

Independent Study MUS 499

Choral Conducting for Choral Understanding: A Reflection

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## **Introduction**

In my time as a Masters' candidate at Northwestern, I have been interested in developing my skills as a music educator as well as a conductor. In my undergraduate program, I took three conducting courses: beginning, advanced instrumental and advanced choral. I was given an opportunity to conduct the pit orchestra of a high school musical, and did plenty of conducting during my student teaching placement for middle school band and orchestra. I still felt like I could use more experience to see what needed to be refined in my technique. I was very lucky to have the opportunity to take Advanced Instrumental conducting this fall, and spent the term honing in my skills with instrumental conducting. Choral conducting, although similar in some ways, requires a whole different set of skills that I was able to practice in my independent study with Chapel Choir.

As a music educator, I am always curious about how my students will understand music and the art of making music together. I am particularly interested in how educators can incorporate the teaching of social and emotional skills into our practice. I then began to wonder how it would look in a large ensemble—how would the skills of collective understanding and empathy manifest themselves in a choir? How would I even begin to teach empathy?

## **Method**

Because I have very limited experience in the choral classroom, I decided that I would use what I had done as a middle school general music teacher. First, with the help of Dr. Alltop, I picked two pieces of music from the standard choral repertoire that had some significant meaning with emotion. The first piece was Handel's final chorus from the oratorio *Theodora*, entitled, "O Love Divine." The second piece was Frank Ticheli's setting of Sara Teasdale's poetry entitled, "There Will Be Rest." Both pieces require a certain amount of understanding of the overall text and the composer's intentions. It is always a challenge for conductors to interpret the composers' intentions of pieces, and to make it into a meaningful experience for their ensemble members. This is why I think it is very important that conductors make it a large part of score study, but also sharing this knowledge of the piece in entirety with their ensemble members is so important. I made two PowerPoint presentations about the background knowledge

of the pieces. My idea was to introduce the background knowledge of the first piece almost immediately, and then work with the choir through the musical challenges to achieve the desired sound. The second piece I would wait until the week of the performance to introduce the background knowledge of the composer, the poet, and the circumstances around the premiere of the piece. I used a standard video camera and taped five rehearsals total: two rehearsals on Handel and three rehearsals on Ticheli. My original plan was to record all of the rehearsals, but I had some difficulty setting up the technology at the beginning.

After viewing the videos I took, I planned to write a response, and give my own reactions to the feelings I remember having while in front of the group. Sometimes, it seemed like the feelings I remembered having matched my facial expressions and gestures. Other times, it seemed like the feelings I remember having did not reflect in my conducting gesture. It was definitely a learning experience for me, and with the experience I gained working with Chapel Choir, I hope to further inform my practice as a conductor.

### **Piece #1: O Love Divine**

The first rehearsal of the piece started with me pointing out different articulations that I wanted the choir to follow. We then sight-read through the piece without having any explanation of context or background. Looking at the videos and remembering it myself, I felt very uneasy in front of the group. I remember feeling very intimidated at the sound that was coming back at me, because of the stronger singers in the ensemble who are paid professionals. I did not make much eye-contact either. I think that it had to do with my level of nervousness, as well as not being able to meet the gaze of any of the singers because it was a sight-read. We did not stop to fix any problems with intonation/pitch, rhythm or articulation. In the second half of the piece, my gesture changed to reflect the more buoyant and upbeat change in the music, but the choir did not react enough to discern a difference in sound. My left hand in this video did not really do anything to help shape the phrases, and it fell into its old trap of mirroring everything that my right hand was doing. After the ending, we did not address any challenging spots due to time constraints.

The second rehearsal video starts with a Power-Point presentation about the piece—the composer and the oratorio *Theodora*. I asked ensemble members to reflect on how it would feel

or how they had felt when they had to repress a certain part of their identity in order to conform to society, since the plot of *Theodora* revolves around a group of secret Christians in the Roman Empire who have to hide their faith in order to avoid persecution. We then watched the scene from the Peter Sellars version before rehearsing it with the whole group. I began the rehearsal portion working just with tenors and basses. As I watch myself conduct, my comportment looks a lot better and it seems like I am calmer/more confident than the first video. I addressed specific problem spots and overall tone of the male voices, which seemed to help the overall sound. It was more blended and intonation was better across all sections. I am making more eye contact in general and getting my face out of the score.

These two video clips were the only samples I took for this piece. Judging from the sound alone, the choir was much more responsive to my conducting. It sounded more blended and balanced, and the members were hopefully more aware of the text and of the context of the piece. As the conductor, I felt much more comfortable and in control. I think also reminding myself of the context and the background knowledge helped to inform my decisions with gesture and interpretation.

### **Piece #2: There Will Be Rest**

The second piece is Frank Ticheli's setting of Sara Teasdale's last poem. I began rehearsals on this piece without sharing any background/contextual information and focused solely on making a good sound from the choir. The first video of rehearsal reminded me a bit of the first run through of the Handel—the choir sounded unsure and timid and I looked timid and was not making a lot of eye-contact. My gesture was getting more integrated with the phrases, but there were definitely some specific phrase ending gestures that I needed to work on. In the second and third videos, I appeared more confident and more assertive when asking for specific changes in the music. By the third rehearsal, I was trying to refine a few gestures, specifically the ending of phrases and coming in together with the same breath. Compared with the Handel, which was shorter and less contrapuntal, the Ticheli presented more challenges with the conducting, and I was having to think more about individual parts finishing phrases at different times, and how to negotiate those changes. Each time we rehearsed, our collective sound became

more and more beautiful and mature. Unfortunately, because of the closings and cancellations at the end of the winter quarter, I was not able to perform the piece.

I gave a presentation after the third rehearsal that covered the text and the topic of the piece, which was finding peace and rest in a tumultuous time. I was not sure how the members of the choir would react to the presentation explaining the life of Sara Teasdale, who was a deeply tortured poet who struggled with depression her whole life and ended up committing suicide in her forties. After listening to the second rehearsal tape, before the presentation, and the third rehearsal tape that was immediately following my presentation, I noticed a subtle difference in tone. The second rehearsal tape sounded overall heavy and dark, with a prominence of slow-moving lines that sounded lethargic. The third rehearsal seemed to me like the singers had more energy in their voices, and the tone quality was less dark—more bright and clear. Even though my own gestures to indicate the ends of phrases were not as clear as I wanted them to be, the choir was doing a much better job of watching me and following my gestures for expression. This was something that I did not feel in rehearsal because I was so focused on my own inner dialogue (trying to get my gestures “correct”). I’m so glad that I ended up recording the rehearsal, because the difference in sound is noticeable and very affirming for me.

### **Conclusion and Further Implications**

The purpose of this independent study was for my own development of choral conducting skills. My hope is that the members of Chapel Choir were able to glean something from the presentations about the pieces. If I were to develop this idea into a more formal study, I would need to have a more consistent rehearsal schedule, and clearer parameters for measuring the sound quality. This would be a very complicated subject to research quantitatively—but if someone were to develop a way to measure sound quality it might be feasible!

It was during the performance of the Handel in Vail Chapel that I truly began to feel the piece taking over—I was no longer in control of what was happening, but I was being guided by the sound that was coming back to me. It was an out-of-body experience, feeling that confident and comfortable inside the piece. I was hoping to have that same or similar experience with the Ticheli, but hopefully I will be able to perform it with Chapel Choir or perhaps my own choir someday. The experience reminded and affirmed me that this is what I want to spend the rest of

my life doing: making music with others, and hopefully sharing the human experience with as many young people as I can.