

When the Orchestra Arrives

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The weeks of piano rehearsals have gone well. After struggling at first with the strangeness of the notes and the text, the chorus has come together in finding both a common rhythmic pulse and a collective sense of the layers of meaning that draw us beyond the notes on the page. The eagerly anticipated performance is at hand. There are the inevitable spots in the music that will provoke anxiety no matter how well they have been rehearsed. But there is also now a welcome sense of security growing out of familiarity with not only the music, but with one's fellow singers, and with all their particular gifts and foibles.

And yet this will not be a performance with piano, but a major work to be sung with an orchestra. As director of a community, collegiate, or high school symphonic choir, you have the coveted privilege of conducting the combined performance yourself, rather than working hard to prepare the chorus only to hand off the baton to someone else. But who are these strangers who have just walked in, invited though they are, who seem like they've walked into the wrong family reunion party by mistake?

Each one looks for his or her own designated place on the stage and goes about their business: taking out their instrument, setting their chair and stand just so, tuning their strings or adjusting their reeds, warming up with escapades of free-floating scales and arpeggios or excerpts from pieces they'd rather be playing (a passage from a Beethoven quartet for a violinist, the solo fanfare from Stravinsky's *Petroushka* for the first trumpet). The music on their stands contains only their own

individual part with only occasional vocal cues or movement headings to give any inkling of what the text is, not even to suggest what the text might be about.

Unless they are trusted old colleagues or familiar students, we might begin to imagine some subversive thoughts that might be running through their heads: *here we are playing for these singers who think this is the most wonderful music in the world, but they have no idea how much more we are capable of in pieces that are not clouded by a big chorus! - and having to play for another choral conductor!...most conductors I've played for know much less than they think they do, but choral conductors are the worst: they don't know the difference between bowing at the frog and going fishing, they talk endlessly about how they want the music to go because they can't show it with their gestures, and they can't beat a clear 4 pattern if their life depended on it!*

While our attention as a conductor is focused on these newly arrived musicians with whom we have but a few hours to mold into the ensemble, the more familiar members of our chorus may be possessed by a few stray thoughts of their own: *the orchestra is so loud I can't hear myself think, no less sing! ...we were so tight as an ensemble before and now everything is ragged!...why do the players look so uninvolved?...even the conductor doesn't seem to notice we're here anymore - doesn't he know we weren't together at all on that last entrance?*

When the orchestra arrives in the last few days before a major performance, the resulting mixture of musical cultures can be both exhilarating and bewildering in unexpected ways. Singers and instrumentalists approach these final combined rehearsals with very different sets of expectations growing out of their distinct musical perspectives. In the limited rehearsal time available, a conductor must meld these differing perspectives into the kind of unified and inspiring performance that both singers and instrumentalists desire. A closer look at the expectations these two distinct musical cultures bring to their first combined rehearsal can provide the basis for a more constructive

engagement. How can the conductor bring everyone, singers and instrumentalists alike, to the same high level of personal investment in the outcome of the music?

Introductions

In many situations, treating your instrumentalists like invited guests to the gathering of a very engaging group of people can go a long way toward making them feel more connected to the total ensemble. This is something we come to expect in many other social situations (such as the first rehearsal of a choir) but unfortunately uncommon for instrumentalists. If it is a large orchestra, they can simply be welcomed as a group (to which the chorus will invariably respond with spontaneous applause). With an ensemble of ten or less pieces, individual introductions take less than a minute.

Personal introductions can be especially valuable when paid “ringers” are brought in to fill out a student or amateur orchestra. Such introductions may run counter to the typically more businesslike culture of many instrumental ensembles. However, when done appropriately, many players will find this a refreshing way to quickly receive some important messages: *we’re glad you’re here...we appreciate the skill you bring to our musical enterprise...we hope you’ll love the music as much as we do.*

Sharing the text with the orchestra

Choral directors who take up limited rehearsal time to muse philosophically about the composer’s interpretation of the text risk being rightly perceived as being not only pedantic but inefficient. However, many players will respond positively to hearing a one sentence summary of the text at the beginning of a movement and the sprinkling of brief textual references at points along the way. Such gestures, so long as they are not long-winded, are usually taken by the players as welcome

signs that you respect their intelligence and assume that they care enough about their playing to want to know what the music is about.

