

What Singers Really Want: An International Survey of Choral Singers

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Earlier this year, I began an online survey of choral singers to find out how singers respond to conductors and what inspires these singers to deliver their best performance. My intention is to share constructive feedback with conductors, facilitating a deeper understanding of what singers value in their leaders. This is an ongoing project and I hope the survey will continue to grow. Please consider this presentation an interim report, as I hope to have many more responses.

Some conductors bristle at the idea of such a survey, perhaps because feedback is not traditionally used in the choir-conductor relationship, though it has proven to be a useful tool in other disciplines. In academic institutions we ask students to evaluate a course so that it can be improved. In business, feedback is used to increase productivity. But, in some situations, asking for group opinion can open the floodgates of total chaos. A ship's captain, making a strategic decision whether to unfurl a jib or lower a mainsail, rarely turns to the crew for a show of hands. A good leader, whether mariner or musician, must know the charts and make difficult decisions in troubled water or in calm sea. One respondent describes it like this:

An effective conductor is energetic and knowledgeable, but not a dictator. They are open to suggestion both in how a piece should sound and what needs to be worked on in rehearsal. But they are also prepared and are willing to overrule some requests for the 'greater good.'

Admittedly, this information will not be helpful to every conductor, since each choir has a different dynamic and purpose. But even so, having insight into what singers want is a powerful tool, and conductors are free to use this to reevaluate, improve, and refresh aspects of their art. At the very least it gives us a glimpse into the mind of our singers, and it is beautiful.

For their thoughtful and insightful contributions to this survey, I have to thank over 300 singers across the English-speaking choral world who have participated so far. I had a great deal of technical support with this survey. Thanks to Brian Power, Craig Martin, and to Yueh-Chin Ma of York Faculty Support Centre. I am indebted to Bryn

Greer-Wootton, my statistician at York University's Institute for Social Research, and to Kathryn Bishop, my key overseas correspondent in England.

Profile of the Respondents

This paper represents the results submitted by 322 people who answered the survey between January and May this 2005. Fifty-nine percent of the responses are from women and 41% are from men. Respondents live in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Europe. By far, the largest group consists of Canadians at 76%, with runners up coming from the United Kingdom, representing 12% of the respondents.

The youngest singer is a soprano aged 16, while the oldest is a 79-year old tenor. The mean age of the survey group is 42. Sopranos clock in as the youngest section at a mean age of 37, while basses are the oldest with a mean age of 45. Basses have the widest range of ages within one voice part, consisting of young-, middle-, and older-aged men. In general, it seems that men are singing for a longer span than women since the female respondents were, on the whole, younger than the men.

The survey participants sing in all types of choirs including church choirs, university choirs, semiprofessional concert choirs, male choirs, female choirs, mixed choirs, community choirs, and professional choral ensembles. Many singers are members of more than one choir.

Education and Training

I wanted to see if singers had different opinions based on their level of musical education. The survey respondents fall into two groups: The first has a fairly high degree of formal musical education, having studied music either through church, university, or private music lessons; the second group's musical education is more experiential; they learned to sing at home, in school choirs, or profess to have had no formal training at all. The formally educated group makes up about 75% of respondents while the experiential group represents 25%.

A cross-tabulation of voice parts and training levels indicates a significant difference in the level of training between the voice parts. According to the survey data, members in one section of the choir typically have lower levels of musical education than their counterparts in other voice parts. I may start a war by releasing this information, but you will be as surprised as I was to learn that it is the altos who typically have less

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formal musical training than their colleagues. This may explode the myth that we altos have the better reading skills.

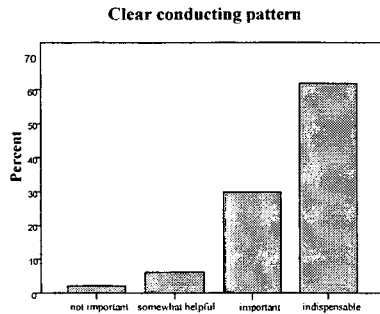
Singers are asked to indicate where they received their choral and vocal training. I was surprised to learn that the institution responsible for training more choral singers than any other is the church. One-third of singers identified that singing in a church choir formed a significant part of their musical education. In Canada, this institution that is so integral to the training and sustaining of choral singers is not eligible to apply for arts funding at any level of government. With churches closing left and right, one wonders who will train the choirs of the future.

The Survey Results

The questions in the survey address three areas of a conductor's craft: a) conducting technique, b) rehearsal methods, and c) leadership skills. Choristers are asked to rank various items on four levels: not important, somewhat helpful, important, and indispensable. By having only four ranked levels, singers are not able to *sit on the fence*. They have to rank each element on the high- or the low-side of centre.

