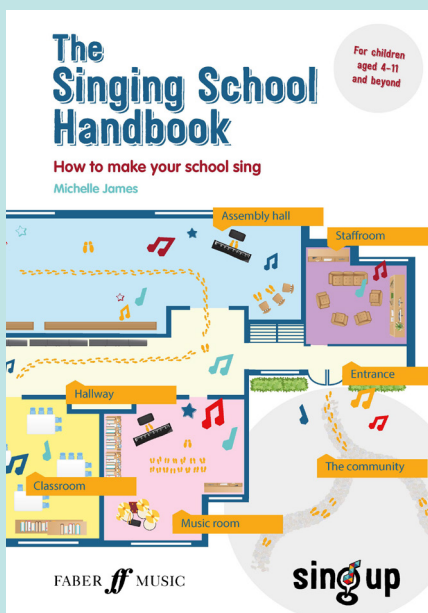


# sing up

Love learning, start singing



## Making progress and improving singing

An excerpt from *The Singing School Handbook*  
by Michelle James  
published by Sing Up and Faber Music

Sing Up makes transformative change happen in schools to enhance children's development and learning through the power of singing. Developed by teachers for teachers, we have been supporting singing schools for over a decade, and today Sing Up is used around the world.

The Singing School Handbook is a how-to guide to help you - a teacher (with or without musical knowledge) or singing leader - harness the power of singing and turn your school into a singing school. This excerpt is taken from Chapter 9: Making progress and improving singing.

We hope you enjoy singing with us.

In this Chapter we are going to think about ways to improve the quality of the singing you are hearing when you are in your school; how to recognise good singing; how to spot areas that would benefit from support, guidance and practice; and suggestions and techniques for helping your young singers to make those improvements and adjustments over time.

It needs to be recognised first that every school will be working from their own starting point, as will each individual child and so 'improvement' will mean a range of different things in different contexts and stages. In our view, this isn't about benchmarking particular vocal 'targets' that ought to be achieved by a given age.

### Improving the quality of singing in your school requires three things:

- 1 A conscious commitment from you and other staff to improve the quality of singing
- 2 Your ability to hear and to identify what can be improved – and over time, the children's ability to do the same
- 3 Knowledge of some techniques and approaches to allow you to support the singers to make those improvements with practice





## CONDITIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

There are some overall conditions you can foster within your school which will go a long way to helping the quality of singing to improve organically over time.

### **Role models and inspiration**

Having good singing role models among the staff and older pupils will be inspiring for your younger singers. Opportunities to hear and see others singing well and enjoying their singing will set a great example. If you can establish a staff choir for example, that would be really great for the pupils to see and hear, and they will be really encouraging and proud of their teachers for getting up and singing to them in an assembly every once in a while, instead of the other way around!

Visiting guest singers, vocal leaders and choirs will also be a source of inspiration and can motivate pupils and teachers to improve their own singing. It is also a chance to learn about other styles of singing and musical genres and to hear more advanced singers sing live – always a powerful experience.

Take them out of school to gain a range of singing experiences, either where they get to sing, or they get to hear others sing, or both. This raises aspirations and helps pupils see what they might be able to achieve.

### **Make connections, think about progression routes**

Make connections with other schools, do joint singing events, maybe work with your local Secondary school and have some older students come and visit and perform or lead some singing themselves. While making these external connections you can be thinking about potential progression routes for some of your young singers who would benefit from a new challenge – might they be able to join a local choir outside of school which is at a more advanced level?



### **Sing regularly and practise**

Where are the opportunities for your pupils to sing regularly? Is there an appropriate space in which you can practise and rehearse? Are there regular opportunities for the pupils to perform songs they have learnt? These don't need to be formal concerts every time, it could be as simple as performing to another class or to the Head Teacher one afternoon. All these give a focus for improving and perfecting a song ready to sing to someone else.

## FOCUSSED LISTENING

Listening really well is the most important skill a musician can possess. It can take a while to learn how to actively listen to music and really connect the musical computer (the brain) with the ears, but the more you listen purposefully to music, the more your ears will tune-in and pass more and more detailed information across to your brain. Listening to music is, in any case, a decoding process – rather like listening to speech. When we are learning a language, whether it is our mother-tongue or a second language, we gradually absorb and learn to decode the sounds, and our brains then give them meaning that we can recognise, understand and act on. So too with music.

