Choral Conducting: More Than a Wave of the Hand

Photograph by Vance Wolverton, University of New Orleans
Many young choral conductors graduate from our nation’s colleges and universities each year. They leave school well versed in the conducting discipline and greatly inspired to share their newly acquired knowledge with a real choral ensemble. After a short time on the job, however, they find that they need additional competencies, more than just the ability to create a well-articulated four-beat pattern, if they are to produce a successful choral ensemble. Sometimes they fail to realize that to be a conductor is to be a teacher and that many ingredients, some of which have little to do with actual conducting gestures, are essential in developing successful choral ensembles.

**Choral recruitment strategies**

Choral recruitment is a responsibility every hour and every day. For recruiting efforts to be successful, choral conductors must work to change student attitudes and cultivate a strong desire for choral membership.

As a choral conductor, it is your responsibility to create an environment in which new students will be attracted to the choral ensemble. You can accomplish this in many ways. First, you must continually motivate your existing students so that they will be inspired to encourage additional singers to join your choral organization. Second, you must motivate your colleagues and administrators so that they will encourage students to enter the choral room. Third, you must be visible at all school events and must continually speak to students, one-on-one, about the benefits of being involved in a chorus. Fourth, you must continually strive to be in contact with school leaders (such as athletes, honor society members, and student officers) so that an interest in choral singing can develop. Finally, you must make your program extremely visible and its offerings prestigious and attractive, both musically and socially.

Before any choral conductor can implement rehearsal techniques or any other aspect of the choral discipline, he or she first must have someone with whom to work. What good is a conductor or teacher without singers or students? The old saying, “We must do the best we can with what we’ve got,” should be eliminated from the teaching vocabulary. If we don’t have enough singers or the quality of singers desired, then we must go out and recruit them.

If we do not produce high-quality choral programs with thriving memberships, then we, as choral conductors, are probably to blame. No one will build a successful choral program for us. If we sincerely want a choral program in which students are breaking down the doors to get in and one small choir grows into a choral department with several large choirs, then we must build and create it ourselves, regardless of any obstacles.

**Teaching style**

The success of a choral program is greatly influenced by the teaching style of the conductor during daily rehearsals. Student attitude, effort, determination, and achievement can depend on the manner in which you, the conductor, present yourself during rehearsals. You must acquire a teaching style that is conducive to productive rehearsals and become aware of how your teaching style is perceived by your students.

There are many ways to adequately describe a conductor’s teaching style. Five specific charac-

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The role of a choral conductor... is an enormous human

characteristics, however, are essential in developing a successful choral program. First, you must acquire the ability to be organized. Without organizational skills, you can give little direction to your choral program and may not accomplish specific goals. Furthermore, your musical activities will lack sequence and your rehearsals may become meaningless.

The ability to be demanding, but patient is a second characteristic that you should develop. When your students perceive that you care enough for them to be demanding but are patient and sensitive enough to accept their rate of progress, their desire to achieve and effort to grow musically will be maximized, and you will develop a successful choral program.

Third, you must acquire the ability to be stimulating. If you motivate your students, creating an attitude of excitement within each individual, you will not only experience instant success but will create a genuine desire in your students for continued learning.

Fourth, a sincere enthusiasm for music, and fifth, an enthusiasm for teaching may be two of the most important characteristics that you can develop. If conductors are not highly enthusiastic about their art and profession, then how can they expect to excite their singers? There is no room for apathy in the rehearsal hall: Choral conductors must display a sincere enthusiasm for music and teaching and help their students gain successful choral experience.

When you are perceived by your students as having developed all these characteristics, your choral program may develop more positive student attitudes, a greater display of student effort and determination, and higher levels of student achievement. Furthermore, each choral rehearsal will become more meaningful, and the total success of your overall choral program will increase.

Literature and programming

One of the major responsibilities of the choral conductor is to select literature appropriate for his or her ensemble. This task can become quite involved—both in time commitment and in decision making. As conductors continually search reference libraries and music stores, they usually establish a mental set of criteria for selecting compositions. A typical list of criteria might include vocal ranges, tessitura, rhythmic complexities, harmonic complexity, and the subject matter of the text. In addition (and this is probably the most important factor), conductors must select literature that challenges the members of their ensembles and helps them grow musically. The philosophy of selecting music for an ensemble within the limitations of a group’s current abilities is difficult to justify. For a more educationally sound approach the conductor should select literature according to what an ensemble could become, that is, literature selection should come first, and the standard of the ensemble must be developed to match the expectations that are reflected in the literature.