For example, in Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, the major transitions in the second, third, and sixth movements are notoriously difficult to manage, with their abrupt changes of meter, tempo, and orchestral texture. However, looking beyond the mere technical difficulties, the purpose of the composer in conceiving these passages was to underline the contrasting character of the music as a direct reflection of the meaning of the text. While stopped in rehearsal to describe how a meter change would work, briefly sharing the translation of the German can help the players *feel* how the transition works rather than responding only mechanically. For example, in the second movement, when stopped to rehearse the transition between the end of the long opening funereal march and the first great fugue in bar 206 (Figure 1), the conductor might say, "At the *un poco sostenuto* in bar 198 we go into a broader 3 as the chorus sings that "the word of the Lord abides forever" in contrast to the preceding section where they sang the less optimistic metaphor, "all human flesh fades like the grass." Then at the *Allegro non troppo* in bar 206, we change into a brisk march in four as the chorus sings "The redeemed of the Lord shall come again to Zion with rejoicing!" Only a few extra words are required, but now the orchestra knows *why* the abrupt transition happens, and has the text as a hook for the memory to recall how the changes *feel* expressively the next time they come.¹

Similarly, a quick way to communicate the articulation of one of the great fugue subjects in this work (or of any other) is to illustrate by speaking or singing the text. For example, the length, accentuation, and phrasing of the Brahms *Requiem*'s sixth movement subject "Herr, du bist würdig zu nehmen Preis und Ehre und Kraft" (Figure 2) is related directly to the inflection of the German text. However, all the orchestral parts show are un-adorned whole notes and half notes. A quick demonstration of the subject with its text conveys to the orchestra an immediate and precise sense of how the conductor wants the phrase go.²

The initial shock for the chorus

Once the introductions are over and the rehearsal starts, the chorus is in for the unavoidable shock of a radically changed rehearsal environment. After being the center of the conductor's attention for many weeks, with only a piano competing for sound in the more enclosed environment of the rehearsal room, the singers must now share the conductor's focus as well as a new, more diffuse acoustical space. It is ironic that while members of the orchestra may come to the first rehearsal assuming that the chorus sees them in a clearly secondary role, members of the chorus often instinctively retreat into a more passive role as soon as they hear the rich, vibrant presence of the orchestral sound that has replaced the piano.

Accordingly, it can be worthwhile for a conductor, even with experienced choristers, to remind them that his or her attention in the first combined rehearsal must necessarily be focused on the orchestra, but will soon return, in a larger context, for the dress rehearsal and performance. One or two pointed musical remarks addressed to the chorus in the early part of the first orchestral rehearsal can also help quickly reestablish the connection with the singers.

In this regard, there are two purely musical issues related to ensemble and balance that bear repeated emphasis with the chorus once the orchestra has arrived:

1) follow by watching

In a piano rehearsal, the chorus can easily stay together with the accompaniment by listening to the localized sound of the piano, with or without the help of the conductor (who as a result is highly dependent on the pianist's rhythmic security). On the other hand, the sound of the orchestra is much more diffuse across the whole stage. This makes it easier to hear individual lines in the accompaniment. However, it also tends to result in delayed entrances and dragging when singers try to follow by *listening* to instruments at points all across the stage rather than *watching* the conductor. The scientists in your choir will respond to the reminder that the speed of light is much faster than the speed of sound. But everyone will need to be given repeated encouragement to trust that they have learned the music well enough to look up much more frequently than before. In the last few piano rehearsals, the chorus can be asked to sing short passages that are difficult to keep together with the music closed, varying the pulse a few times to check responsiveness. When possible, it can also be helpful to have a final piano rehearsal on stage, with the conductor standing far away on stage where the podium will be when the orchestra comes.

2) avoid over-singing

The sound of the orchestra also has more *presence* than the piano. This increased presence of sound is often perceived as increased *volume* of sound by the chorus. However, it is the *closeness* and *diffusion* of the sound across the stage that leads the singers to perceive that the chorus is being greatly overbalanced most of the time (regardless of the actual balance to the audience in the hall). As a result some singers will unintentionally push their voices to compensate, or over-sing. This experience is like the difference between jogging alone and starting out in the midst of a pack of hundreds of runners at a marathon. Being surrounded by so much athletic (or in our case, sonic) energy makes it difficult to stay within oneself and not push the body beyond sustainable limits. Singers must make this adjustment initially when they start singing with a large chorus. Then they must make it again when

the orchestra arrives, which is a greater challenge because the newly massed sound is much less homogeneous.