### **A great starting point is to listen to lots of recordings of choirs – they could be children’s or adult choirs**

- If you read music, try having a copy of the music in front of you when you are listening and follow one line
- Practise thinking ahead and trying to hear in your head what is coming next, then whether the actual sound matches your ‘imagined’ sound – in doing this you will be forming expectations in your mind which will either be met or not met by what you hear
- Now try listening to different choirs’ recordings of the same pieces
- Listen and compare how they differ. They might both be good but try to spot the differences in how the two choirs sing the same piece.
- Try to describe those differences in words and explain what you prefer from the two performances and why.

### **Go to a concert where a choir is singing**

- While you’re listening think about what you like about the singing
- What kind of sound do they make?
- How might you put it into words to describe it to someone else?
- Notice the phrasing, the dynamics, how together they are, how they enunciate the words. Again, try to think about how you would describe what is good about it in words.

Best of all, join a choir! You will learn so much from the experience of singing with others yourself, learning to listen to the voices around you, to blend your voice with theirs and working collectively on a blended sound and polished performance.

What you are learning here is focussed listening which will allow you to listen deeply to a performance and identify what you like about it. Then you are learning how to articulate that in words – the better you get at this the more able you will be to describe to your choir or singing group what it is that you want to hear in their singing.





## FOCUSSED LISTENING IN THE CLASSROOM

Whatever the context of singing in your school, whether in the classroom, in assembly, in music lessons or in choir, you want your pupils to be singing well and to be improving. So – keeping in mind the golden rule of starting where they are – if you apply some listening and improving techniques in any of those contexts, you will be able to help the children to learn, enjoy and improve the quality of their singing.

The focussed listening technique isn't something you need to keep to yourself and take sole responsibility for. Constantly encourage your pupils to be listening to themselves and each other – to the sound of the group – when they are singing, and to be asking themselves questions about whether it could be improved. Here is a list of the kind of things that you and they, can be listening out for, broken down into categories:

### **Pulse and rhythm:**

- Are we keeping a steady pulse, or are we rushing, or slowing down compared with the pulse at the start?
- How does the pulse feel? Does it feel about right for the music?
- Does it feel like the music is dragging, or too sluggish?
- Does it feel like the music is too rushed or frantic?
- Do the words feel garbled?
- Does the pulse feel appropriate for the mood of the song and the meaning of the words? You could make them laugh about this by telling them to imagine a funeral march played really quickly or a happy up-beat song played really, really slowly – for example, music used to accompany the clowns in a circus - and have them think about and describe why this wouldn't feel right.
- Have we got the rhythmic patterns accurate? Are we singing them together or are they sounding messy?

### **Pitch and melodic accuracy:**

- How well have we learnt the music? Are there mistakes we can hear?
- Are we listening to each other carefully to make sure our intonation is good?
- Are we listening carefully to the accompaniment/backing track (if there is one) to make sure we are in tune with that?
- Are we able to sing the correct notes cleanly?
- Are we swooping when there are jumps in pitch or able to manage the jumps cleanly?
- When singing in parts – can we hear the other parts? Are we listening carefully to them to make sure we are in tune with each other?

### **Tone, blend & balance:**

- Are we producing a nice blended sound together?
- Are any voices sticking out?
- Is the sound we are making going to be pleasant to listen to?
- Is it a nice focussed sound – not breathy, not shouty?
- When singing in parts – are the parts balanced – can we hear the other parts as well as our own?

### **Communication and expression:**

- Are we singing the words clearly?
- Does the way we are singing the song help to communicate its meaning?
- Are we singing loudly and softly in the right places?
- Are our faces expressing the mood of the song?

## IMPROVING WHAT YOU HEAR

What can we do when we (and they) spot that something isn't quite right?

First of all, as educators we know that the following approaches to rehearsal and practice will not be effective:

- Asking the children to repeat something over and over without pointing out what they should be improving
- Always starting at the beginning and singing through the whole thing without focussed practice on the less well-known or tricky bits
- Not connecting their learning, for example, not connecting the warm-up with something specific they need to practise and transferring that learning into the song

### Tip – break it down, slow it down

1. Identify the section or sections that are causing problems and practise just those sections slowly but in time – i.e. the section is still in time with itself and rhythmically accurate, it is just slower than the actual tempo you're aiming for
2. Break the troublesome sections down into really short phrases, practise them slowly
3. When the short phrases are accurate, try putting them back together – still below tempo
4. Gradually increase the tempo, making sure that there is still accuracy

We also need to remember, whenever we're teaching, that children have different strengths and preferences in their learning styles. So, we need to use multiple approaches to solve each problem – some young singers will feel how to improve, some will hear how to improve and others will need to understand intellectually how to improve. Mostly, you need a mix of all three.

Here are some specific things you can try in order to make improvements under the four headings we used above of Pulse and rhythm; Pitch and melodic accuracy; Tone, blend and balance; and Communication and expression.