Choral directors should also consider the element of musical style when selecting literature. It seems highly inappropriate, in a choral education setting, to place an undue emphasis on popular music: Students deserve the opportunity to study literature that has depth and substance. After all, in English literature classes students have the opportunity to study Shakespeare. Why shouldn’t they have the opportunity to study Bach and Mozart in choral rehearsals? In our society, a hunger for classical literature needs to be developed continually, and it is the choral conductor’s responsibility to create and nurture this hunger. In addition to fulfilling this duty, a director who chooses a well-rounded selection of literature, ranging in style from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, will aid in the development of a successful choral program.

Selecting the literature for a concert program is also a very complicated task. No matter how well an ensemble performs, if the literature is not appropriately chosen and arranged, the success of the ensemble may be hampered. The concert format must hold the listeners’ attention and interest at all times, and the performance by each ensemble must be handled with great sensitivity. The total concert program should have a definite beginning (to alert the listeners to what will be coming), a climax, and an ending (to leave the listeners wanting to attend the next performance). In addition, each ensemble within the overall concert format, regardless of ability level, should perform literature in styles varying from light to intense.

Score analysis and editing

Adequate score preparation by the conductor has always been a necessary ingredient for a successful choral program. You must accomplish a thorough investigation of the literature to be rehearsed before a composition’s initial rehearsal.

You can undertake this task of score analysis in many different ways. One successful method of analysis is to transform each score into the format of a “graph.”1 Determine specific categories for analysis such as phrase delineations, the use of text in each phrase, meter signatures, tonal centers, cadences, voicings, texture, and the compositional material used for accompaniment. When this analysis is completed, you can visualize the musical score in a more analytical, detailed fashion. All the categories of your analysis are highlighted, giving you a more accurate view of the structural format and compositional devices used in the composition.

Furthermore, this type of analysis gives you the opportunity to internalize and memorize the score more easily.

Score editing is another essential ingredient in the rehearsal preparation process. Again, there are many ways to edit a score so that the printed music becomes singable: I suggest that you first transfer all of the information obtained from your analytical graph to the printed page of music and highlight all of the entrances so that you can conduct adequate “preparation” beats at each entrance. Next, determine and mark all articulations so that your choir will execute them cleanly and circle all dynamic shadings so that you can lead the singers to produce these contrasts—even during the first rehearsal. Then phonetically rewrite all difficult text so that your choristers will achieve a distinct and consistent pronunciation. Circle pitches that you foresee will be difficult and rewrite note values as necessary, so that when the singers must breathe or place a final consonant, they can do so rhythmically. Also circle voice parts that will be sung in unison or in duet so that you can teach them more readily. Mark especially important places in the accompaniment so that a total ensemble of voices and instruments can be achieved, and, finally, mark appropriate places in the music that are good rehearsal starting points.

There are many benefits to score analysis and editing. In addition to using these techniques to present a composition successfully, you can also develop more awareness of those items that need special attention. Many young conductors address the element of dynamic contrast but fail to consider anything else. By thoroughly analyzing and editing the score, you can clarify your rehearsal objectives and increase the chances for a musical, productive rehearsal. Choral conductors have extremely busy schedules, and preparation of scores in this manner for each composition rehearsed by each ensemble may be an unrealistic goal. For a successful and meaningful choral program, however, score analysis and editing is not an option; it is a necessity.

**Ear and eye coordination**

One of the choral conductor’s major responsibilities is to detect errors in performance. The ability to coordinate aural and visual activities and to discriminate between the two is essential in the development of a successful choral program. Choral conductors need to address a variety of musical elements continually during each rehearsal. Some of these elements are intonation, balance, blend, diction, tone quality, note and rhythmic accuracy, phrasing, dynamic shadings, articulation, and precision in entrances and releases. It is your responsibility as a choral conductor to hear the sounds being made by your ensemble and to determine whether these sounds are actually those indicated by the music’s composer or arranger.

The following is a suggested plan for developing aural and visual coordination. You should become totally familiar with each voice part so that you can execute each line accurately; you must be aware of all of the musical elements in each line before the rehearsal. (Avoid the failing of some conductors, who focus only on the individual voice part that they themselves sing, such as those who sing bass and are continually aware of the bass line but fail to recognize problems in the upper voices.) If you cannot accurately perform the musical line yourself, then there is little hope that you will be able to detect errors in it as the composition is being performed by an ensemble.

After you have internalized each musical line and the combination of lines, you should focus initially on accuracy in one or two voice parts as the entire ensemble rehearses the composition. When you have reached competency at this level, focus on additional voice parts until you can discriminate all the musical lines. After concentrated practice, you should be better able to hear and distinguish total sonorities, coordinate ear and eye, and discriminate errors in the voice parts.

You should attend as many performances or listen to as many recordings as possible, with score in hand, so that you can gain aural and visual practice in isolating individual voice parts and combinations of voice parts. Coordinating the eye with the ear is a difficult task, and the additional opportunity to listen and watch can be beneficial.