The distorted acoustical vantage point of the podium

This heterogeneous acoustical environment is a challenge for the conductor as well. In most concert auditoriums, the podium is in a far from ideal vantage point from which to judge the balance of these complex forces. Since the conductor is much closer to the orchestra than the chorus, and the orchestra with its contrasting timbres is spread across the stage, an accurate estimation of the dynamic balance must be gained from out in the hall. Part of the conductor's preparation should involve anticipating potential balance problems in the score. The conductor can then listen to these passages for him or herself in the hall by handing over the baton to an assistant, or by bringing them to the attention of an assistant listening for balance throughout the rehearsal. Such passages should include not only *tutti* sections at the high end of the dynamic spectrum, but more transparent textures as well, where different sections have distinct musical materials that need to be heard clearly in counterpoint to one another. In Haydn's *The Creation* there is a wonderful example of such a passage in a section of Adam and Eve's first duet with chorus (Figure 3). At the second statement of the theme "By thee with bliss," the intimate conversation of the soloists is supported by a graceful triplet figure in the first violins, a punctuating dotted figure in the woodwinds, and the hushed benediction of the chorus "Forever blessed be his pow'r." While these four distinctive elements must be kept in vivid but restrained equilibrium, the regular pulsing eighth notes of the violas, cellos, and basses, and repetitive triplets of the second violins must be kept steady, but clearly in the background. At the same time, the words of the chorus need to be clearly discernible without being punched out.

What the orchestra expects from the conductor

Given the variety of orchestral instruments and their peculiar technical challenges, facing an orchestra can be intimidating for even a well-prepared choral conductor with little previous experience in this role. However, there is an important distinction that can be made: while every conductor standing in

front of an orchestra should be as well versed as possible in the ranges, transpositions, basic mechanical principles, and special techniques of all the orchestral instruments (see bibliography) an intimate knowledge of each instrument equivalent to mastery is not expected or essential.

What is essential is that the conductor have a thorough knowledge of the score at hand, have a compelling conception of how he or she wants the music to go, and be able to communicate that conception clearly and efficiently in rehearsal.

This is what any large ensemble expects a conductor to provide. There is no shame or loss of authority in asking advice from a section leader (or instrumental colleague in school situations) on *how* to achieve a musical result on a particular instrument so long as the conductor knows *what* he or she wants the musical result to be!

Preparation: score and parts

It should go without saying that thorough study of the score is the necessary prerequisite for developing a compelling conception of the music. There are excellent articles and books about score preparation that detail the basic process of learning a score.³ It will suffice here to briefly highlight a few of the challenges particular to preparing an orchestral score.

How well should you know the individual parts?

At the very least, a conductor must know the individual instrumental parts of a score well enough to be able to recognize when an incorrect note or rhythm is being played. Viewed more positively, a conductor should know each individual instrumental passage well enough to understand its function in the polyphonic texture of the music and to have made specific choices about the phrasing, dynamics, and articulation of each passage. If a member of the orchestra asks the conductor “how do you want me to play this passage?” the answer should not be a spur-of-the-moment response.

Should a passage of running detached notes be played on the string or off? Should a series of eighth notes without a slur in a woodwind phrase be legato-tongued, slightly detached, or staccato? Where should the trombones breathe in a sustained chorale-like section? Does the character of a particular movement call for the timpanist to use harder sticks or soft?

Just as we try to sing the different parts in a choral score to get a first-hand feel for how the music works, we can become more familiar with each orchestral part by singing it or playing it at the piano. The conductor should be sure to have a firm grasp of how all transposing parts work.

Transposing these parts to concert pitch at the piano is an especially effective way to be sure one is reading the transpositions correctly. Horn parts are the most difficult, not only because the customary transposition to F makes the parts look visually far away from the sounding concert pitch to which we are accustomed, but because the ambitus of the four parts normally overlaps across the two staves, with first and third horns playing high and second and fourth playing low. While limited facility at the keyboard may prevent some from reading horn parts fluently, struggling to work out important passages at the piano is a good way to build the security necessary to listen accurately in rehearsal.

It is also important to try to anticipate which passages will be particularly difficult for an instrument, not only because they include difficult passagework, but if they require extremes of range or demands for dynamic control (e.g., flutes asked to play soft in the upper register, oboes in the lower register), as well as other challenges peculiar to each instrument. For example, there is a notorious woodwind balance problem in the final chords of both the first and last movements of Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, where the composer has the first flute playing a very exposed high F on the top of the chord (Figure 4). It is difficult to play this note on a modern flute at the same level of *pianissimo* as the middle range voicings of the oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and horns. Some conductors choose to re-voice the chord as a result, especially with less proficient players. When in doubt about the difficulty of a particular passage, it pays to ask the advice of a colleague who plays the instrument, not

only save valuable rehearsal time but add to your own base of knowledge. Looking at the individual printed parts in isolation from the full score before mailing them out to the players is another good way to quickly analyze the nature of a particular part at a glance.