### **Pulse and rhythm**

Much of acquiring and improving a good sense of pulse and rhythm is about internalising it, within the body and mind. The best way to achieve this is with a holistic approach – covering feeling, hearing and thinking.

### **Feeling**

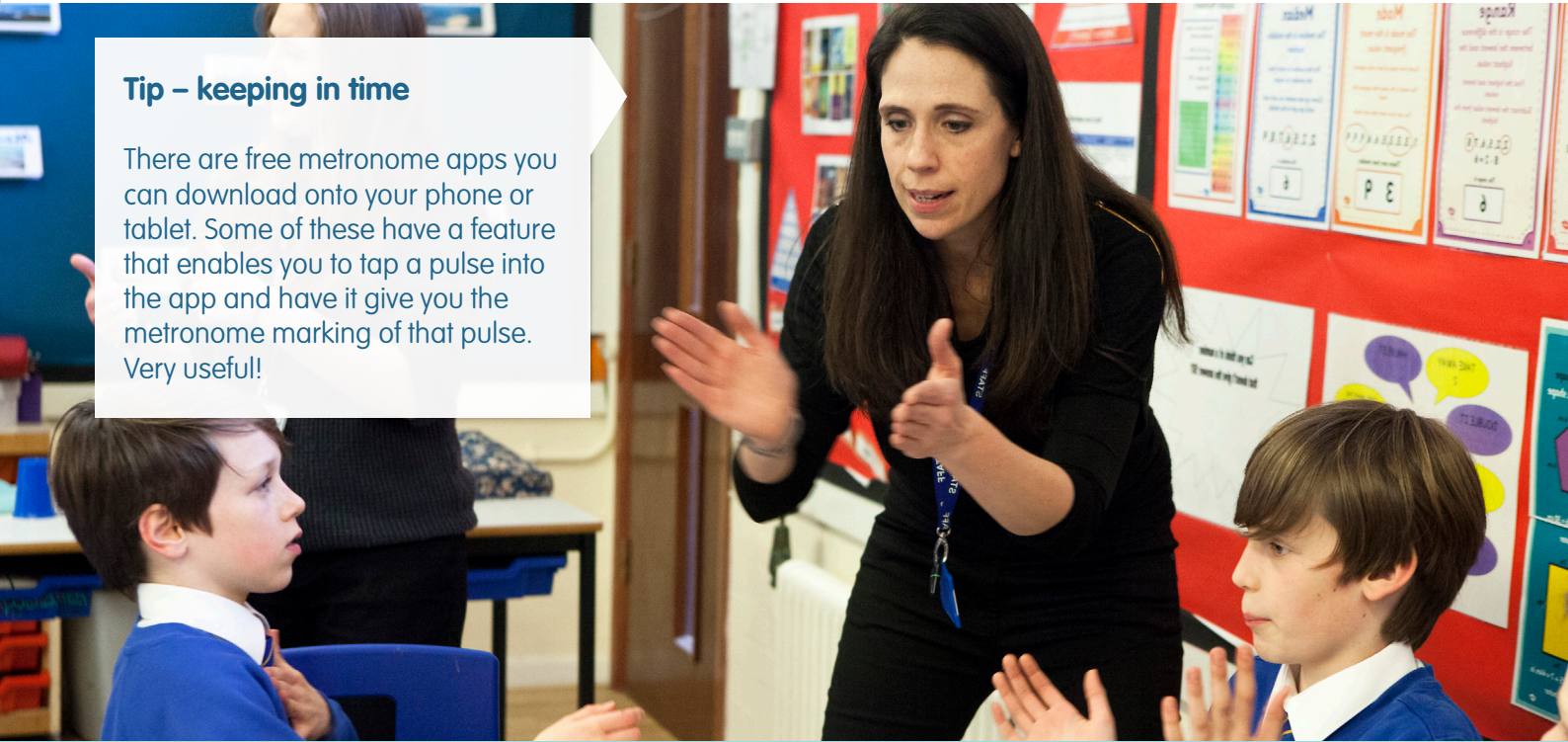
Some children will respond most positively to actualising the pulse and rhythm within their bodies. Stepping in time with the pulse, clapping the off-beat, inventing and using body percussion – all these can help with achieving this. This approach isn't only applicable to music with a strong drum-beat (like rock and pop), it applies just as much to classical, folk and other genres of music. This internalising of the pulse is a thread that runs through all musical performance on any instrument.

