

# It's not what you do, it's the way you do it: A study of encounter between choral conductor and singer.

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## The people that walked in darkness

One day a graduate student of mine told me of her observations of a choral society conductor in England with whom she sang a solo role in a concert. Basically, she was astonished to witness a barrage of verbal abuse from conductor to singers during a choral rehearsal. The student reported that the conductor spent most of the rehearsal in a stressed out condition, blaming, shouting and generally acting in a dictatorial manner that would be largely unacceptable from anyone else in a position of authority. Her observations prompted her to investigate a little further into asking some of the singers in the choir about their expectations of a conductor. What was extraordinary (though perhaps it is not necessarily uncommon) was that the singers appeared to accept that this was what conductors do - namely, that they are expected and allowed to be temperamental and abusive to those they conduct. The singers (mostly in the upper age bracket - a fact which may in itself be significant and worthy of research) came back each week to take more of this behaviour in rehearsals - a form of sadomasochism no doubt. How many other social groups would be willing to tolerate such forms of flagellation, apart from perhaps the armed forces or with extreme forms of physical training?

Another case: a friend who sings in a cathedral choir in England, when engaged in a conversation about conducting, told me that it was considered too risky when singing in rehearsals or services to pay too much attention to the gestures of the choirmaster when he conducted. His gestural messages could easily be misinterpreted and it was better, all choir men tactfully agreed, to leave it to the innate musicianship of the singers to get through the musical accurately and, with luck, musically. In this context, knowledge and experience in choral conducting will, almost by default, be due to the close association of the role(s) of organist and choirmaster - the most important qualification for a cathedral choirmaster in England is to be a good organist! (Did the conductor of the choir at the latest royal wedding in England know enough about vowel sounds, for example?)

Further anecdotal snippets come to mind, and I am sure many people can recall instances of some sort of idiosyncratic behaviour of conductors. Such perceptions of conductors may stem from the stereo-typical caricature of the heroic conductor figure on a rostrum gesturing vigorously and now and then stopping the music to shout. Lebrecht in

his book *The Maestro Myth* (1991) attempts to uncover and expose some of the myths surrounding the great conductors. He refers, for example, to Koussevitsky and Toscanini who terrified their players by the manner in which they used their authority, often treating them like children in a very formal classroom. Maybe some of our lesser status choral conductors model themselves and their behaviour on the styles, personalities and idiosyncratic behaviour of powerful, Caucasian and apparently, though with notable exceptions, heterosexual men.

While it is apparent that, throughout the world, people need to sing together, various reports are revealing that young people, particularly boys, are reluctant to engage in singing activity. A number of music teachers on our graduate programme are researching into this phenomenon with no clear-cut solutions, except that it's clearly not "cool" in some social situations to be seen singing. A recent article in the *London Times* (22 June 1999) reported that there was a shortage of tenors in Italy which is threatening the future of Italy's main opera houses - "Italian men no longer know how to sing". Questions as to whether this was due to "the consequence of male identity crisis, a mysterious hormonal mutation that reverberates in the male voice, or . . . the fault of bad teachers" continue to be asked. Bruno Casoni, the chorus master at Turin's Regio opera house, complained that while there was no shortage of women, "men are no longer singing ... people are not singing in church anymore, there are no more traditional songs and the few Italian boys who apply to join our music schools are consistently defeated by Koreans and Japanese." A credible answer to the problem?

Is there a correlation with the state of singing as indicated and the teacher / conductor? The necessary consideration with regard to the choral conductor is that most of these beings not only conduct, but also train and rehearse choirs on a regular basis. Such choirs will usually be "amateur" (in the best sense of the word), where people, whether in school, church or community, will come to rehearse because they want to. In such situations, the choral conductor has a responsibility not only to aim for the highest musical standards possible with that choir, but also to enable effective learning and individual and collective vocal development. In rehearsal the conductor will operate as a teacher. One problem with the conductor described above was that he was devolving the responsibility of learning the music to the singers themselves and blaming them when things went wrong. Were they felling good about themselves and their singing? Were they singing healthily without tension?

The questions to be raised, however, are why people take part in collective singing activity as well as the issue of the responsibility a conductor has with regard to the vocal health and development with whom s/he comes into contact. The first question can be tackled sociologically, culturally and psychologically. Some attempt to investigate such issues was made by Durrant & Himonides (1998), reported in the *International Journal of Music Education* (32). Findings showed that there were a number of considerations to do with the behaviour of people in a group situation:

- that they will often think what the group does and thinks;
- that people do what is expected of them to a surprising degree;

- that the collective singing activity promotes the issue of self-image in relation to perceptions and judgements within a social group.

It was the social and emotional reasons for singing that stood out in the research study. The conductor then, has a critical role in enabling social cohesion and emotional catharsis as well as developing musical skills in choral singing.