Marking individual parts

With limited rehearsal time it is essential to make sure the set of parts you will use are uniformly marked. This can involve considerable effort when using previously marked parts that are not uniform. However, without this preparation it will become apparent soon into the first rehearsal that a carefully marked part, like a picture, is literally worth a thousand words. The following is a list of some of the more essential items to be marked in the individual parts before distributing them to the orchestra in advance of the first rehearsal:

1) rehearsal numbers

There is nothing more important to making an efficient rehearsal possible than the purely mundane issue of making sure the parts, choral scores, and full score have some uniform system of rehearsal numbers and/or letters. Next to conductor's soliloquies, false starts are the most frustrating source of wasted time in rehearsals. Having a complete set of scores and parts with each bar already numbered is ideal, but rare. Writing bar numbers into the parts by hand is the next best option, but very time-consuming to implement. Choral scores and orchestral parts of standard repertoire are often published by different companies with different sets of rehearsal letters. The wonderfully inexpensive Dover reprints of full scores are often missing any rehearsal marks at all.

Whatever system is arrived at, it needs to be uniform, and the conductor needs to have an unambiguous way of directing everyone to any spot in the music where there might be need to re-start. This includes marking choral score page numbers in the conductor's score as well, which will save singers the frustration of trying to find a rehearsal letter in a 100+ page score. As part of basic score

study, anticipate passages that are likely to need to be repeated. Find the best place to re-start, and make sure a complete reference is already marked in the score. It can then be announced quickly and clearly (and without creating dead time while the conductor counts bars first): “Let’s start at five bars before letter D, please - for the chorus, that’s on the bottom of page 122, beginning in the third bar on the first beat.” A few moments later, with a clear preparatory beat, the rehearsal can resume without a hitch.

2) tempo indications and subdivision

Among the important choices the conductor must make in advance are tempo and subdivision. Insofar as it is possible, marking these indications in the parts can save a great deal of time in rehearsal. Penciling in metronome markings gives players a much clearer idea of which passages will need practice. Marking whether a 4/4 section will be taken in 2, in 4, or in 8 can often save 2 minutes of explanation and an unnecessary re-start in rehearsal. Subdivisions for ritardandos at ends of phrases can be marked by penciling in vertical slashes for each sub-divided beat. Along the same lines, any cuts or repeats not taken should be clearly and uniformly marked. Stylistic alterations to the notation, such as double-dotting or *inegale* rhythms in baroque music should be clearly marked in advance as well.

3) string bowings

Uniform string bowing makes for unified string playing. While bowings may occasionally be changed in the course of a rehearsal, it saves a great deal of time to start out with a matched set of markings (including fingerings in passages involving awkward shifting). Rental parts may have excellent bowings all the more valuable for having been tested in performance. However, because sets of parts often become intermixed, it can't be assumed that all the parts will have the same markings. Choosing orchestral bowings involves a mixture of both musical and purely technical considerations. Any conductor should understand the principles of orchestral bowing (see bibliography) and have a clear idea of the articulation and phrasing desired for each string passage.

Unless a conductor has the personal experience of having mastered a string instrument, it is best to have the concertmaster (or string playing colleague in student situations) mark a set of bowings for the first violin part (with the conductor's metronome marks indicated). There is no substitute for the first-hand familiarity of an experienced (and currently active) player in making judgments about the relative facility of a particular bowing (or fingering) while taking into account the abilities of the particular string players at hand.

Once the concertmaster has marked the bowings according to what works best, the conductor should review them and meet with the concertmaster to go over any bowings that seem to conflict with the conductor's musical choices. In such passages there is usually more than one possible bowing, and a demonstration by the concertmaster for the conductor can help resolve the issue quickly. Once the first violin part is set, the rest of the string parts can be bowed by the conductor to match the approach in the first violin part, consulting with principal players in the lower string sections for unique or especially difficult passages as needed.

