

# Feature

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Getting kids to memorize music used to be next to impossible. As their director, I felt for my kids. Our musicals added to their work-load of homework, after school sports, and piano practice. So I would always allow them to sing from books and lyric sheets longer than was necessary. As performances drew near, pressure skyrocketed. Kids couldn't remember lyrics that seemed second-nature the day before. Director and co-director both grew irritable under increasing pressure. Parents worried about how their little darlings would do in concert.

Things have changed. Our last seven productions have been characterized by energetic enthusiasm from confident children, smiling faces, near perfect recall of well-learned (and understood) lyrics. Parents have been amazed at how quickly these professional-quality productions come together.

What made the difference? **Meta-Memory**, a unique blend of rebus, memory by association, homonyms and puns.

It's called Meta-Memory, since "meta" means "to rise above or go beyond a discipline to designate a new but related discipline designed to deal critically with the original one." The discipline in this case is the memorization of lyrics.

No doubt about it, memorization takes discipline. Singers moan, "I can't memo-



## *Meta-Memory!* A Proven Technique for Lyric Memorization

rise" when musical preparation begins. They hate the discipline involved. Most directors do too, I would guess. So why do our singers jump at the opportunity to memorize? They never have. The thought of memorizing a 1500-word string of lyrics doesn't excite anyone. We might consider memorizing key phrases — maybe. Better yet, let's memorize eight or ten pictures. That's **Meta-Memory**.

With Meta-Memory, singers develop and memorize a picture for each song or medley, and each picture is designed to spark the memory's recall of lyrics.

**Meta-Memory makes learning lyrics**

**fun.** All that's needed is a sense of humor, the ability to consolidate many ideas into a few, an above-average ability to doodle or draw diagrams, and some audiovisual equipment.

**Meta-Memory employs singers' imaginations, a group experience, sight and sound.** It's no secret that the more senses involved in an experience, the easier it is to recall that experience.

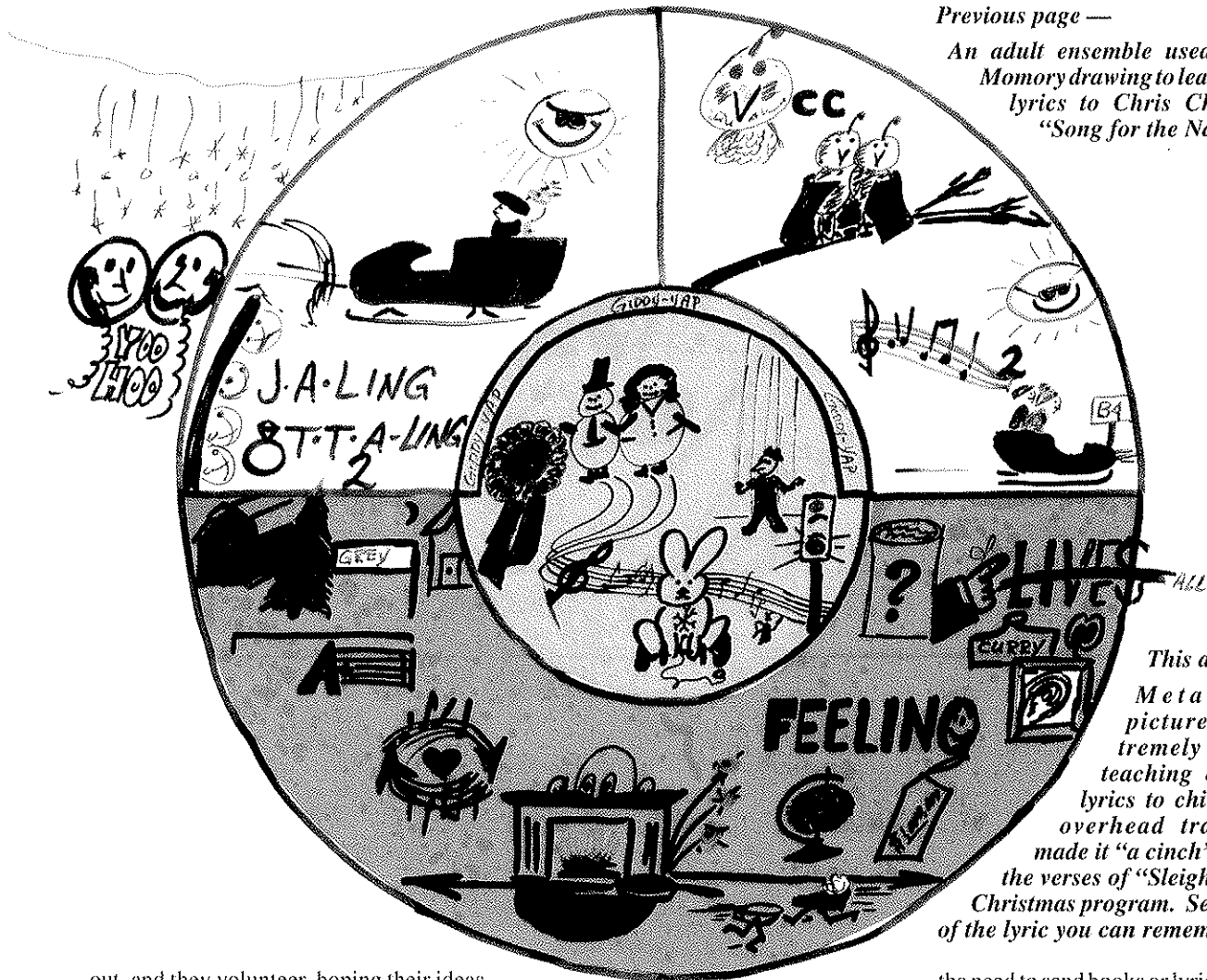
**Singers have fun with the lyrics.** The illustrations singers devise make no sense to anyone outside the group, and will never be displayed in an art gallery, but that's okay. The object is to remember the songs—

