

Master Teachers Rehearsal Techniques, Part One



I don't know about you, but I'm constantly looking for new "tools for my directing toolbox"; new ideas to use in my rehearsals, or ways to tweak things that I'm already doing.

This summer at a conference, I was able to attend a couple of workshops led by choir directors that I would consider "master teachers"--teachers at the college/university level who not only lead incredible choirs, but also are charged with working with young teachers in the choral field. From these sessions, I came away with multiple tools/techniques that I immediately could take back and utilize in my teaching.

My thought was this: "It's too bad more directors didn't have the opportunity to attend these workshops."

And that's when it hit me. I decided to contact numerous "master teachers" in our field, and ask them this question:

"What are one or two rehearsal concepts or techniques that you have found to be invaluable in your teaching?"

The feedback was AMAZING. And I'd like to now share it with all of you. I've included a few of my own thoughts, just to provide examples or context for each comment. I received so much great feedback, that I've separated the responses into two parts. You'll find the first half of the responses below. I hope you find them helpful!

Enjoy, and keep an eye out for Part Two!

Dr. Aimee Beckmann-Collier, Drake University

- *Accurate rhythm is the foundation of expressivity.*
- *Phrases are like life. Knowing their direction is essential.*
- *Manufacture energy. (“I don’t feel like it” doesn’t run the world.)*

I love the first comment. As a director, it is really difficult to focus on expressivity, or anything else, really, if the singing is not rhythmically accurate. We will spend a lot of time with things like count-singing, work with takadimi and chanting text to make sure that our vocal parts are rhythmically secure.

One of my choirs is currently singing a piece that changes time signature almost every measure. In order to understand the phrasing, we’ve really focused on looking ahead, and trying to understand where each phrase is headed. I totally can relate to the second comment: this piece has really been a challenge, but it's really reinforced the importance of phrasing with my singers.

And how many days, as teachers, do we manufacture energy to make our rehearsals go? It's so important that our singers bring both mental and physical energy to our rehearsals.

Dr. Pete Eklund, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

To answer your question, I often head out into schools/colleges and attend other choral rehearsals for the purpose of helping and mentoring. One thing I frequently tell my choirs is that we do not “sight-read” music. When you open a textbook, you do not “sight-read” it. You “read” it. It is the same with print music. There are fewer different pitches in most pieces of music than there are letters of our alphabet.

Your first time through a piece of music, you read it. You mentioned a mentor, Weston Noble. He would not allow singers to do initial readings of pieces on notes and text. There are just too many tails to chase and most young singers spend an inordinate amount of time looking at the words and using their peripheral vision to see pitches and rhythms—which leads to errors in pitches

and rhythms, but saying correct words—words can come later. Find a safe neutral tone-syllable (“doo,” for instance or count-singing, depending on the range of the music) instead. I know Weston got his inspiration for this from Robert Shaw. So, the first time through, “read,” the pitches and rhythms admirably. And if by any chance, which certainly can happen even with professional singers (to say nothing of young singers that are still under construction), if you are going to make an error, at least make it with a full-bodied beautiful tone. Don't add insult to injury and miss a note and use wimpy “sight-reader’s” tone.

Secondly, as a teacher of many successful conductors, I encourage choral conductors to get a good balanced baton. Conducting is communicating—learn the vocabulary, and if all else fails, use words. The harder the baton is to see, the less most musicians will try. Learn to stabilize the upper arm and forearm during your “default pattern” and your “neutral-legato” and get a lot of mileage out of the wrist and fingers. We've all witnessed too many choral conductors have to either cut a career short because of shoulder problems or resort to invasive surgery. Diane Wittry in her text “Baton Basics: Communicating through Gestures” writes about the four pivot points: the shoulder, the elbow, the wrist, and the fingers (she writes about the specific topic better than anyone—Eric Ericson of Swedish Radio Choir fame, spoke fluently about it but never wrote a text about it). And wimpy little petit batons are a thing of the past. Ann Howard Jones stood in my classroom and chastised the young conductors for their skinny little petit batons saying “Use a stick that everyone can see. I am short, I need all the help I can get. Can you imagine me using a little tiny stick?” She added “Speak softly and carry a big stick.”