## Hearing

Some children will also benefit from listening and matching a pulse – drummers spend hours and hours practising with a metronome or click-track for a reason. It's also the reason why the drummer at football matches is vital to keep everyone in the stadium together. So try creating a steady, audible beat for the children to sing to – not the accompaniment, and not the backing track, just an audible beat on its own. This might be as simple as you clapping the beat if you are confident you can keep it really steady, or you can use a metronome. You can buy a regular metronome in music shops or you can use a free online metronome that you can run through speakers.



### Tip – keeping in time

There are free metronome apps you can download onto your phone or tablet. Some of these have a feature that enables you to tap a pulse into the app and have it give you the metronome marking of that pulse. Very useful!



## Thinking

Finally, an intellectual understanding of what is going on rhythmically is also important and helpful. This is where a bit of understanding of music theory and notation will really help. A major part of rhythmic accuracy comes from the ability to sub-divide the beat silently in your mind – which as we've said before, is your musical 'computer' - or physically in your body .

Explaining to your pupils that one of these notes  is worth half of one of these notes  and then getting them to feel or clap both quavers evenly and steadily within each crotchet beat, will cement and enhance their intellectual understanding of what is going on in the music. And it will dramatically improve the accuracy of where they are placing those crotchet beats.



## PITCH AND MELODIC ACCURACY

All singers, from beginners to professionals, sometimes have problems with pitch. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Make it clear to your students that there is always another level to aspire to and that you are going to try some fun activities with them that are aimed at improving their tuning.

### How do I stop us from singing flat?

This might be a combination of singing consistently 'under the note' and/or of under-hitting particular intervals or jumps or – a common problem – going flat when singing descending scales.

If there is a tendency for your singers to sing consistently under the note, posture and technical remedies are usually the first place to start. As before, combining feeling, hearing and thinking together will be really effective.

- Feeling:** Try refreshing posture and technique by standing, doing some warm-up exercises and to focus their vocal tone (use the exercise for 'breathiness' below)
- Hearing:** Combine this with asking them to listen carefully to each other and to the accompaniment (if there is one)
- Thinking:** Think about singing on the tops of the notes rather than reaching up towards them

If there are particular problems with jumps that they are under-hitting you can try the following:

- Feeling:** Practising swooping up to the note will help your singers learn and remember where in their voices the note is, how big the gap between the two notes is, and what it feels like in their voice
- Hearing:** Using the thinking voice - sing the bottom note of the problem interval out loud, pause, hear the upper note in your thinking voice, then sing it. Practise this a few times for accuracy
- Thinking:** Thinking about the distance between the two notes, thinking about singing on the top of that note, coming down and landing on the top of it, rather than reaching up to it, will help

And problems with descending scales going flat can be helped by simply thinking 'up' while singing it. Try getting your singers to do a smooth upwards movement with outstretched hands, palms facing upwards while they are singing the descending scale. You'll be surprised how much that can trick the brain into thinking upwards while singing downwards!

### How do I stop us from singing sharp?

It is much more common for singers to sing consistently flat than sharp, but when inexperienced singers are excited or nervous – e.g. in a performance, they can suddenly begin singing sharp even if they never have before. Good listening skills are your best ally here. Encouraging them to listen carefully to each other, the accompaniment and to their own voices plus making performance a regular occurrence – even if it is on a small scale to another class or just another teacher – will all help to avoid sudden onsets of sharp singing.

The other thing to watch out for is that your pupils are not singing sharp because the song is too low for them. So, if the sharp singing is coupled with poor tone or signs of voices giving out on the low notes, consider transposing it up a tone or more.





## Tone, blend and balance

Achieving a good tone, blend and balance is almost entirely about developing good listening skills and good vocal technique. If the tone the singers are producing doesn't sound good, it is most likely that there's something you can do to remedy that in relation to their posture, how they are breathing and by making sure the song is within the correct range for their voices. Warm-ups are a great way to address tone problems.

### Tip

Encourage good posture and breathing from the start. 'Soldier, Teenager, Singer' is a great one for this. Call out "soldier" and the children must stand to attention, shout "teenager" and they mime a slouching teen, call out "singer" and they stand straight with balanced head and soft knees."

### Tip

Smiling slightly while singing will immediately brighten and focus the sound. They don't have to go overboard with broad grins, but just raising the corners of the mouth and the 'apples' of the cheeks for a gentle smile will produce the effect of brightening the tone.

## Breathiness

Remind them to focus the sound so it isn't breathy. Experiment with getting them to all hum to an 'mm' or 'ng' sound, really listening to each other. Try it on one note or on a triad if you are singing in parts and get them to really listen to the resonance of their voices. Then get them to try the same thing with the song – still to 'mm' or 'ng'. Next get them to think about maintaining the same tone but opening up to an 'oo' sound, then an 'ohh', and finally an 'ahh' but not with an overly opened mouth, just a natural 'ah' sound. Last of all, add the words, asking them to consciously try to retain the same sound they've just been making.