**Rehearsal structure**

The organizational structure of your rehearsals is an important factor in the success of your choral program, because it can help you promote successful choral performance and develop positive student attitudes. You must organize rehearsals that are efficient and that have a meaningful impact on all choral participants.

There are many different ways to structure an efficient choral rehearsal. In any case, the rehearsal should contain both fast-paced and slower paced activities. Singing through familiar, enjoyable selections without interruption and motivating student interest with a high intensity level should occur at both the beginning and ending of the rehearsal period. The purpose of placing fast-paced activities at the beginning of the rehearsal is to welcome the students and to prepare them, both vocally and emotionally, for what is to come. Placing fast-paced activities at the end of the rehearsal provides a positive closure and leaves the students wanting to return to the next rehearsal.

In one possible rehearsal structure, slower paced activities, such as a detailed, analytical study of works in the developmental stages, the presentation of supplementary
information about composers, annoucements, sight-reading activities, and ear-training activities, are spread throughout the middle section of the rehearsal period. As an alternative, the middle section of the rehearsal can consist of a relatively rapid alternation of familiar music with new music and easy with difficult compositions (giving a constant interchange of fast-paced with slower paced activities). Regardless of the specific rehearsal structure, it is vital that you give adequate thought to the manner in which you structure your rehearsals. An organized, effective rehearsal structure will allow you to save considerable time and accomplish many short-term goals.

Rehearsal techniques

Much has been written in textbooks on choral music education about the value of effective rehearsal techniques. Every director who wishes to develop a successful choral program faces the vital task of acquiring rehearsal procedures that motivate singers and create a strong desire to learn.

There are two basic guidelines for motivating your singers through the choral rehearsal process. First, you should not rehearse a composition by always singing through the entire piece of music but should select appropriate starting places and then discriminate between sections in the score that are difficult, those that are less difficult, and sections that are easily grasped. Rehearsing a sequence of these sections produces very effective ensemble results; then, after a detailed investigation in which each sequential section has been rehearsed, it is appropriate to close a rehearsal segment with an uninterrupted run-through of the entire composition.

Second, when presenting a detailed investigation of a composition, you should eliminate all musical elements except the specific element under investigation. For example, if you are rehearsing the rhythm of a specific section, you should isolate that rhythmic passage and ignore everything else temporarily. You can do this easily by speaking the rhythm on a neutral syllable, thus eliminating all extraneous musical elements such as melody, harmony, text, articulation, and phrasing and placing the total focus of the group on rhythmic precision. After you achieve rhythmic precision, you can bring additional elements into focus: With the introduction of each element, your ensemble has the potential to become more musically mature.

Vocal pedagogy, the teaching of singing, is extremely important in the development of a successful choral program. The total sound of your choral ensemble depends largely on your ability to teach proper, healthy singing techniques. You must deal on a daily basis with physical and vocal warm-ups, correct posture, low breathing techniques, vowel modification procedures, and strategies for developing tone quality. Many ensemble problems, such as faulty intonation, inadequate blend and balance, and the production of an unpleasant tone quality, can result from the inadequate handling of the individual human voice. You must avoid these problems by presenting singing techniques that aid the students in improving their level of vocal development.

One area of rehearsal technique that requires special consideration is the presentation of new literature. You must use an enthusiastic approach: Students will rarely want to investigate challenging literature if their conductor is not excited about the value of the composition and the worth of rehearsing it. The initial investigation of the work must be brief, and you must concentrate on those sections of the composition that can be learned with little difficulty. Many times conductors spend most if not all of their rehearsal time teaching an ensemble everything there is to know about a new composition, when the singers simply do not care. A brief presentation, focusing on those sections that can be conquered easily, will not only whet the singers' appetite for the composition but will create a real hunger for a thorough investigation. You should use several brief presentations of each composition until your ensemble displays a strong desire for an in-depth rehearsal.

You also need to provide a variety of seating or standing arrangements for each rehearsal period. Sitting or standing in full circles (with all of the students facing either in or out), semicircles, quartets, and mixed formations are all appropriate techniques that can be used to produce effective ensemble results. By alternating seating or standing arrangements, singers become better aware of their own sound, those sounds around them, and the total sound of the ensemble, and they can more easily control elements such as the ensemble's blend, balance, and musicianship. Varied arrangements also provide a better opportunity for you to monitor the progress of individual participants.

Your responsibilities

The choral conductor is responsible for many competencies beyond the ability to execute a finely articulated conducting gesture. The abilities to recruit singers, motivate an ensemble, select and program appropriate literature, analyze and edit a musical score, discriminate between aural and visual inconsistencies, structure an efficient rehearsal, and competently direct the total rehearsal process are vitally important to the effectiveness of a choral conductor and can greatly influence the rate of growth of an ensemble. The role of a choral conductor involves more than just a wave of the hand; it is an enormous human and musical responsibility.