Conducting technique

Participants are asked to evaluate various aspects of conducting technique: expressive gestures, clear conducting pattern, cueing vocal entries, conveying the meaning and pronunciation of the text, understanding the capabilities of the human voice, and extensive knowledge of choral repertoire. I was particularly curious to see whether singers value expression over clarity in conducting technique, since equally effective choral conductors can exhibit very different conducting styles ranging from demonstrative to introverted. The survey participants vote strongly for a clear conducting pattern. Sixty-two percent of respondents rank this as an indispensable aspect of conducting technique.



I was also curious to take a closer look at the data to see if there might be a correlation between the singers' level of education, age, or gender, but there was nothing statistically significant here. Whether the singers are highly trained or self-taught, men or women, old or young, a clear conducting pattern is highly valued. However, there is a strong current in singer's prose answers that indicates that singers do appreciate a high emotional involvement in the music and expressive facial gestures. One respondent described the ideal conducting style as "expressive, clear, relaxed, yet energetic." Others mention "musical magic" and "passionate engagement in the music" or simply "showing the music with her hands." Yet in the end, singers do first and foremost want to see a clear beat.

Understanding the voice and vocal repertoire

Singers also place a very high value on a conductor who understands the capabilities of the human voice. Half of the singers call this quality indispensable. One singer dislikes the conductor's "search for the desired sound at the expense of my own vocal technique." Singers want more than a mere theoretical understanding of vocal technique. They appreciate empathy. "I enjoy a respectful and empathetic approach—being treated as an equal partner in the pursuit of excellence and being challenged to improve continuously." Respondents do not particularly care if their conductor has extensive knowledge of the choral repertoire, but their comments stress that, ideally, the conductor will not only choose music that is appropriate for the skill level of the group but also will challenge them to attain a higher skill level. One singer suggests that "people rise to the level of expectation."

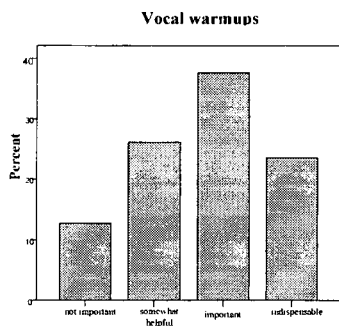
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Rehearsal methods

No performer will dispute the importance of effective rehearsing, but this is the most controversial area for singers. The survey asks the singers to rank these elements: good use of available time, hearing and correcting mistakes, vocal warm ups, interpreting and shaping music in a unique way, using a variety of teaching methods, a sense of humour, explanation of historical or musical context of the piece, and conveying harmonic and theoretical aspects of the music.

Warm-ups

The most surprising result of the entire survey is the relative dislike of vocal warm-ups. Remember that half of singers felt that the conductor must understand the capabilities of the human voice, but an astounding 39% feel that vocal warm-ups are not important or only somewhat helpful.

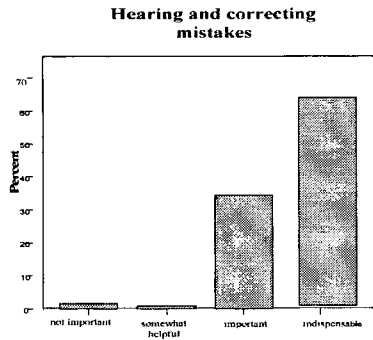


I wondered if there was an identifiable group pulling this result down. My statistician and I reran the data to see if the highly trained singers like warm-ups less than the singers with a lower level of training: In fact, there was a tendency for untrained singers to place a higher importance on vocal warm-ups. As we delved more closely into the data, we realized that it was actually one voice group that was swaying the results heavily into the "not important" side of the equation. A significant percentage of singers who do not like warm-ups are *tenors*. This is a mystery that certainly merits more detective work. It may have something to do with this singer's

comment: "If a warm-up doesn't make you feel at least a little silly, it's probably not very good."

Time well spent

What singers really want is an efficient rehearsal and a conductor with a good ear. Sixty-three percent of singers ranked "hearing and correcting mistakes" as an indispensable aspect of the rehearsal.



Fifty-nine percent feel "good use of available time" is also indispensable. These two responses possibly indicate the same thing: a desire for an efficient rehearsal where measurable progress is made and time is not wasted while the conductor talks too much.

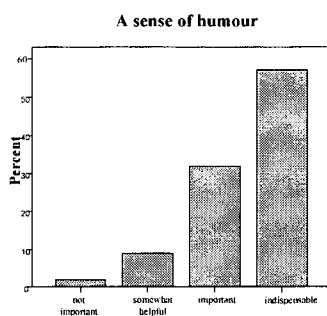
A pointed description comes from survey respondent number 241: "I like conductors who value my time. They start rehearsal on time and they end on time. This is extremely important. Conductors who waste time during rehearsals or start late and then go late are showing disrespect for singers."

