



TRIAD PRIDE
PERFORMING ARTS

GALA
CHORUSES

DIRECTOR, NOT DICTATOR

Inspiring Singer Collaboration
in Choral Music

THE PROBLEM

- Music-making as a group is HARD!
- Choices, choices, choices:
 - Repertoire
 - Stylistic choices
 - Musical choices
 - Technical choices
 - Vocal instruction choices
 - Interpretation choices
 - Music production choices: costumes, scenery, lighting...

CONTROL IS AN ILLUSION!

What do
we not
control in
the music
space?



TRADITIONS OF POWER

- The conductor's only job is to produce a “perfect” sound.
- To achieve this, the conductor makes all decisions and corrects all errors.

Think about the skill set this requires!

CONDUCTORS ARE TRAINED TECHNICIANS

- Conductors are trained to believe that the quality of the performances is the only priority
- Conductors disregard the opinions and experiences of the singers at the service of “quality”
- Conductors are trained to make all decisions in university courses and through textbooks
- Four values of conductors (Wolfe-Hill, 2015):
 1. Sole givers of knowledge
 2. Rehearsals should be technical and efficient
 3. Singers learn through conductor-initiated action
 4. Rehearsals are good if conductors are good problem solvers

CONDUCTORS HAVE POWER

- Conductors control singers **bodies!** Break them down, rearrange them, through gestures and commands
- The choir becomes an extension of the conductor's body: conductor as "puppeteer" (O'Toole, 2005)
- The singers become the conductor's expression
- Conductor is "above" the singers: podium, separate and elevated
- Conductors use surveillance: no talking; eyes front; error detector

Why do we give conductor's this authority unquestioningly?



POWER HAS CONSEQUENCES

- Singers describe anxiety
- Vocal health problems due to stress/tension
- Singer self-doubt



**THIS IS
NOBODY'S
“FAULT”!**



IT'S NOBODY'S FAULT!

Conductors are constrained by their training and the conventions of their professional norms and standards.

Singers submit willingly to the process, knowing full well what the experience will be, drawn by a conductor's charisma.



SINGERS HAVE KNOWLEDGE

- Adult singers come with a long history of music education
- Even without professional training, singers have technical skills and aesthetic beliefs
- **Choral music spaces are the only place most adults can continue their musical education**

SINGER VS. DIRECTOR PRIORITIES

- Adult singers don't come to rehearsals to be trained to make a perfect sound
- Levine (2012): female-identifying singers sang to express emotion in a safe environment, to find belonging, and to create a community with shared values
- Southerland (2017): New Orleans Gay Men's Chorus singers talked about involvement, socializing, and belonging far more than musical priorities



COLLABORATION SOFTENS HIERARCHY

- Conductors can allow singers to participate in the artistic and musical decision making process
- By working together, singers watch the conductor work through problems, developing their own skills
- Fosters a cooperative environment, rather than a competitive one
- Builds singer skills, ensuring an institutional future

THE SINGERS REAL VOICES MUST BE HEARD

Create a sound based on shared, collective experience



**“ BUT IF EVERYONE
TALKS AT ONCE, NO
ONE WILL BE HEARD! ”**

Conductors can establish systems and procedures for allowing contributions in a reasonable, effective way.



STRATEGIES FOR COLLABORATION

Elaborated from Wolfe-Hill, 2017



STRATEGIES

1. Rehearse and perform without a conductor
 - Make the singers accountable to themselves
 - May require more rehearsal time, so plan accordingly
 - Let your accompanist “drive the ship”
 - Teach singers other ways to communicate musical ideas



STRATEGIES

2. Use formations that decentralize the conductor
 - Sit in a circle, with the director to one side
 - Sing in small groups, facing each other, either one part or mixed small ensembles



STRATEGIES

3. Discuss musical decisions

- Encourage singer contribution: solicit views through questioning techniques
- Allow debate and voting for repertoire, soloists, performances
- Guide singers to discover choices rather than always pre-empting



STRATEGIES

4. Discuss musical decisions

- Ask for feedback on your own performance!
- If a decision must be made quickly, ask for follow-up opinions



STRATEGIES

5. Have singers help lead rehearsals
 - Use practice tracks and videos
 - Use highly skilled volunteers
 - Experiment with leadership, even if they are just starting and stopping the group

STRATEGIES

6. SING!

- You got into choral music because you enjoyed singing. Let your singers see that!
- The conductor is *part* of the group, not above or beyond it
- Getting “in the trenches” lets you hear things you can’t from the front



STRATEGIES

7. Talk about meaning in music and text
 - Lead singers to find the value in poetic and emotionally-charged lyrics
 - Ask members to share personal feelings and stories about their experiences with the song
 - Provide translations of foreign texts



STRATEGIES

8. Ask thought-provoking questions

- “Guide on the side” not the “sage on the stage”
- What musical experiences have your singers had which affect how they interpret the music?
- Make connections between personal experience and the music of the ensemble



STRATEGIES

9. Allow time for personal reflection

- Not every minute has to be spent singing!
- Have singers reflect silently
- Discuss meaning with neighbors
- Foster conversation! Relationships and community are why most of them are there.



STRATEGIES

10. Describe imagery to engage emotions

- Find concrete images to describe the feelings and images in the music
- Invite singers to share their own images



STRATEGIES

11. Allow for experimentation

- There is no one right answer!
- Experiment with different interpretations, then decide as a group on the best
- Foster musical leaders through practicing problem solving skills

STRATEGIES

12. Assess performances as a group

- Record the group singing and have the singers judge their performance
- Solicit suggestions on how to fix problems and improve the quality
- Ask singers for personal experiences with similar or contrasting musical quality



SOME CONSIDERATIONS

- Learning to work collaboratively may be unfamiliar and even uncomfortable to some singers
- Some singers may have difficulty understanding boundaries
- Repertoire difficulty may need to be scaled back to accommodate other priorities
- *What other considerations can you envision?*



CONCLUSION

- Collaboration helps improve the experience for everyone, singers and conductors
- Conversations help develop singers musical sensitivity
- Emotional connections make singers invested
- Collaboration makes singers accountable for their contributions!

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS



THANK YOU!

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