

Intermediate Choral Conducting

Portland Regional LDS Church Music Workshop 2012

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1. Conductor as Vocal Coach: Improve the Vocal Technique of Your Choir

Teach proper vocal technique your choir and insist that they use it when they sing.

- Tall, Flexibly Erect Posture -Dropped shoulders, open chest, aligned head
- Low, Active Breath -Breathe from below your belly button. Inflate belly like a balloon when you inhale.
- Stretched Pharynx -a.k.a. “open throat” or “raised soft palette.” Create space inside your mouth.
- Breath/Speech/Moan Connection- Practice transitioning from a speech-y, resonant stage voice into singing. Use stage speech and moaning to create a good breath-to-singing connection.
- Create Resonance (both head and chest)- An ideal vocal sound will have both a dark resonance from the chest and a bright resonance in the head.
- Relentless Openness- Maintain open connection between the breath/pharynx/resonance cavities.

Most of these are taken from Clayne Robison’s DVD “Beautiful Singing: Not Just for the Chosen.” I highly recommend this DVD for both conductor and choir seeking to improve vocal technique. It can be purchased online at <http://beautifulsinging.com/dvd/index.php>

2. Improving Your Choral Sound

Tuning: If your choir is not in tune, not much else matters. The choir needs to learn to hear the notes internally and aurally “picture” the pitch before they sing it. There are infinite gradations in between pitches. Learn to listen for the “top” of the pitch, rather than the middle. Listen for the “shiny,” bright part of the pitch, rather than where it is dull or muddy.

- Singing out of tune is often related to incorrect vocal production. Check to make sure the choir is using good vocal technique.
- Don’t let the choir become dependent on the piano for their tuning. Spend time at EVERY rehearsal singing without the piano.

Singing a note out of tune is just as bad as singing a note incorrectly. If the choir is out of tune, stop them and correct it. You will have to develop your own ears to be able to hear the difference between a note that is tuned well vs. slightly flat vs. slightly sharp. It really helps if the choral director can demonstrate by singing the difference between a pitch or passage sung in tune vs. flat.

- Experiment with your voice at a piano. Play a pitch. Slide gradually lower until you are slightly flat and then until you reach the next lowest note. Slide back up and then repeat the exercise going up from the note. .

Vowels: This is one of the biggest bang-for-your-buck changes you can make in your choir. Proper vowel formation creates a huge difference in the blend and quality of the sound. Avoid wide, smiley, young/immature, “east-west” vowels (i.e. “pleeeeeease”) and replace them with tall, fish-lipped, puckered-up, mature, “north-south” vowels (i.e. “pizza”).

- Think “pizza,” not “pleeeeeease.” Think “Nordstrom,” not “K-Mart.”

Diphthongs: In English, many vowels are actually made up of two (or more) vowel sounds put together. When two vowel sounds are combined it is called a diphthong (when three are combined it is a triphthong). Whenever you sing a diphthong, **hold the first vowel sound and add the second sound at the very last moment.**

- For example, the word “I” is a diphthong that combines “ah” and “ee.” You would sing “ah” and only add the “ee” sound at the very last moment.

“R’s” at the End of Words

R is not a vowel. American’s like to talk with an R that is chewed in the back of our mouths. This can create what I call “riding the R,” it turns it into a vowel—and not a pleasant-sounding one. For the purpose of most choirs, either cross off the “R” at the end of words (or where it would modify the vowel) or add it very lightly at the very last moment, similar to the second vowel in a diphthong. i.e. ‘care’ becomes ‘keh-----r)

Facial Posture:

- Bringing the lips forward creates a sound that blends easily. It also opens up the pharynx for better tone.
- “Smiling” eyes—showing excitement like someone just gave you a surprise.
- Drop jaw/eliminate jaw tension. Tall cheekbones.

Musical Shaping

Music is like speech. We don’t speak using the same inflection or tone on every single syllable. We couldn’t listen to that. Similarly, the musical inflection should not be static. On every note and every phrase there should be either a crescendo or decrescendo. What is the shape of the phrase?

3. Rehearsal Techniques

- Don’t waste rehearsal time with lots of talking or lengthy explanations. Give short, clear directions or explanations (30 seconds or less). Then have them sing again.
- Don’t be afraid to stop the choir and correct them. Don’t let them keep singing if it isn’t correct. This builds bad habits. If the choir isn’t following you precisely, stop them, demonstrate or ask for what you want differently and have them do it again correctly.
- After correcting something, insist on the choir singing it correctly for you (maybe even a few times). Avoid saying, “Fix this next time,” and moving on.
- Don’t stop if you don’t need to—you can call out directions to them while they are still singing.

4. Connection with your Choir

- Physical Connection: **EYES!**, Breath, Posture, Arms/Gestures.
- Emotional Connection: Is the choir emotionally engaged with you as a conductor? Are you conveying the feeling of *how* you want them to sing
- Spiritual Connection: What is the message we are communicating? Do we feel the message of the words? Are we speaking these words as if they are our own original thoughts?