In my conversation with Dr. Eklund, I mentioned a few of my experiences with Weston Noble at Luther College. Mr. Noble would not move to text for quite some time--he would wait until the choir was confident in notes, rhythms, etc. before adding text. As Dr. Eklund states, there are just too many tails to chase! Not sure if your choir is ready for text on a piece? Try singing a section with text--you'll

usually find out pretty quickly if they are ready to add text, or if you need to go back and clean some things up first.

Dr. Geoffrey Boers, University of Washington

Teach vocal technique to your choir as John Muir said, “The mountain winds bless the forest with love, they touch every tree, not one is forgotten.” Always teach the individuals within the ensemble, rather than merely address “choral tone.”

My most oft spoken words in a rehearsal are “conduct with me,” “breathe with me.”

Rarely correct your choir, more often ask, “what is now possible?”

I appreciate Dr. Boers’ first comment; I always try to remember that my students are individuals, and so much more than soprano #5 or baritone #6 in the choir. “Breathe with me” is a terrific phrase--if the choir breathes with you, the onset of phrases will be more consistent. Conducting is a great kinesthetic activity to engage with our singers. And how many times do we say things to our choir that, with a little thought, we could make it a positive phrase rather than a negative?

Dr. Jeffrey Douma, Yale School of Music

“The most important aspect of effective rehearsing is always the conductor's preparation - if the score has been truly internalized and if the conductor's inner recording is strong, that will guide most aspects of the rehearsal. But it is also helpful to be continuously thinking about two other principles of effective rehearsal. The first is isolation (for example, isolating individual elements such as pitch, rhythm or text; isolating individual parts or vertical sonorities; singing softly; singing slowly; or isolating the element you listen for in a given moment). The second is variety (for example, of the pace of your rehearsal; of the seated or standing position of the singers; of the specific element you choose to focus on;

of the difficulty of the passage you choose to work on; of your own demeanor; or of the atmosphere you hope to cultivate in a given moment)."

I think Dr. Douma wonderfully describes the juggling act that is directing a choir. Rehearsal preparation is so important (when does that happen, again?). Variety is indeed the spice of life, and I try to put myself in the seat of the singers. Would I want to tackle the same things everyday, and in the same way? I love to sing, so I would do it, but I'd enjoy rehearsal more myself if there was more variety.

Dr. Joshua Habermann, University of North Texas

Less talking, more singing.

Dr. Betsy Cook Weber, University of Houston

My best rehearsal advice based on loads of research on effective teaching and a seminal article in Choral Journal by Charlene Archibeque is that choral directors need to STOP TALKING!!!! :-)

These two are similar, so I've put them together. I've heard of colleagues playing "seven words or less". They'll count to see how many times the other goes over seven words during rehearsal, lowest score wins! Depending on your plan for a particular rehearsal, this could be difficult, but I definitely think that the more you can keep them singing in rehearsal, the better.

A HUGE thank you to Dr. Aimee Beckmann-Collier, Dr. Pete Eklund, Dr. Geoffrey Boers, Dr. Jeffrey Douma, Dr. Joshua Habermann and Dr. Betsy Cook Weber for taking the time to contribute their thoughts to this project. We hope you enjoy it, keep a look out for Part Two!

**Which of these is your favorite? Send us an email to:
admin@choirdirectorcorner.com and let us know!**

Master Teachers Rehearsal Techniques, Part Two



This is a continuation from Part One (you may want to read that first before reading Part Two). We asked master teachers in the choral field this question:

"What are one or two rehearsal concepts or techniques that you have found to be invaluable in your teaching?"

You will find the second half of the responses below. I have added a few of my comments just to provide some context.

Dr. Edith Copley, Northern Arizona University

How do you achieve great vowel uniformity? Robert Shaw's answer: "Rhythm"

The shape of each vowel is important, but it's more important that everyone arrives at the vowel at the same time, so count sing and/or have the choir tap subdivisions of the beat until every singer has that internal clock constantly going as they sing.

Going along with the same idea: Consonants are always sung slightly ahead of the beat. Vowels are always on the beat.