4) marking wind parts

Markings particular to wind parts will normally be less involved than bowings and fingerings for strings. Such markings would include articulation marks where not unambiguous in the score. While printed slurs generally tell a player when to breathe, longer phrases may need to be broken. More frequently, breaths will need to be marked between sustained chords where there are no rests marked but breaths are physically necessary and/or musically desirable (the breaths marked in the passage from Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem* cited above (Figure 4) are an example of a case where breaths are musically desirable though not physically necessary). With only one player on a part, "staggered" breathing is not possible as in a similar choral passage. Many wind players will offer a puzzled look when asked to "change that half note to a dotted quarter and an eighth note rest" as is normal for choral singers. Except in special cases, indicating a breath with an apostrophe or check mark will be sufficient. Most competent wind sections will feel the release together in response to your gesture.

Transposing instruments can cause special problems, especially for amateur players. Many nineteenth century trumpet and horn parts are still written out as they are in the full score, in transpositions that were standard at the time when crooks were used instead of valves. Usually these parts will contain multiple transpositions for additional crook changes along the way. This can be a formidable challenge for non-professional players used to reading parts in Bb or F. Publishers often make available parts that are transposed into modern keys, but addressing this potential problem requires advanced planning by the conductor and/or preparation by the players.

5) *percussion assignments*

Percussion parts involving more than one player (e.g., Orff's *Carmina Burana* or the "Polovtsian Dances" from Borodin's *Prince Igor*) are printed on a single percussion part with multiple staves. The staves are generally not labeled "player 1, player 2," etc.), and the number of staves varies according to the number of instruments employed in a particular passage. As a result, parts need to be assigned and

divided up in advance by the conductor in consultation with the lead player. It can be a disconcerting surprise in rehearsal to turn to cue the first cymbal crash or triangle ring only to see the percussion section feverishly huddled to decide who's playing what, followed by a mad scramble to rearrange the percussion equipment according to the assignments.

6) let them know the markings are yours

A final cautionary word on marking parts: if you go to all the trouble of marking the parts consistently as suggested above, be sure to remind the players at some point before you begin that "all the markings in your parts are good." This warning is useful not because instrumentalists are inattentive by nature, but because they are so used to playing off of parts covered with conflicting markings that they will tend to take lightly those markings not explicitly reinforced in rehearsal as being yours. This is also an opportunity to reinforce the message that you take their contribution very seriously and respect them enough to make the most efficient use of their rehearsal time.

Of course, marking the parts well is not sufficient in itself. Important musical points will need emphasis and clarification through both gesture and verbal instructions. But the more time can be saved on smaller details that can be easily addressed through markings, the more time will be available for matters that really need actual rehearsal.

The big picture: developing a compelling musical point of view

All these details in the individual parts will be of little consequence if the conductor does not have a vision of the large-scale flow of each movement and the work as a whole. Such a vision grows out of a thorough formal analysis of the score,⁴ through struggling to make interpretive choices related to such factors as tempo, pacing, phrasing, and articulation, and through living with the music until it has become internalized. By this I mean the process whereby a conductor immerses him or herself in a

piece to the point where the music speaks so directly to the conductor, that he or she has no doubt how the music must go.

This “must” is not an claim of authenticity against all musicological challenges, but a matter of personal conviction and passionate engagement with the music. For each conductor this interpretation of the score may evolve through the process of preparation and rehearsal, changing even more dramatically on encountering a work the second time around. But it is only such a strongly held view of how the music should go, effectively communicated, that will enable a diverse group of singers and instrumentalists to give a memorable performance after coming together in a only a few brief rehearsals.

Practicing conducting

For solo performers and chamber ensembles, this internalization of the music happens more by playing the music first-hand in the practice room and rehearsal studio than by study and analysis in the imagination. While most performers probably do too little creative analysis as a result, conductors, in contrast, have little opportunity to actually practice the music by bringing it alive in sound before the first rehearsal. While listening to recordings far along in the study process can be helpful in checking the accuracy of conductor’s internal conception of the music and in providing models for testing interpretive choices, practicing conducting directly with a recording is counter-productive because the conductor is necessarily following rather than leading.

Assuming the conductor has learned the details of the score through singing and playing parts at the piano as well as hearing the music internally, much can be gained by practicing conducting with the score placed in front of an imaginary chorus and orchestra. Such practicing can be most useful in making important choices related to tempo, phrasing, and overall pacing. It can also aid the

development and clarification of the conductor's internal ideal of how he or she wants the music to sound.