and people remember the absurd. To observe a woman walking her dog provides little reason for memory to catalog the sight. But notice a lady and her huge dog wearing matching parkas, stocking caps and neon-colored boots! That duo will be remembered and discussed for a long time! *Guess what I saw the other day?* The more outrageous a Meta-Memory drawing is, the easier it will be to remember in concert.

**Plays on words and creative imaginations are put to good use.** Before Meta-Memory, kids said things to each other about the words, hoping they wouldn't get caught. Meta-Memory asks them to speak

Previous page —

An adult ensemble used the Meta-Memory drawing to learn the wordy lyrics to Chris Christensen's "Song for the Nations."



This drawing—  
Meta-Memory pictures are extremely helpful in teaching complicated lyrics to children. This overhead transparency made it "a cinch" to learn all the verses of "Sleigh Ride" for a Christmas program. See how much of the lyric you can remember!

out, and they volunteer, hoping their ideas will become a part of the picture. "We three kings of Oreo are" becomes a visual idea the whole choir can use, instead of a smart remark that wastes rehearsal time. *When was the last time you saw three kings built like Oreo cookies ride into town?*

Singers like the pictures, even when they don't particularly like the song. One student told me, "I really like these pictures. They're funny. It's easier to smile when I'm singing." A second grader said, "It's easier to remember the picture than all those words." Their sense of ownership in the production is high because they've helped create the illustrations they use to remember the words.

Meta-Memory improves performance of memorized literature. In rehearsal, the group sees pictures projected on the wall or screen (the bigger the better) until a song is memorized. In concert, any

singer can "project" the picture needed on the wall of his or her imagination. No need for overheads or slides in performance!

Long-term recall is surprisingly accurate. One September, after using this approach for several years, I gave the choir a test the first fall rehearsal. I turned on the overhead projector, and let my students review the picture for the opening song of last year's Christmas musical. We played the accompaniment track, and to everyone's amazement, the class sang it straight through. We hadn't sung it for ten months! The visual imagery was still in their "computers" somewhere, linked to the words to that song, and they helped each other re-create it at a moment's notice. I've tested this technique in other ways with children and adults alike, and have yet to be disappointed. Meta-Memory has eliminated

the need to send books or lyric sheets home for singers to memorize—everything is done in rehearsal—in less time, with virtually no pressure.

