

Reference Points for *Choral Conducting Master Class*

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Dr. David M. Thomas and the Portland Choir & Orchestra; www.MusicInPortland.org

- I. Rehearsal Tips: Optimal choir sound and experience for the singers most often occur when the conductor gives clear direction reflecting a strong, compelling vision (artistic, spiritual, thematic, or combination of all these).
 - a. **Planning is key**: Make decisions ahead of time regarding all musical events
 - b. **Figure out the best way to get your singers' input**, and remember point I. above. Rehearsals where singers are trying to be the conductor can be frustrating for the group, and usually aren't as good as those where the conductor is in charge, and still gathering input.
 - c. **Know each part well**—not only notes & rhythms, but also phrasing, dynamics, etc. Sometimes different parts need different direction.
 - d. **Make a detailed timeline** for rehearsal with everything that must be accomplished.
 - e. **Stick to the planned timeline**, but know the music well enough to be flexible and improvise, e.g. if you are really making progress, or need a few minutes more on one item to really get it to stick.
 - f. **Use a video camera** in rehearsal to watch & improve your physical conducting gesture & rehearsal style
 - g. **Resist the temptation to talk a lot**. Interrupt singing only when you have something important to say.
 - h. **Keep a good pace to the rehearsal** (again planning is key). Respect the singers' time by being prepared, and reinforce the importance of rehearsal by not wasting time. More people will want to sing in this type of environment. Find a good balance of focused intensity with a couple well-placed "breather" moments. Mix easy and difficult tasks in rehearsal, and try to end rehearsal on an exciting success.
 - i. **Find every good thing the choir is doing, and tell them**. It is important to find and fix the problems, but equally important to find and reinforce the successes. **Doctrine & Covenants 121:41-44 is a good guide.**
- II. Physical Gesture: Use the body to elicit healthy, expressive singing from the choir, to communicate the testimony/passion/vision/artistry that burn inside of you, and to reinforce the musical decisions you have made.
 - a. How can we be **clear** in our conducting?
 - i. Indicate preparation for what is coming
 1. Conductor prepares singers for each musical event
 - ii. Develop a strong, clean basic conducting motion
 1. Reduce conducting motion to its basic form
 2. Enhance basic form when indicating an event
 - b. What are we trying to **communicate**?
 - i. Musical events should be visually prepared by conductor
 1. Entrances (cues)
 2. Breath releases (cutoffs)
 3. Tempo
 4. Articulation
 5. Mood
- III. Basic Components of Physical Gesture:
 - a. Clarify basic conducting motion:
 - i. Ictus (motion on the beat)
 1. Point of energy & clarity
 2. Communicate through fingertips
 3. Stroked or clicked

- ii. Rebound (motion in between the beats)
 - 1. Legato
 - 2. Marcato
- b. Physical Gestures for Musical Events
 - i. Entrances
 - 1. Focused click of ictus (on beat preceding entrance) gives energy and unites singers
 - 2. Cue with eyes and breathe with singers
 - 3. Give rebound in time and style of entrance
 - ii. Breath Releases
 - 1. On the beat (slow-fast movement)
 - 2. Between beats (stop-flick movement)

IV. Physical Body and the Conductor

- a. Encourage correct physical technique by example
 - i. Practice conducting with flexibly noble posture as the default position
 - ii. Breathe with the singers as you would have them breathe
 - iii. Move conducting plane lower when specific direction to take low breath is needed
 - iv. Pay attention to the body language of the face, hands, arms, torso and legs (i.e. the entire body). What are you communicating (tension, freedom, support, sloppiness, clarity, excitement)?
- b. Teach breath and posture in every rehearsal
 - i. Simple warm-up exercises are a good time to teach principles without the pressure of performing notes and rhythms
 - ii. Monitor the singers' habits and tendencies during songs and then remind as needed

V. Flexibly Noble Posture

- a. Proper posture is critical for establishing healthy breathing and singing technique
 - i. Raise arms above head and then lower hands while retaining moderately high posture of sternum and rib cage
 - ii. "Noble" chest position extends out over toes
 - iii. Tall or long back of the neck balances out noble chest
 - iv. Continually monitor posture while you sing.
 - v. The best way to have great singing posture is to have great posture all day long!

VI. Fundamental Breathing Technique

- a. Breath is the life force of the voice
- b. Role and function of the diaphragm
 - i. Diaphragmatic vs Clavicular breathing habits
 - ii. Tips for developing correct diaphragmatic breathing technique
 - 1. Sense the resultant abdominal wall movement (hand on lower abdomen)
 - 2. Focused breathing exercises on back with book on lower abdomen
 - 3. Inhale-Suspend-Exhale, increasing from 5 to 10 counts
 - 4. Make this the way you breathe for life!
 - a. Initially monitor breathing 24/7
 - b. Average adult "practices" breath technique 18,000-30,000 times each day, so let's practice correctly (all day long, every day)!