## Shouting

Don't let exuberance and enthusiasm turn into shouty singing. Take the whole dynamic range of the song down a notch if necessary so there's room for a noticeable increase in volume for the loud bits without resorting to over-singing them.

Just keeping a consciousness of not shouting in your mind and in the children's minds will probably be sufficient to avoid it happening. Your gestures from the front will serve as an effective 'limiter' on the volume they're aiming for, so when you can hear it going too far, think about what gestures you can use to rein it in without losing the excitement of the louder moments.

Basic, practical things like the singers straining to be heard over a backing track or piano accompaniment that is too loud can be swiftly dealt with and may solve the problem.



## Ensemble singing

Achieving good blend and balance is about sounding as one – an ensemble. Just like in a sports team, each player is valued and essential as an individual but ultimately, they must all work together as a team to be successful. In singing this will mean:

- Listening to and watching each other
- Beginning and ending phrases together
- Placing words carefully at the same time with the same clear articulation
- Singing precisely the same rhythms
- Singing with the same phrasing and breathing
- Being aware of the overall volume
- Having a shared sense of style and meaning of a song
- Listening to the overall sound and consciously blending their own voice with it

## Creating a unison blend

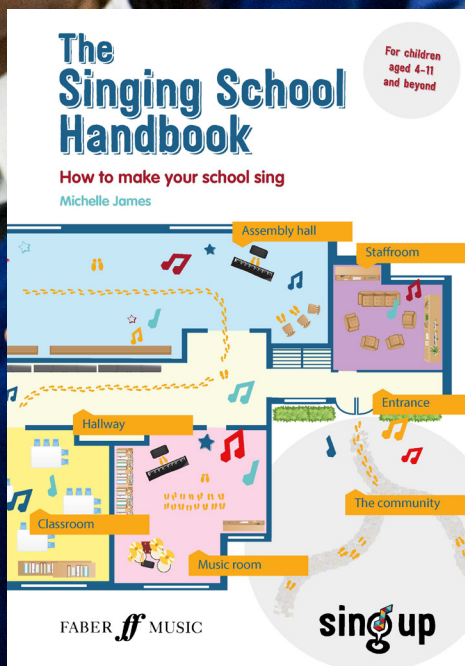
Achieving a good blend among your singers requires a combination of a consistent, shared tone quality, uniformity of pronunciation – including uniformity of vowel sounds and precise placing of consonants – and phrasing the music as one. You are looking for a collective unison sound, not a group of individual singers. The responsibility for this lies with your singers themselves but you can guide them as to how to achieve this and encourage them to listen carefully to each other.

It can help if you listen to smaller groups or rows of singers and move them around to encourage them to listen to each other more carefully. They will focus their listening on the things you are listening for. Discussing where you want them to breathe and how you want them to pronounce words and vowel sounds in particular will help with consistency. You will also want them to have a shared understanding of the style of the song and how you want that conveyed in their singing.



Through our award-winning digital solution, Sing Up provides you with the complete singing experience. Your Membership includes access to our Song Bank, the original and the best, with almost 1000 songs, specially arranged to promote good vocal health in young voices. Our wide range of resources, training and songs are designed to help you use singing for cross-curricular learning in the classroom or to act as a complete foundation for musical learning across the school, from early years to age 18 and beyond.

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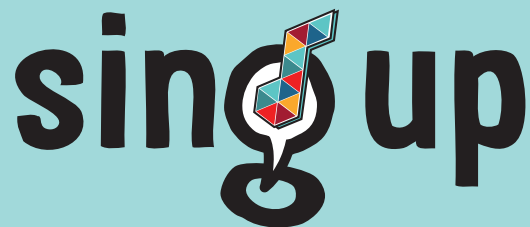
## The Singing School Handbook

If you want to become a successful singing school, dive into our practical guide and start your journey today

“Every school leader who aspires to see their pupils grow intellectually and glow in spirit would do well to embrace the aims outlined in this book”

- Music Teacher Magazine

[www.singup.org/the-singing-school-handbook](http://www.singup.org/the-singing-school-handbook)



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### **Every school a singing school**

**Sing Up's core purpose is to support every school  
to be a singing school**

Embedding regular singing into school life is a way of ensuring that learning outcomes, teamwork, community and inclusion all improve and develop over time. At Sing Up we have seen countless examples and collected many case studies where the school community themselves believe that it is singing that has transformed their school. From head teachers, to pupils, to parents, all have reported the change they have seen take place as the result of regular singing happening in school.