### Creating the Pictures

**Before rehearsal.** Identify recurring key words or phrases in the song and develop symbols to trigger that key word or phrase each time it occurs. Is "exalt" a key word in this production? How does it sound? Like "egg - salt"? (see figure 1) Create a

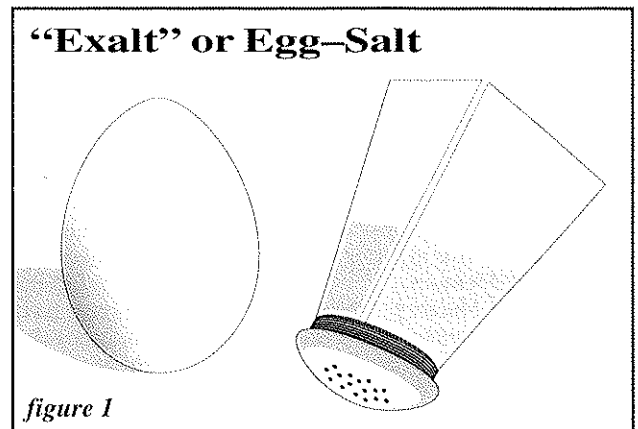
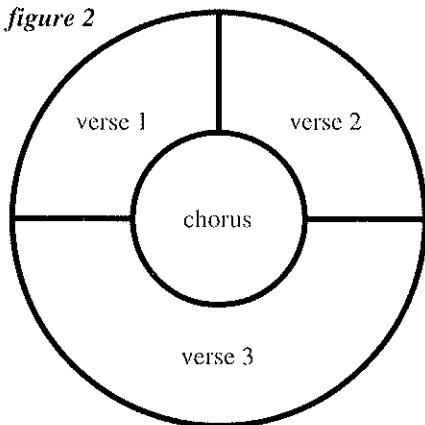



figure 1

- With Meta-Memory, singers develop and memorize a picture for each song or medley, and each picture is designed to spark the memory's recall of lyrics.

figure 2



way to picture it using a homonym, pun expression or association. Next phrase, please. Continue to ask: *how would this phrase look if ours was a language of pictures, instead of letters?* If the choir won't need the whole phrase, a key word near the beginning of the phrase may do it. Maybe an initial or two is all they'll need.

For example: **J • A • LING**   
**T • T • A • LING 2** ("jing-a-ling, ring ting ting-a-ling too") takes a tongue-twisting, hard-to-remember phrase in the song *Sleigh Ride* and "makes it cinchy," to use the words of one singer.

Pre-rehearsal work saves time and provides continuity, but unless it's a recurring word or phrase, let the singers create the picture.

**Study each song's form, and design a grid for the diagram to be created.** *Sleigh Ride* has a recurring refrain, and three verses. The last stanza is rather complicated for elementary age singers. Our chart for this song put the refrain at the center of a circle, surrounded by the stanzas (see figure 2). The third stanza needed the entire bottom half of the chart. No problem. (see the "Sleigh Ride" chart on page 6)

*Let It Snow* has three self-contained verses with a common last phrase. Its chart included a box for each verse. (see figure 3 and "Let It Snow" drawing on page 8)

A medley of *Bless the Lord, He is Exalted, His Name is Life, and We Bow Down* fit a framework of four circles, leading clockwise from one song to the next. (see figure 4 on page 9)

• *Meta-Memory eliminates the need to send books or lyric sheets home for kids to memorize.*

**Creating the pictures in rehearsal.** Inform the group that in the next few minutes as many ideas as possible will be "thrown" on the board as this picture takes shape. Leave inhibitions at the door and enjoy the fun and creativity. The teacher or

