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Choral and Orchestral Conducting Techniques

Thomas Iacono
Colby College

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CHORAL AND ORCHESTRAL CONDUCTING TECHNIQUES

By

THOMAS J. IACONO

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Senior Scholars Program

COLBY COLLEGE

1975
APPROVED BY:

[Signature]

TUTOR

[Signature]

CHAIRMAN, DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

[Signature]

READER

[Signature]

CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE OF SENIOR SCHOLARS
In this final report on the aspects of choral and orchestral conducting I will divide the discussion into four areas: 1) Score Reading, 2) Rehearsing, 3) Movement and Beat Patterns, 4) Necessary Traits for the Conductor. This will be a general discussion, in layman's terms, of the work involved, not giving attention to specific details and problems dealt with in specific works. This paper is merely to serve as a sort of journalistic report of my own experience in learning this art. Practical experience involving rehearsals and actually directing a choral or orchestral group was limited during the year of study. However, during January I worked with a choral group of Colby students rehearsing and ultimately performing a program of Negro Songs and Spirituals. This was a time when I was able to apply all the aspects of the above four areas to my study in the way of practical experience.

Score Reading

The first thing a conductor must do when he selects a piece of music or is handed a piece of music is to sit at the piano and play through it. A familiarity with the piece is at least accomplished in this way. One must practice the skill of simply reading the notes. This involves, with a large scale orchestral work, being able at sight to read different clefs and to transpose instruments of different keys. When the complexity of many voices or parts makes it physically impossible to play all the notes, then special attention is paid to the main line wherever it occurs. Being able to readily recognize rhythmic and scale patterns facilitates the reading.

In my own experience I found that I was too bogged down
by the complexity of large scale works to be able to read them with any speed. Therefore I would have difficulty realizing important lines. So I began by reading through smaller scale works of the four-stave type such as the early Beethoven String Quartets, Schubert Trios, and four to eight part choral scores. This gave me a familiarity with reading different clefs and I was able to read easier from reading a smaller number of parts. Gradually I worked through larger scale works for reading, such as Barber's Adagio for Strings, Debussy's Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, Wagner's "Prelude" to Act I of Tristan und Isolde, Haydn's Symphony #75, Beethoven's Symphony #3 (Eroica), and Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture (I have yet to tackle Stravinsky's Le Sacre). Gradually I became better at three important things in reading: reading different clefs, transposing instruments, and noticing the main line.

Once the familiarity with the piece is established, serious analysis should then be given to important aspects involved in the music, such as the harmonic language, melodic construction, and important rhythms. Thorough analysis of these elements will give the conductor a clear understanding of the composer's ideas, intention, and style. When the conductor has gained a clear understanding of these elements of the music, he may then proceed to study the music for details such as dynamic markings; tempo and meter changes; articulation; important themes, patterns and motives; important entrances and cut-offs for voices or instruments; and proper phrasings. The orchestral scores that were studied in this detail were Haydn's Symphony #75 and Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture. These scores were
read, and analyzed in the above manner. During the weekly sessions with my tutor, Professor Ré, practice and discussion of this work took place. These sessions were also used for the conducting of these pieces. I would practice the conducting using a recording or with Professor Ré playing passages on the piano. This was our way of "rehearsing" the music. In addition to learning the appropriate conducting movements, we would discuss how the rehearsal of certain passages with an orchestra should be carried out and what would need special attention. Half of each semester was devoted to thoroughly studying these two works which involved the reading, analyzing, and conducting practice; but no actual rehearsal time with an orchestra took place. Only when one has all these details of a piece of music firmly in his grasp, is he able to apply his own interpretations through knowing the composer's intentions and the style of the period. Knowledge of these concerns came from my study of the historical periods in music to which these pieces pertained. It also involved discussing these aspects with my tutor. Now the conductor is ready to rehearse.

Rehearsing

Rehearsals should be planned ahead of time, always considering the time available for work to be accomplished. Complete efficiency should be strived for in the use of this time. Every minute of rehearsal time is valuable, especially if the players are being paid, so that a group may be thoroughly prepared for top performance at the time of public presentation. Again, the conductor must know the music completely so that he can answer all questions and know when things are going wrong.
In the first rehearsal of a piece, the group should read through the entire piece or large section to gain their own familiarity with the work, which also serves as a good exercise in sight reading. For a choral group, warm-up exercises are important for attaining good balance, listening to pitch and producing overall good tone. For an orchestra, a good thing to start off with might be playing the scale of the particular key the piece is written in. The orchestra can check balance and tuning in this way. These practices have been observed practices, either through my own association in musical groups or by observing experienced conductors.

After the initial run-through, note and/or rhythm corrections can then be made. The conductor should from the start insist on accurate pronunciation and skillful articulation from his group. He should indicate clear, logical musical phrasing, correcting mistakes in breathing or bowing. And he should strive for attaining the group's proper proportion and balance. Sectional rehearsals, separate from the main rehearsals are sometimes necessary for particularly difficult sections and will aid a certain segment of the group to learn their section without losing time for the other players. Once the group has been introduced to a piece and is quite familiar with it, they should watch the conductor more and pay attention to the subtleties of phrasing and articulation in the music and the conductor's direction.