In addition, conducting an imaginary ensemble forces the conductor to confront the mundane but critical decisions related to gesture that must be made before the first rehearsal, specifically: 1) beats per bar in each section; 2) sub-divisions of those beats where necessary; 3) preparatory beats; 4) fermatas and cut-offs; 5) section and solo cues (see bibliography). When conducting an unaccompanied choral ensemble, it is easier to get away with finessing these gestures and working them out more fully in later rehearsals. However, with a complex choral-orchestral work and limited rehearsal time, these choices must be made and *practiced* in advance. Players may be confused the first time they see a particular preparatory beat, cut-off, or beat pattern, but if the conductor is clear and secure with the gesture, most players will respond by the second time around. Emphasis should be given to practicing clear, standard beat patterns as well. With fewer rehearsals and no reference to other parts, instrumentalists are much more dependent on a clear beat pattern to know their place in the bar. These gestures should be practiced with a baton, because it is simply much easier to see in front of a large ensemble. Choral conductors used to conducting with their hands alone should have practiced enough with a baton to overcome any self-consciousness, so that the baton feels like a natural extension of the arm.

The importance of eye contact

Cues should be well-practiced, making eye contact in the direction of the imaginary choral or orchestral sections, using full, breathing preparatory gestures made primarily with the left hand. Cues are important not only for bringing people in on time, but for conveying a clear idea of the character of the entire phrase to follow long after the conductor's attention may have moved on to other parts. Large sections of the music should be practiced until gestures flow naturally from one phrase to the

next. Difficult transitions and important cues should be committed to memory so that full eye contact can be maintained especially at those critical moments. Eye contact is *the* essential connection between conductor and ensemble. Without it, the relationship between the conductor's gestures and the ensemble's response rarely goes beyond the mechanical. If a conductor pleads with an ensemble to look up more, but when they do they see only the top of a head lost in the score, they will be even less likely to look up in the future.

The importance of being centered

The sprawling nature of a choral/orchestral set-up challenges the conductor not only to maintain direct contact with the diverse sections scattered across the stage, but to remain vitally centered on the podium. It is important to maintain a comfortable but upright posture with the feet firmly planted on the floor while physically centered at the bottom of the breath, just below the diaphragm as for singers. To address the chorus and orchestra separately with clarity, it can be helpful to think of an imaginary plane across the middle of your body at about elbow height. Gestures intended primarily for the chorus will be most effective above that line, and those intended primarily for the orchestra at the level of the imaginary plane or below.

With the orchestral sections ranging a full 180 degrees around the podium from left to right, there is the risk that in turning to make more direct contact with one section of the orchestra, the conductor may turn his or her back to a large part of the rest of the orchestra. To avoid losing one's center in this way, imagine drawing the sound *out* from the different sections toward you and your physical center rather than merely directing your own energy out toward the section. Instead of reaching out to tap (or shake) them on the shoulder with a cue, let your gesture invite them to project their sound to the center, where it can become a focused part of the whole rich choral/orchestral texture.

The most important point is that all these physical aspects of communicating the music can and should be *practiced* before the rehearsal, just like any musician or singer has to practice the physical disciplines of their art.

Rehearsing efficiently

All the good preparation in the world is for naught without efficiently run rehearsals that make the realization of that preparation possible in performance. Ideally, a typical performance of a one to two hour long choral/orchestral work would be preceded by four combined rehearsals: two to work through the piece completely (or one with soloists and one with chorus in longer works with a large number of arias such as *Messiah*, *Elijah*, or *The Creation*), one to do the whole work with corrections, and a final rehearsal to go through the whole work without pause. However, given the financial and/or scheduling limitations of most ensembles, two full rehearsals are the most that are usually possible. Performing a major work with a single combined rehearsal is sometimes necessary, but reduces the likelihood of reaching the point where the music gels for the ensemble.

1) timing the rehearsal

With a two rehearsal format, each rehearsal should be planned to the minute, movement by movement, with the help of CD timings or a reference such as David Daniels' *Orchestral Music* (see bibliography). Such a schedule is not for use as a straight-jacket, but to provide a clear point of reference throughout the rehearsal (see the sample plan for a first rehearsal of Mozart's *Requiem*, Figure 5). There will always be sections which we wish could be given more time, but covering *all* the material as well as possible must be the first priority. The first rehearsal can be ordered according to the forces needed so that people not playing (or singing, in the case of a work with large solo movements) are not sitting idle for long periods. The last rehearsal should be in program order if at all possible.