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director helps the process without doing it for them. (The director may play too—just don't take over)

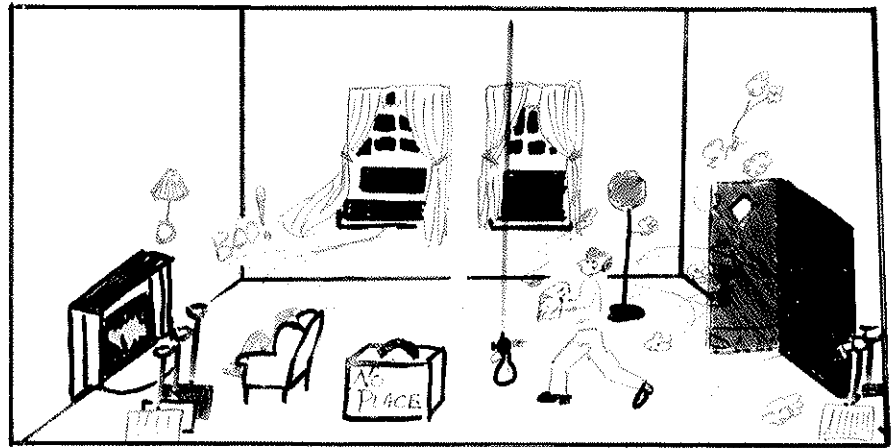
Disrespect and making fun of others' ideas is unacceptable. If singers are laughed at, creativity is stifled. So describe the penalty for making fun of other singers' ideas and be prepared to follow through.

Play a demo recording or sing the song through once while choristers imagine what the words would look like if our language used pictures instead of words.

Section by section, sketch their ideas on a white board or chalk board, keeping the central idea at or near the center of the illustration. White boards allow the use of color, which enhances the memory recall even more—and white boards serve well as projection screens. White Masonite or Abitibi bathtub surround paneling is easily made into inexpensive, lightweight white boards.

Combine several students' ideas to represent a key word or phrase whenever possible. It's good for students to see they can work together in the early stages of a song's or musical's preparation.

**After rehearsal.** Copy the group's picture to paper immediately following the rehearsal (using an artistic member of the group, if possible). From this pattern, pre-



*This drawing for "Let It Snow" used the diagram in figure 3. Most of the full lyrics are there if you study this chart that the children designed.*

pare an overhead transparency for use at the next rehearsal. The sharpest transparencies come from black and white drawings photocopied onto transparency stock before color is added with adhesive transparency color or permanent markers. Photocopying also allows the use of clip art, press-on letters, and computer graphics.

Use color to enhance the memory's recall ability. Color can also provide continuity. Verse one may be in red, verse two in purple, and verse three in blue, for example. Red to purple, then blue (just like in art class).

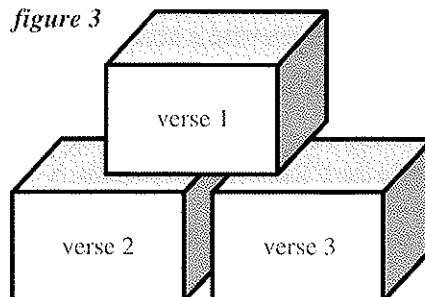
The picture should be clear, easily interpreted and attractive. The life of this transparency will only be about four or five rehearsals, however, so don't stay up all night perfecting every detail. As soon as the group has a song memorized, the need for its transparency ends and the transparency sneaks off to a file cabinet or three-ring binder. That's where it belongs when the children ask to see it again, when in fact they don't need it at all. (3M's Flip Frame Transparency Protectors take up very little filing space and are designed to work with loose leaf binders.)

### Meta-Memory Rehearsal

**First rehearsal.** The finished transparency should be used at the next rehearsal. Project the picture on the screen (or white board) so the choristers can enjoy their creation. Admire their creative efforts out loud, and smile with them at the parts they like best.

Then quickly move to rehearsing the song each picture represents, tracing the eyes' journey from key word to key word

figure 3



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