Rehearsal methods that incorporate teaching and talking about theory and history get a rather lukewarm response. I was surprised that "shaping music in a unique way" scored fairly low with singers, whereas from my side of the podium this is really what makes a performance worth listening to. Perhaps the secret for efficient conductors is to pack interpretation into the learning process so that the unsuspecting singer thinks yours is the only possible interpretation.

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Humour

Singers respond very strongly to the need for a sense of humour. This is deemed by 32% to be important, and by 57% of respondents as indispensable. This poses a bit of a conundrum to the conducting student or teacher. It is fairly straight forward to learn a conducting pattern or to study vocal production, but how exactly does one acquire a sense of humour that can be usefully employed as a rehearsal technique?



Let us not assume singers want a stand-up comedy act during rehearsals. The last thing these respondents will tolerate is a person who wastes their time spewing a stream of one-liners. In my own experiences with superstar conductors, there was not a running comic shtick in rehearsal, but there was an overall sense of delight in the music and a certain levity of spirit that made rehearsing seem more like play than work. Singers in the survey make similar observations—a successful conductor should “convey a sense of enjoyment in the music.” One respondent enjoys “a conductor who pushes you, who believes in you, and makes the evening’s rehearsal fun.”

Leadership

In this section, I try to solve some mysteries in my own mind. How many conductors have I seen with a less-than-clear conducting technique who, nonetheless, inspire chorister to perform to their utmost capacity and extract an almost chivalric allegiance unparalleled in other spheres of modern life? What are those characteristics that can make a musical hero of the ordinary conductor? Above all, singers want an inspirational leader who has people skills. Singers respond that the ideal is “a deep musicality converted by the conductor into a respectful but demanding working

relationship with the singer." Like any good boss or coach, a conductor must "gain the confidence of the group and then provide the challenge."

Energy versus experience

The survey indicates that singers prefer an energetic leader with imagination as opposed to an experienced, predictable conductor. "I appreciate a conductor who motivates us by his enthusiasm for the music, who encourages us by praising us when we do well and [criticizes] constructively with the confidence that we can meet his expectations."

Anger

Although I do not pose a question about anger management, many singers pointed to temper tantrums as a negative leadership trait that indicates that this is quite a regular occurrence. My guess is that emotional outbursts are not usually employed as a conscious leadership strategy but are behaviours that occur when the conductor is at her wits end and has run out of constructive ways to solve a problem. Hold on to your hats as I quote a partial list of traits and personalities that singers feel are unproductive: anger and frustration; arrogance; blowing up; bullying; a grumpy, highly-skilled tyrant; loss of temper; moaning; over-conducting; petulance; psychological abuse; prima donna qualities; rage and spite; regimented technocrats; rigidness; tension; waving around like a lunatic; yelling and screaming; and "we'll come back to that later," but we never do.

And there is also this choice comment: "I have never fully enjoyed working with a conductor. I only tolerate conductors as a necessary evil. Conductors are essential to the production of a good choral result, but they are typically rude."

Evidently, singers want to be challenged to perform to their utmost ability, but they appreciate patience and respect from their conductor. Most singers are doing the best they can and need the expert to guide them through rough passages without demeaning them.

Money and morality

Singers do not feel their conductor should be a good money manager. Again, this is surprising, as the conductor's choice of repertoire and soloists can often make or break a musical project. But from the singers' point of view, 61% feel that fiscal responsibility is

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not important or only somewhat important. In the area of moral integrity, it is interesting to see that singers with a lower level of musical education value this more highly, but on the whole it is not considered an indispensable quality in a leader.

Conclusions

Singers invariably say that their favourite conductor is the one with whom they are currently working. In general terms, it seems that singers really want an inspirational conductor with excellent interpersonal skills whose conducting technique incorporates a clear pattern, who understands vocal technique, who does not waste time, and who makes rehearsals a pleasant experience with patience and a sense of humour.

One respondent sums this up well: "I have enjoyed all conductors who love their music and the people they work with. When a conductor's hands can express what is in his heart, this is great technique."

Future of the Survey

I hope to continue the survey by gathering more local and international results. I would particularly like to hear from Newfoundland and the Maritime provinces since they are underrepresented in the survey so far. Next, I hope to expand the survey to orchestral players so that conductors can get feedback on things that orchestral players value. Hopefully this will be helpful to choral conductors who want to conduct large works with orchestra as well. I hope that all the singers in the audience today will visit my website at www.yorku.ca/stmartin, click on "research," fill out the survey, and then send the link to all your singing friends.