5. Polishing Your Conducting Gestures

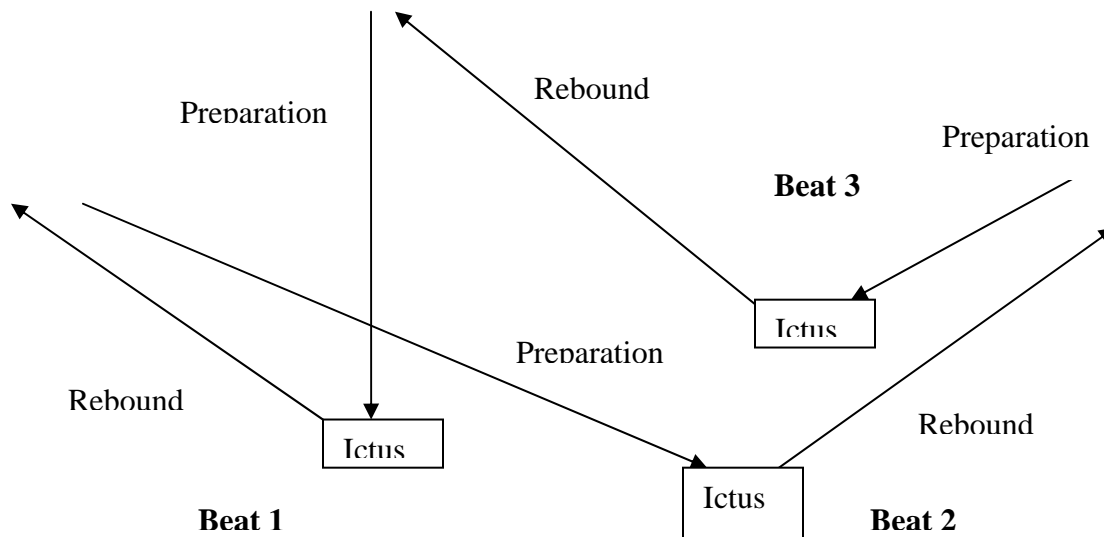
Beat Pattern Terminology

There are three parts to each beat of any conducting pattern:

- Preparation (the movement going into the beat)

- Ictus (the beat itself- the point where you change direction)
- Rebound (the movement coming out of the beat)

Preparation, Ictus and Rebound in a 3/4 Beat Pattern



Entrances and Cutoffs:

To cue the choir for an entrance or a cutoff, you do a slow motion on the rebound previous to the beat and a fast motion on the preparation following the beat. For example: To cut off on beat 1, you would have a slow rebound out of beat 3, followed by a fast preparation into beat 1. The net effect is a bit like a karate chop. “Hiiii” (pull slowly out of the rebound)-“yaaah” (snap the preparation down into the ictus).

Expressing with the Rebound

The rebound is your tool for making your conducting expressive and telling the choir *how* you want them to sing. Is it smooth, pulled and legato or sharp and bouncy?

Body Language

1. Posture: Model the posture you want your choir to have when they sing. Posture should be tall and flexibly erect.
2. Tension/Relaxation: Be careful to not project tension to the choir in your stance and expressions. Have a relaxed but confident posture.
3. Beat Pattern: Don't be too swirly or loopy; this hides the beat. Simple and clear is best.
4. Beat Pattern Placement: Where you place your beat pattern on your body can impact how the choir breathes. When you center your conducting pattern in front of your lower chest/abdomen, it encourages the choir to use good breathing with a low, supported, active breath. Conducting up high or out to the side can unwittingly encourage tension and unsupported chest breathing.

5. Hand Position: Flat hand: fingers together, thumb extended. Your fingertips control the sound and mark the beat. Keep control of the sound in your fingertips. No floppy wrists. Excess hand movement can hide or obscure your ictus.
6. Facial Expression: Your facial expressions can be one of your greatest tools in communicating to your choir. Don't be afraid to use your eyes. Make eye contact! Your eyes should connect with the choir, not be buried in your music.
7. Breathing: Breathe with your choir when you want them to breathe. Don't sing with the choir – you need to be listening-- although mouthing the words is okay.
8. Use a Mirror to Practice: Practicing in front of a mirror is very revealing. Are you making eye contact? Are your entrances and cut-offs clear? Is your beat pattern legato or marcato (strong and detached)?

Resources

For a review of basic guidelines for LDS choir directors, see the excerpt from the LDS conducting course at: http://lds.org/cm/ccourse/Lessons/ConductCourse33619000_11.pdf
I don't agree with point #1 on using the left hand (I do not recommend doubling the beat pattern with your left hand for the prep beat, downbeat and first measure) but the other advice in the article is useful as a reference.

You can also find more information at my website: "Ward Choir Help."
<http://sites.google.com/site/wardchoirhelp2/> . It hasn't been updated in a while, but it has a lot of ideas on what to sing, how to organize rehearsals, how to train your choir to be better singers and how to get your choir to sound better.