2)work-throughs vs. run-throughs

There is a challenging dichotomy in organizing the time allotted to rehearse each movement. On the one hand, there is a need to rehearse difficult passages carefully, especially transitions from one section to another. On the other hand, there is the equally important need to run complete movements

(or at least large sections) in order to secure the overall flow of the music. In most cases there will be time for one complete run-through of each movement, but not two. Therefore, one of three logical sequences might be chosen for each movement to be rehearsed:

- 1) run-through without stopping, then rehearse rough spots
- 2) work-through from beginning to end, stopping as needed (after long phrases)
- 3) rehearse rough spots, then run-through without stopping

In a two-rehearsal situation, the first two sequences work best for the first rehearsal, whereas the third is best for the last rehearsal where the actual trouble spots are now clearly identified, and a refresher increases the odds for a successful run-through. Starting with spot rehearsing at the first rehearsal risks wasting time on sections that may not be as difficult for your performers as anticipated.

Beginning a rehearsal with shorter, isolated sections before the players have really warmed-up on longer passages also tends to be counter-productive. The kind of stop-and-start detail work that choral singers are used to will likely be perceived as extremely frustrating by orchestral players. One exception to this rule would be with music built upon discretely defined motivic material, such as a Handelian imitative chorus or a Bach ritornello aria. In this case, if the principle subjects are carefully rehearsed and given definition at the beginning, the run-through flows naturally without needing to stop again.

In the first rehearsal, starting each movement with a run-through (sequence 1) has the benefit of ensuring that everything will be covered without having to watch the clock too closely. For pieces that are sufficiently difficult that a run-through without a “train-wreck” is unlikely, working through the movement from the beginning and stopping as needed (sequence 2) is usually the better choice. However, this sequence requires the most diligent time management to avoid becoming bogged down on one spot without allowing sufficient time for running larger sections. Difficult transitions of tempo and/or meter must be allowed sufficient time for multiple repetitions needed to attain security. Beyond

these passages, being able to judge which sections need intensive work and which will take care of themselves by the second run-through is an a crucial skill to be gained through experience.

3) *making the most of limited time*

Having put a good deal of time and effort into studying the score, it is difficult to avoid the temptation to want to rehearse every detail. However, our rehearsing can be both more efficient and effective if we choose to rehearse details that can have a ripple effect beyond the particular passage in question. Which musical characteristics are *most* essential in bringing each movement to life? Are there particular passages that can be chosen to illustrate these essential characteristics in a way that can be applied to the rest of the movement?

For example, the second part of the opening theme of the first movement of Verdi's *Requiem*, beginning in bar 12 (Figure 6) contains off-beat melodic accents for muted strings and four choral sopranos that are an important characteristic of Verdi's melodic style and recur in other central themes throughout the *Requiem*.⁵ This expressive *leaning into* a rhythmically weak part of the phrase is the kind of defining detail that can be easily ignored if not emphasized in rehearsal. The marked note must be clearly stressed without breaking the overall line. The first violin phrase is one that the conductor might well have spent some time discussing with the concertmaster in advance. By marking the whole phrase with a single slur, Verdi leaves the necessary bow changes to choice while emphasizing the importance of the long line with its melodic syncopations. If the decisions have been made beforehand about *how* to make the melodic accents work, taking the time to insure that such an expressive detail is effectively realized at an earlier point in the rehearsal will make it possible to refer back to that work when similar passages come along without having to take as much time.

This ripple effect can also be applied by making a point of addressing each section of the orchestra at least once with some central aspect of ensemble playing that can be applied far beyond a single passage. Taking the time to tune one chord with the woodwinds establishes the expectation and

desire to tune all exposed chords equally well. Taking the time with one string section to play a unison phrase with true unanimity of pitch, rhythm, tone, and shape sets a standard for the rest of the piece. The same principle can be applied to the chorus. One reminder about expressive diction or singing with line can quickly bring back the focus of the choir after having become more passive in the presence of the newly arrived orchestra.

4) A helpful axiom for efficient rehearsing

One of my favorite rehearsal axioms is, “If it’s worth saying it’s worth rehearsing,” which can be extended further to say, “If it’s not worth rehearsing, it’s not worth talking about.”⁶ A change only described by the conductor in words without being attempted right away in rehearsal is soon forgotten. Even when spoken just before a run-through, a list of recommendations is likely to be ineffective beyond two or three important items. Having said this, it is also important to note that the conductor should never ask the orchestra to repeat a section without giving a clear *reason* for playing it again.

