Singing Tips: How’s your memory?

Memorizing music can be daunting, but choruses that require it report that their singers connect better with the conductor, with the music, and ultimately with the congregation. That doesn’t mean we need to never use sheet music on Sundays. William Metcalfe, conductor of Oriana Singers of Vermont, believes that holding the music helps singers understand “how the vocal parts of those pieces interact with the instrumental accompaniment.” “I have always felt that choirs, especially ‘amateur’ choirs with a good deal of musical sophistication, learn music differently when they have all the parts of the score in front of them,” William says.

Let’s be clear on memorizing: you don’t have to memorize the entire music in order to engage better with the director and the congregation. If you can memorize everything, great! However, you can also memorize just a few critical points in the music score and thereby have a positive impact in the service. Select places to pay attention to:

1. **Very beginning of the score**
   - Just as the first paragraph of a book sets the expectation for the whole book, so does the beginning of the music.
   - Seeing our faces is most important here.

2. **At the end of a phrase before long rests**
   - This ensures we watch the conductor so we all cut off at the same time.

3. **Start singing after many measures of rests**
   - As a transition, we need to watch the conductor for a proper start again.

4. **At any point there is a fermata (a hold)**
   - How long to hold is always at the discretion of the director.
   - Depending on the style and mood of the music, the hold may be quick, or slow.
   - Knowing the words before and after the hold is important.

5. **When there is a retardo**
   - Memorizing the words is especially important here, as every retard is different.
   - The only way for the entire choir to match the same retard is to watch the director, and that means to memorize the phrases there.

6. **When a music line is repeated in several places in the music**
   - Nothing helps memorization and keeping the head up like repetition.

By no means can all this be done at once! As you practice your music at rehearsal, focus on just one of these six areas for the night. When at home, listen to the recording and continue to practice memorizing that one area. Start with memorizing a few words, and then memorize the notes. Do everything in small amounts for best results.

Like a muscle, your brain will become accustomed to the process. Memorizing is purposeful act and unless you’re blessed with a memory that’s like fly paper, it take doing this over and over before it
becomes natural. Remember, this is not about a performance. It’s about communication. Whatever we can do to get our heads out of the music binder and looking up will allow us to better minister through singing.