## **Gesture and the voice: Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened**

My own research study (Durrant, 1996) reported that a model of an effective choral conductor must, in addition to appropriate musical and technical knowledge and skills, include a series of inter-personal skills, which will enable singers in a choir to sing efficiently, healthily and enjoyably. Supported by a number of previous research studies (Thurman, 1977; Grechesky, 1983; Osman, 1989) the issue of communication skills should be considered paramount in any training in the choral conducting field. Another area in which choral conductors are often deficient is in their knowledge and understanding of the voice, not just of the physiology, but more importantly on how the behaviours, language and gestures of the conductor can profoundly influence vocal health and efficient and effective singing.

To illustrate with yet another anecdote: I attended a choral concert conducted by a colleague who is a very skilled and knowledgeable musician. The choir was a selective chamber choir of some 50 singers. The programme included the Rachmaninov Vespers - a musical and vocal challenge indeed. However, as I listened, I became very conscious of a somewhat thin soprano tone in the choir, which essentially did not either match the tone of the basses wallowing in the depths or suit the required musical style. Watching my colleague conducting, I noticed that his arms were raised all the time at shoulder level and higher - perhaps to make sure that, as he was not particularly tall, his gestures were seen by all the singers? What was happening was that the singers were simply responding physically themselves to his posture and gesture. Their shoulders were raised, as if in imitation, thus creating an appearance and sense of tension with seemingly squashed vocal tracts. This responsive posture was making it almost impossible to create the depth and intensity of tone necessary for this music. Thurman (in Thurman & Welch, 1998) refers to the fact that most humans are "visual primaries" - in other words we respond "outside conscious awareness" to what we see. We are programmed to make sense of and interpret the behaviours of others and consequently process not only verbal instructions and explanations, but more significantly, visual cues from communication through body language, facial expression, eye contact and gesture. The learning situation, therefore, can influence the patterns of behaviours of the learners - that is the nature of the communication of the choral conductor will have a direct bearing not only on the musical responses of the singers, but also on their attitudinal behaviour. To refer back to Thurman's paper in the first *Phenomenon of Singing* (1997), he cites Mehrabian's data that suggests that when people deliver spoken communications, about 45% are delivered vocally; 55% are delivered by facialexpression, arm-hand gestures and postural arrangements of the body. (One of my departing music education graduate students recently, as part of the course

evaluation and discussion, commented on that fact - albeit with a smile on her face - that she has learnt much from my arm gestures - these indicating more effectively than my words what I have been trying to communicate all year!)

## **A UK perspective: Behold I tell you a mystery**

The situation in the UK in respect of singing is an interesting one at the moment. A number of reports, including the British Federation of Young Choirs and Ofsted (the official government inspection organ) as well as small scale research studies at Roehampton have indicated that singing, particularly in secondary schools, is an infrequent and often uninspiring activity. It is questionable as to whether matters are worse now than they were say twenty or thirty years ago; some, nevertheless feel the tide is now turning. My research study (Durrant, 1996) collected data of conducting courses within higher education and found that there were few (also reported in Durrant, 1997 in the *Canadian Music Educator*). My investigation was prompted by the fact that, over the years of teaching a postgraduate teacher training course in secondary school Music, a significant number of these students had little or no experience and previous training in any form of conducting, and certainly not specifically in choral conducting. Also, Gibbs (1993) found that conducting was at the bottom of the list of subject areas most commonly addressed in the musical training of teachers. What is now interesting is that various institutions and organisations in the UK are at last beginning to consider and address the subject of the training and education of choral conductors, with the conception that the education of musicians and teachers in the choral and vocal area might have a correlation with the state and quality of singing in churches, schools and the community.

What then are the considerations of the characteristics of the effective choral conductor? What are the structures and curriculum developments that will provide for this evident need? The nature / nurture debate carries on. Is the conductor born or made? The cathedral tradition in England is certainly promoted by the somewhat close network of people who have been cathedral or chapel choristers themselves, then organ scholars and so on. The training for organists is rigorous in comparison with the training for choirmasters. The tendency is that a form of osmosis takes place. But there is little provision made for those who are not brought up in that tradition but want to activate and maintain or revive choral activity in schools, churches and communities around the country. What sort of training is appropriate for a beginning and developing choral conductor?