In my own experience with handling a group, I spent the month of January working with twenty-two students forming a choral group. We prepared a program of Negro Songs and Spirit-
uals. We rehearsed two hours a day, five days a week for four weeks. During this time I realized the value of rehearsal time and was able to apply the previous statements of rehearsals to those sessions. Much time can be wasted if attendance is low and if parts aren't being learned. I found that there was too much time being spent learning words, notes, and proper rhythms. A couple of days were spent in sectional rehearsal so that parts could be concentrated on and learned. One of the major difficulties was articulating the proper rhythms, many of which were syncopated. To facilitate the learning of these rhythms, the practice of clapping and single-syllable verbalization was employed. Eventually the proper notes, words and rhythms were achieved. We then were ready to face our biggest problem: putting forth the energy to capture the proper "spirit" and feeling of these highly spirited songs. During the last two weeks of rehearsals, I stressed learning the music by memory and the fact that the music would only come alive if the amount of energy necessary was put into it. The rehearsals began to show an improvement when the singers were able to watch me with more attention. Without their heads buried in the music, there was a definite response from me to the group and vice versa. At the end of the month, the final performance was given with much success, the necessary energy as well as the technical requirements being present. This performance also marked my public presentation in the Senior Scholars Program. (see program attached—Appendix A)

Movement and Beat Patterns

Most of the time during the year was spent in practicing
beat patterns and conducting gestures to portray every character of the beat. The basic beat patterns must be learned to the point of reflex action so that attention can be given to other things which call for it, such as cuing and dynamic indications. Within a specific beat pattern like the four-beat pattern are types of beating which convey the character of the beat, such as the four-beat legato or four-beat staccato. Much of the first semester's work involved becoming thoroughly familiar with these basic beat patterns and types of patterns. The clearest and most useful text on this subject is Max Rudolf's Grammar of Conducting. This practice was later applied to conducting works of scores studied for all the movements of cuing, dynamics, and beat character. In cuing players or singers, the conductor must always be ahead at least one beat of the entrance in giving the cue. Dynamics are indicated simply in the size of the beat, the beat size changing in correspondence with the dynamic change—piano, a small beat; forte, a large beat. The conductor must be sure that all his movements are precise, efficient, and clearly understood. The beat must clearly reflect the tempo, character, and dynamics of the music. Excess motion is just as bad as not enough direction. The direction and beat must always come from the center of the body, directing right in front of the body and facing the group being directed at the particular time. While conducting a piece of music the conductor must constantly be ahead of himself and the players, knowing ahead of time what is coming so that he may be ready with the proper direction when they have to play. When the group is supposed to play or sing off the beat, it is essential only to give a clear
indication of the beat itself, allowing the players to do their off-beat playing. Cut-offs and attacks must always be clear and precise. At the beginning of any song or piece, the conductor must have the entire group ready and at attention, then a clear up-beat must be given to begin the music. Watching oneself in front of a mirror will help the conductor see, in his private practice, how clear he is in his movements. Again, it must be stressed that every movement must be clear and understood by the players. A conductor may develop his own "free" style which is fine for his own group if they understand him in that way. But if a conductor is to get up in front of any group, he should know these basics discussed, so that he may be understood by any group.

Traits Necessary

I will conclude this report by listing the general traits necessary for the conductor: a sound musical scholarship involving a thorough knowledge of theory, harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, and composition, and a knowledge of the history of music, its period and style characteristics; a good ear; ability as a pianist and/or an intelligent command of the singing voice; sensitivity to music; a command of all movements in clear, precise direction; imagination; rapport with performers; a sense of humor; poise, based on solid knowledge and musical ability; ability to make oneself understood; enthusiasm; and last, but by no means least, patience.
THE COLBY JUBILEE SINGERS
Tom Iacono, director
Jan Plan Performance
AMERICAN NEGRO SONGS and SPIRITUALS

Ride the Chariot
Daniel, Daniel Servant of
The Lord
Tenor Solo- Todd Heisler
Bass Solo - Bob Weinstein

Elijah Rock
I Want to be Ready
Ain‘A That Good News
I Hear a Voice A-Preyin

When I’m in Heaven Sittin Down
Soprano Solo - Karen Blough

Joshua Fit De Battle of Jericho
Ain’t Got Time To Die
Tenor Solo - Jim Thrall

Great God A’Mighty
Sweet Canaan
Soprano Solo - Karen Santic

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THE COLBY JUBILEE SINGERS

Soprano I
Karen Blough
Betsy Bowen
Maz Iacono
Karen Santic

Soprano II
Jean Crowley
Judy Deman
Bev O’Brien
Melinda Walker

Alto
Carol Haffenreffer
Alice Jellema
Kathy Overheiser

* * * * * * * * * * *

arr. W. Henry Smith
arr. Undine S. Moore

arr. Jester Hairston
arr. Ralph DeCoursey
William Dawson
Houston Bright
arr. Walter Ehret

arr. Jester Hairston
Hall Johnson

Jester Hairston
arr. Clifford Taylor

Alto (cont.)
Gloria Payne
Francie Prosser
Mary Whiting

Tenor
Don Bell
Dave Cross
Todd Heisler

Bass
Mario Cardenas
Brian Shelton
Jim Thrall
Bob Weinstein
Gerrit White

Friday, February 14, 1975
12:30 pm
Lorimer Chapel

Sponsored by the Student Arts Festival
Appendix B--Texts used