Bringing everyone together (and keeping them together)

Perhaps the most elusive task with a combined ensemble in both rehearsal and performance is keeping everyone together rhythmically. As a rule, choirs tend to drag (waiting to hear the orchestral sound) and orchestras tend to rush (especially in sections with dense passage-work). For example, at the triple meter section of the *Allegro non troppo* in the “Baal Chorus” from Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* (Figure 7), the running eighth notes in the upper strings will tend to run ahead of the longer sustained phrases of the chorus which will then tend to fall farther behind with each phrase. Establishing a clear pulse through gesture and eye contact is essential, and major disjunctures must be addressed in rehearsal if at all possible.

Given the complexity and size of the forces at hand and the unavoidable hazards of live performance, accidents can and do occasionally happen in even the best prepared performances where one section gets so out of sync with the rest of the ensemble that the music is in danger of falling apart. This inherent fragility of the fabric of live performance is the same attribute that makes it possible for other passages to gel in a way they never have before, taking us equally by surprise. At moments of unexpected disunity in performance, it is usually best to stay calm, stay centered, and continue conducting the most secure section that is still following the conductor while giving a strong left-handed “stop” signal to the section that is out of sync in preparation for their next cue. This is a time-honored technique of opera conductors that can be quite useful in a choral/orchestral performance as well.

In the midst of all the time pressures and added stress of the final rehearsals, be sure to find a few moments along the way to acknowledge the power of the music itself. We often take for granted how fortunate we are to be able to come together to bring great music to life in a world so full of conflict. “What an incredible passage that was, especially when we shape the phrase so well together!” “There is a sense of jubilation [or tenderness, or exaltation, or mystery] in this text that

comes through the music so much more powerfully than with just the words themselves!” One or two *brief* reflections made at an appropriate moment can reconnect the chorus actively to the heart of music from which they may have become more passively disconnected since the earlier piano rehearsals. But such remarks will also be welcomed by most instrumentalists in the context of a focused, well prepared rehearsal. Orchestral musicians want and deserve to have their hard-earned technical skills respected, but also want to be reminded of why they have chosen to be faithful to their discipline in the first place. All our careful preparation is so valuable precisely because it makes spontaneous music making possible, to remain in our memories long after the non-repeatable moment of the performance has passed.

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¹ For further suggestions about talking to an orchestra in rehearsal, see *Face to Face with an Orchestra*, by Don V Moses, Robert W. Demaree, Jr., and Allen F. Ohmes (Princeton, NJ: Prestige Publications, Inc., 1987) pp. 31-33.

The discussion in this book contains a quote from Robert Shaw that would seem to contradict the idea of talking to the orchestra about anything beyond the notes on the page: “Orchestra players don’t want to know about musicology; they just want you to tell them whether you want the passage faster or slower, or louder or softer.” This statement reflects a great deal of truth about the cultural preference for a business-like manner among instrumentalists and an important corrective against the propensity of some choral conductors to be overly verbose and pedantic.

However, my own experience with professional as well as amateur instrumentalists both as a conductor and as a bassoonist has led me to believe that many of the more recent generation of players seek to escape the stereotype of the narrow-minded, purely mechanistic player that this statement also implies. I think the key in bringing the text and other extra-musical references into the rehearsal is to be sure that what is said is succinct and directly pertinent to the musical task at hand.

² In my experience, professional players who specialize in performing Baroque music on original instruments will often *ask* me for the meaning, articulation, and inflection of the text of a melodic idea if I don’t offer it right away, since they tend to believe that instrumental phrasing in vocal works should be dependent on the inflection of the text in the vocal line.

³ See particularly the recent *Choral Journal* article by John Dickson, “Score Study: A “Magical Eye” for Musical Blueprints,” March 1999.

⁴ While there are many approaches to formal analysis, one of the most useful for conductors is Julius Herford’s method, as outlined in the book *Choral Conducting: A Symposium*, 2nd edition, edited by Herford and Harold Decker (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973): 199-265, also referred to in John Dickson’s article cited above.

⁵ See especially the “Libera animas” theme beginning with the cellos in bar 13 of the Offertorio, the “Quam olim Abrahae” motive at bar 89 of the same movement, the vigorous (but still legato) accents in the Sanctus fugue first occurring in bar 12, and the *dolcissimo* Agnus Dei theme, where a grace note on the fourth beat of the third bar functions the same as the earlier melodic accents.

⁶ I first received this insight from Professor Fred Stoltzfus, director of the graduate program in choral conducting at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.