## **Choral Education: Then shall be brought to pass**

My own and other research observations have concluded that the knowledge of music, score preparation, aural and error detection skills, clarity of gesture are some of the important attributes of an effective choral conductor. These can be identified as areas that can be taught and trained. But also, worthy research studies have concluded that it is the area of personality, behavioural traits and dynamic interaction that are equally important attributes for an effective choral conductor. Many of these research studies have adopted an

experimental design and atomistic approach, defining small areas and patterns of behaviour in the conductor or teacher as being more productive than others (Fiocca, 1986; Parker, 1990; Watkins, 1986; Grechesky, 1985; Osman, 1989; Donovan, 1994). Strouse (1987), for example, postulates the formula:

$$\text{Positive Personality} + \text{Competent Rehearsal Skills} = \text{Meaningful Interpretation}$$

He refers to the conductor entering into a dynamic human relationship with his ensemble:

. . .the decisive factor which ensures an inspirational performance is the positive impact of the conductor's personality [p.5]

These studies have been salutary in building a picture of the effective choral conductor. What has become increasingly evident through (i) observations both of students on our graduate programme and experienced choral conductors as well as (ii) interviews with singers, is the connection between musical and vocal knowledge, gesture and interpersonal skills. This connection, I now believe, is the key. Certain conducting gestures are damaging to the voice. Certain gestures are misinterpreted. A common conductor's gesture when the choir's pitch has dropped is to point a figure upwards in a jabbing motion. What does this tell a choir? Only that the conductor has noticed the drop in pitch. The conductor has yet to take the responsibility to remedy the situation with a more effective gesture - cupping the hand, for example, to replicate the shape of the raising of the soft palette, or pulling an imaginary string up from the back of the head to ensure posture is appropriate and not affecting the intonation. Certain gestures can improve tonal quality more effectively than a verbal explanation. A richer more sustained tone, for example, can be developed by adopting a gesture which looks as if the conductor is holding a very large ball low down - thus creating an image which is conducive to fuller, abdominal breathing to enable such tone to develop. What becomes even more effective is when the singers are able to be sufficiently free to be able to make appropriate movements and gestures themselves as they sing. The capacity to react gesturally according to the needs of the choir is a craft skill; but it demands that intrinsic connection between vocal knowledge and inter-personal skills to communicate the message in a positive, safe and vocally healthy manner.

It is in this area that the training becomes a little more exacting. The craft of rehearsing is an important one to develop in students. This is where young people can be motivated or not into the singing activity. I cite two further examples of graduate students who I consider to be very competent and inspiring choral conductors and teachers (one of whom is now emigrating to Ontario from the UK to teach). One was rehearsing Mascagni's Easter Hymn with an adult choir: his gesture was fluent and clear and he had an understanding of the musical and technical requirements and knew the score well. In the rehearsal, he stopped frequently and gave a series of verbal instructions about crescendos, dynamics, phrasing all of which were entirely justified, but not fully taken on board by the singers. I suggested to him that all this could be done by gesture and non-verbal means, and, by moving more obviously among them to make his presence felt, he would attract

their attention with an exaggerated gesture, which could then be modified as the rehearsing progressed. This would more likely hit “bullseye” (Thurman, 1997) more efficiently with supporting appropriate verbal commendation, which in turn seals the appropriate musical behaviour in the singer’s psyche. Another student, an experienced teacher in an inner-city school, came into a hall full of young children and, with no verbal instruction, simply started a pulse and a series of vocal patterns, call and responses, leading eventually into learning a song. Her body was full of natural movement; she created an environment where the children were gradually and effectively captured from their inattention as the musical experience progressed. I wonder if a more formal, instructive start to this would have had the same effect?

The development of an holistic choral conducting programme must therefore include insight into the way people behave in particular situations, and go beyond the study of conducting patterns, however important they might be. For North Americans, who have many well established choral conducting programmes throughout their universities and colleges, may be surprised by the fact that the UK has few of these. But, as my own and other research is finding out, maybe we need them. In order to address all the issues relevant to the holistic approach to choral conducting, courses have been designed to promote students’ own research and investigations into the choral phenomenon in particular within our Faculty of Education’s graduate programme at Roehampton. Taught courses include:

- A Philosophy of Music Education course, which provides a rationale much of their thinking and practice in the area;
- Conducting, which explores not only conducting patterns and gesture, but includes the whole area of effective rehearsing in relation to the group being rehearsed, dealing with vocal and technical issues, preparation and communication;
- Singing and Vocal Development, which explores the physiology of the voice, the developing voice, adolescence and older voice in relation to teaching and learning in the singing and vocal area.

The belief is that all these areas relate: that a conductor in whatever situation cannot be truly effective unless s/he has an understanding of how the voice works and how their gesture may contradict effective and healthy singing. Until that belief is realised more widely, we may not be moving very far forward in encouraging and developing better singing in our schools, churches and communities. Knowledge, effective communication and love of the choral phenomenon is crucial.

## **Amen: Hallelujah**

A final anecdote: Janet Baker, the now retired singer, spoke of Benjamin Britten’s conducting:

... his marvellous shaping of the phrase but at the same time one was given room, a sort of freedom, to yield to the inspiration of the moment. Only the very greatest conductors have this ability. [Carpenter, 1992: 251]

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