Third suggestion: Experiment with a variety of rehearsal seating/standing formations

Traditional SATB sections; mixed quartets; each section in a small circle; women in a large circle and men are the inside circle facing the women; switch

(men on outside facing in and women on the inside facing out); both large circle face inward; both circles face outward; have the large circles step in time going in opposite directions (then in the same direction); four voice parts facing each other in a square or a clover with the piano in the middle, etc. Be creative--How many formations can you come up with?

I have found all of these suggestions incredibly valuable with my choirs. Students can tap themselves, or they can tap the shoulder of the singer next to them. Singing the vowels of the text, but inserting an “n” for each beginning consonant helps to isolate when they are happening. And changing singing formations not only changes things up, but also gives the singers a different experience and perspective.

Dr. Andrew Last, Luther College

"Find the destination point in each and every phrase and make intentional choices as to how you will approach and depart that point."

"Always play with the color palette of your ensemble. Not only does it make for more exciting ensembles but it challenges singers to become versatile."

"Consonant energy is crucial for more than just text purposes. It forces us to be connect with our breath."

There are some warm-ups that cover each of these topics that I'll be searching in a future resource. These are all things that you can use warm-ups to practice, and then transfer to your ensemble's repertoire!

Dr. Andrew Crane, Brigham Young University

Dr. Crane and I had a wonderful, in-depth conversation. When I first contacted him, he offered this suggestion:

1) The more prepared, organized, and efficient the conductor is in rehearsal, the more success the choir will have.

2) Teaching and conducting a choir is as much psychological as it is musical.

Now, as a high school director, I was particularly interested in Dr. Crane's ideas concerning #1. It seems like I always have so many irons in the fire, that time for rehearsal planning and score preparation is sometimes hard to come by. I asked Dr. Crane for some more specific ideas, and here is his response. It's incredibly detailed, and while you might have differing opinions, there is a LOT we have to gain from the description of his process.

I come to rehearsal each day with a very detailed plan. BYU Singers rehearses for 50 minutes every day. I have the plan organized in rehearsal segments. The longest segment might take 12 minutes, the shortest around 3 minutes. So there are anywhere from 4-6 different segments on any one day.

I never rehearse the whole piece until we are getting close to the concert. I know there are people that disagree with this. I rehearse very small chunks. For example, maybe I'm rehearsing a certain 8-measure segment for 10 minutes on a given day. You can do a lot of drill/repetition on those eight measures to where they basically have it memorized in those 10 minutes. And I build in the musical detail from the VERY FIRST TIME they read that passage. Dynamics, phrase shape, articulation, etc. I make sure it's all there from the very beginning. And I have made all of those decisions well before the rehearsal. I sit behind my piano and play through the piece A LOT. I mark the score. I don't have some scientific way of doing this---I tend to use blue, red, and gray pencil but I'm not necessarily consistent with the way I use them. The most important part is playing through the score (or singing through it, if you are not a good pianist), making many many DECISIONS about how the piece should be performed. All of these decisions should be influenced by the music, the form, the harmony, the text, etc. You cannot make interpretive decisions simply by saying "because I like it that way."

So maybe in a 4-minute piece there are like 6 main “chunks” of music. I have to actually calendar/plan when I will teach each chunk, so that it’s all ready by concert time. I don’t necessarily rehearse them in order, in fact I would say that I more often than not teach the music OUT of order. There are lots of psychological reasons for doing this. Each time you learn a new ‘chunk,’ you have to be along the way reviewing the previously-learned chunks. All of this takes very careful planning. For every 50-minute rehearsal, I spend AT LEAST that long planning. In what order will I rehearse the pieces? Which segments? What are the musical details I will be going for? Do I know how to conduct it? How long will each segment take? What are the problems that I can anticipate?

There is a lot more that goes into it, but I’ve already gone on too long :) As a former HS teacher myself, I realize that I have the luxury of more free time at the university level to plan. However, even when I was teaching high school, this idea of teaching in “segments” and going for detail IMMEDIATELY, and using drill and repetition, etc., all applied. I abhor the idea of “teaching the notes” and then “adding the detail” or “polishing” later on. I find that it’s very hard to add things, because they get into ruts early on.

