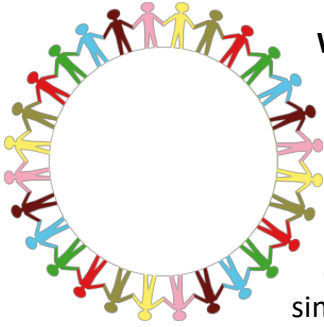


Tips for Circle Singing



What is Circle Singing?

Circle singing is a participatory form of improvisational group singing that promotes musical sensitivity, collaboration, and new skills within the singers. It is also done just for fun.

Bobby McFerrin is often known for his circle singing. His videos of workshops and performances illustrate the art at a very high level. But many amateur singers derive great pleasure doing group circle singing for fun.

What Might it Look Like?

One or more singers begins by singing a short phrase into the group, repeating it as an ostinato or loop. Singers 'catch' the phrase and join in. Another voice adds a new layer, building upon the phrase as other singers listen. Eventually a third, fourth, or more layers are improvised and added to the original loops. Mouth and body percussion might also be woven into the polyphonic texture. As participants both sing and listen, they absorb the rhythms and pitches of the ensemble and sometimes start new phrases. Their task is to add sounds that match the flavor of what is happening.

Sometimes, a single singer will be moved to improvise a new song on top of the group song. After such free improvisation, that singer will return to the circle and the song that continues. Harmonizing phrases can also be brought into the song. Over the time span of a circle song, the melody, mood, tempo, and rhythms might change, slowly transforming the piece.

Process Suggestions

1. If you are new to circle singing, watch some of the videos included in the Resource section of this Tip Sheet. They all use different approaches but can assist any teacher in building their approach to the process.
2. Introduce circle singing to students by watching a video selected from the list.
3. **Go for it! Here is one step by step approach:**
 - Gather the ensemble into a circle with the leader in the center. (This is likely the teacher for the first few experiences, but it should eventually be led by students.)
 - Have similar voice groups stand near each other.
 - Set a warm, friendly, kind mood; perhaps through physical or vocal warm-ups, supportive comments, or friendly positive chatter.
 - The leader invites students to mark time by shifting from side to side, then sings out a looping phrase/ostinato. Then with a look or gesture, the leader signals a section of the group to sing with him/her.
 - When that group is securely singing, the leader begins a new loop and invites another part of the ensemble to sing. This continues until all groups are singing. The leader can drop out at

Scat singing is a feature of vocal jazz and circle singing. The singer improvises by imitating the sound of instruments. Wordless vocables, nonsense syllables and phrases of mouth sounds without words can all be scat. The singer improvises melodies and rhythms using the voice as an instrument rather than a speaking medium.

any time, add a new loop for a part of the group to sing, signal a change of dynamics or tempo, or change a loop to other variations.

- Move it to a close. Enjoy the moment of silence.

Here are a few variations and expansions:

- Encourage students to add body percussion loops (snaps, claps, thumps, etc.). It adds more diverse texture and timbre to the song.
- Improvised new scat singing loops to add interesting sounds to the song.
- **Hand off leadership** within the song by ending all parts but one. Step out of the middle and welcome a new leader to add new parts.
- Add short improvised solos on top of the loops.
- Close by removing one part at a time.

Turn over the leadership role to students as quickly as possible!

Resources

- [Circle Singing with Rosephanye Powell, American Composers Forum – ChoralQuest®](#). Powell starts as the leader, but then steps away as the students take over the creation of the song.
- Bobby McFerrin is credited with codifying the Circle Song genre. Listen to recordings on YouTube including <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wHxkCOrUII> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGj0wVzOjdY> from the first album of his Circle Song Singers, **Circle Songs** (1997).
- [NAfME article](#) by two choral educators. [Videos](#) from the two educators' classrooms.
- Check the website for The Society for Spontaneous Singing for [prompts](#), thoughts and tips.
- There is a [Facebook Group](#) for Circle Singing and Spontaneous Improvisation.
- [Moving Star Voices website](#) have many videos of vocal improvisation including circle songs and other processes.

Here is a definition that encompasses many facets of circle singing.

"Circle Singing explores a number of foundational improvisational techniques, drawing from call and response, hocketing, vocal percussion, poetics/storytelling and free improvisation that when layered, create freestanding pieces of music. Attentive listening encourages and establishes a trusting creative community of singers as spontaneous sound-scapes are invented, played upon and shared. As a result of this creative process, students make exciting choices that foster new knowledge and often experience personal transformation."

<https://debbywatt.weebly.com/circle-singing.html>