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CONDUCTOR AS MIRROR: HOW GESTURE DIRECTLY IMPACTS THE TONE OF THE CHOIR

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In talking about conducting and gesture, I hope to discuss the ways in which the shape of the hand is a reflection of the shape of singers mouths, an awareness of the impact of posture, breath and relaxation, and to highlight three to four kinaesthetic tricks that can be immediately applicable to most choirs and their common vocal technique issues.

In order to make the best use of these ideas, I recommend that the reader cycle through a few of these ideas, testing them out with their choirs, and then circling back to understand further the impacts of various kinaesthetic movements on sound. Additionally, the greatest reflection comes from videotaping rehearsals, and then watching and noting at which points the sound of the choir suffers and how the gesture might be adapted to problem solve the vocal issues.

This process is a humbling one. A conductor must first admit that 90% of the problems in a choir are due to the conductor. However, it can be an encouraging admission because it also means that most of our challenges with our choirs can be solved purely by changing our gesture: they can be solved non-verbally and without any rehearsal! And how many of us struggle with too little rehearsal time? A true process of self-reflection can improve the choir without any rehearsal time involved; not that I am advocating for no rehearsals – I am merely being realistic.

Choirs must be taught to watch conductors. While this may sound obvious, many choirs have learned to do one of two things: they watch the conductor and sing what they see (sometimes with beautiful results) or they have been taught *not* to watch the conductor. This second statement might sound foolish, but it is all too common. If a choir is verbally taught to sing a certain way but that is contradicted consistently by the gesture of the conductor, the choir will eventually teach themselves not to watch (e.g. “sing more smoothly and connectedly through this phrase” while the gesture remains choppy and disconnected).

Additional risks can follow teaching your choir to watch. The person on the podium becomes a mirror for the choir in nearly every way. The choir will mimic tension, breathing and posture almost involuntarily. This places a great deal of responsibility on the conductor to be aware of every facet of his or her body when conducting – not

just the hands and arms. Conducting therefore becomes a challenge not just for the external body, but for the breath, and also the mind. So often when the choir begins to struggle, the conductor, out of frustration, will introduce tension into the body, which will immediately be reflected by the choir and sound. When this happens, the problems invariably worsen. Instead, when the choir begins to struggle, the first step of the conductor should be a self-check. Am I breathing low? Is my body relaxed, or have I introduced tension into myself, and through me, to the choir as a whole? What do I need to do to re-centre and refocus myself, my gesture, and the sound of the choir? I will not suggest that this is an easy task for any of us. But it is one that gets easier with time and practice.

While breath is another important consideration for a conductor, I will not go into too much detail about correct breathing techniques or even too many exercises to improve breath control. There are endless examples to be found online and in choral method books. But I would like to take a few moments to consider that there are hundreds of different types of “correct” breaths, and there is great value in understanding how your gesture for the breath can set up singers for success.

Consider the following needs for your choir when thinking about the breath they need: Is the coming phrase low or high in the voice? What is the tempo? What is the first needed vowel? If the choir is going to sing “To Thee, O Lord” the breath can be taken almost as if sipping quickly through a straw, creating a lifted space in the mouth, and an “oo” vowel on the lips. When preparing for “Alleluia” a breath which creates a lifted soft palate is needed so the vowel is prepared with a tall “ah.” Without a unified vowel, even as early as the breath, a blended in-tune sound is much more challenging. This can be practiced with a kinaesthetic gesture for both conductor and singer. Have the choir imagine holding a large rubber band, and then stretch it vertically, one hand towards the floor and the other to the ceiling. Have them mirror you stretching the band as they (and you) take a breath in the shape of an “ah.” This will help create a lift in the soft palate on the breath and set up the shape of the mouth for Alleluia. If this is done several times, the choir will begin to set up a kinaesthetic memory for the gesture, and their muscular response to it. This allows you to draw on this gesture when conducting to produce that reaction from the choir. It can be subtle and still effective. One other consideration should be the tempo of the piece you are about to sing. A quick-paced Antiphon asks for a quick breath, while a Cherubic Hymn should begin with a focused, relaxed breath. Nothing will derail an entrance faster than a breath which does not match the tempo of the music.

Finally, as you consider both the breath, and the start of a piece, study carefully the shape of your hand and the way it affects the sound of the choir. This is, once again, where video will give the conductor the best feedback. The shape of the hand will often inform the shape of the mouth – literally. So begin a hymn and notice if the hand is flat, arched, lifted etc. And notice what the sound does as a result. There are many right answers here, and it is really about what sound a conductor wants from the choir at any given moment. To dig rather deeper here, take a single, simple response, and conduct it in three different ways. Conduct it ten different ways if you can. It is not for anyone to dictate the right or wrong choice here, but for the conductor to explore which gesture draws out the sound that they desire. Only once you know your options can you make an informed decision moving forward. Then search for consistency.

Begin with a simple response, e.g., Lord, have mercy. Conduct the refrain several times, playing with different gestures. Try a higher arm position, lower arm position, placing gestural weight on different words and syllables, sharper motions, and smoother motions. Encourage the singers to watch carefully and to match the gesture of the conductor. It is hoped that this will demonstrate two things: First, the conductor can watch back the different versions and note which helped create the best overall sound. Second, the singer will be actively engaged in *watching* the conductor.

While this overview is brief, the hope is that with practice, a choral director can begin using reflective practices to notice and inform the way his or her gesture can directly impact the tone of a choir. Additionally, the more a choir can be taught to watch, the more value the gesture has. Use of kinaesthetic tricks can create a common vocabulary between you and your choir. While you might use the “rubber band” stretch to create an “ah” breath in one place, that same gesture, once learned by the choir, can appear in other places with a similar impact. The more kinaesthetic tricks used, the more the options a conductor has to solve problems in real time as they arise. Above all, be mindful of the fact that the conductor is a mirror in every way. Your stress is their stress. Your tension is their tension. But fear not, because it also goes the other way. Your joy is their joy, and your energy is their energy. Your prayerfulness is their prayerfulness. When you step in front of the choir, remember always that the work you do is work for God. If you can remain mindful of that, the choir will find themselves wrapped up in prayer through every word they sing. “Serve the Lord with gladness. Come before his presence with singing.” (Psalm 100)