BTW--if you are interested in utilizing a calendar-type planner to organize your rehearsals like Dr. Crane suggests, I have a free, printable planner available on my website :)

Dr. Angela Broeker, University of St. Thomas

-Rehearsals are like good lesson planning. There’s a period of high concentration, followed by a change of pace, followed by another period of high concentration, followed by a dynamic closing that keeps them coming back for more!

-If students are breathing at a place where a group breath is not desired, have them stretch the vowel of the last syllable before the unwanted breath. Works every time!

Notice a theme here? Another comment about rehearsal planning! This one pertains to the importance of “mixing it up”. It’s hard for singers to have a laser focus on one thing for an extended period of time.

John Byun, Riverside City College

My biggest concept for singers is to move. Being a vocal performance major we were always taught to release the tension and sing freely. No other singers in this world will stand still when performing...opera, rock, jazz, country, musical theatre, pop...they all move. So, why do choral singers stand still?? We’re singers also.

Movement can be so beneficial, especially if you have freshmen boys :) The video “Creating Artistry Through Movement and the Maturing Male Voice” with Henry Leck and Randy Stenson is one resource that details the benefits of movement while singing.

Dr. Jonathan Talberg, Bob Cole Conservatory-California State Univ.

Perhaps the two most important aspects of my teaching that I would recommend are these:

1. Absolute fidelity to the score.

2. Open discussions about poetry, text, and words with the ensembles.

In terms of absolute fidelity to the score, I think it's imperative that every conductor know and internalize every tempo and dynamic indication, word, note and rhythm before teaching a piece to a group. You have to internalize the form. You have to know how it's supposed to sound before you can teach it and that requires hours and hours of score study. This should be done without listening to recordings as much as possible. It's important to figure out all transitions (both in terms of how they'll sound and how you'll need to conduct them) and it's imperative that you understand every word of text (if it's in a foreign language, you need to know it word for word and poetically. If it's in English, you need to wrestle with the text until you really have a point of view.). I can't tell you how many times I've heard good choirs (especially good high school choirs) ignore dynamics, sing with poor diction, or gloss over a composer's performance suggestions if they happen to be in French, German, Italian—or, even—English. It's our job to know exactly what the score says and then to ensure that our ensembles are performing accordingly. And, I think that score study is not presented as the beginning and end of teaching choral music—and it really should be. You just can't teach how it goes until you know it. This is becoming even more true as contemporary composers include so many more dynamic, tempo, and performance suggestions.

We talk about poetry a lot in my choral rehearsals these days. As I've been teaching for more and more years, I find that I teach fewer Mass movements and religious music than I did in my early career. My choirs are more diverse. There are more composers writing amazing secular music than ever before, so I find I'm choosing scores on secular—often densely poetic texts—that need wrestling with in order to be successfully interpreted. “Why this word?” “What do you think she means by THIS?” “How does this line change if we stress this word instead of this word?” “How do we successfully de-emphasize less important words (or syllables) to be sure the audience can understand what we're singing about?” These are questions that have really changed my teaching. And, I recommend them to everyone who asks for ways to get your choir more emotionally involved in the music they're singing. They need to understand the

words—every one of them. And, they need to have a point of view about the poem. Ideally, everyone should see the poem the same way, but that's not always possible. I like to ask for their interpretations, and then share mine at the end. Frequently, I'll end by saying, "I don't care what you think about this poem, so long as you THINK about it and you have a point of view." It's changed our performances in so many ways, and I find that my students really love poetry by the time they leave. That's as much of a gift as getting them to be in love with choral music.

Another great perspective on the importance of rehearsal planning and preparation. I can really relate to Dr. Talberg's second topic; I try to have conversations often with my singers about poetry and text. How can we manage a performance that's musical and authentic if the singers haven't given thought about the text and what it means to them?

A HUGE thank you to Dr. Edith Copley, Dr. Andrew Last, Dr. Andrew Crane, Dr. Angela Broeker, John Byun, and Dr. Jonathan Talberg's contributions to this project. I hope that you find these suggestions helpful, and that you now have some new tools to add to your rehearsal toolbox.

And with that.....I'm going to go do some rehearsal planning! :)

Matt Walker

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