What Are the Important Things for Choral Conducting?

Ko Matsushita, composer, conductor, Japan

When teaching choral conducting, one must first educate students on acquiring the necessary skills to be a conductor before teaching baton technique. In particular, the ability to distinguish between notes, solfège, and the ability to analyze music must be taught properly, as well as compositional skills, such as harmony. Dictation is of course a must, and conductors who do not have the ability to listen clearly and distinguish between the individual parts of a choir should be discouraged, but unfortunately, there are still many choral conductors who have "bad ears".

The following is a short list of items that should be specifically taught as basic skills:

1. Sight-singing: rather than blindly singing difficult pitches and rhythms perfectly, it is important to sing while understanding what chords are attached to the melody and what the modulation process is. The students should sing with a thorough movable Do system, thinking about where the modulation comes from and how to change the Do position to make it easier to sing.
   Singing one part of a four-voice chorale and playing the other parts, such as singing and playing the piano also helps the conductor.
2. Dictation: more emphasis should be placed on dictation in two- and three-voice polyphony and four-voice chorales than on single melodies. It is important to perform the assignment after it is done.
3. Harmony: when analyzing a piece, knowledge of harmony is absolutely necessary. The choral conductor must also

have the ability to arrange music. In this case, it is impossible to arrange without knowledge of harmony.
4. Knowledge of temperament: it is important to know the theory behind the creation of beautiful chords and melody. It is important to have a keen sense of hearing, but it is also important to have an understanding of theory.

In addition to the above, I teach proper baton technique as a choral conducting method, and I place special emphasis on the following points:

1. Basic posture of the conductor:
    a. Basic position of both arms
    b. Range of motion of both arms (position and use of arms that are easy for the singer to see)
    c. Role of each arm
2. How to give instructions for the beginning of a phrase (An attack, Einsatz):
    a. How to swing arms
    b. How to direct gaze
3. How to show the choir members polyphony in renaissance music
4. How to conduct classical and romantic music

Although many modern pieces are difficult to notate and require ingenuity in conducting, I believe that it is important to be able to understand and express the music of the early Renaissance, Classical and Romantic periods, and that modern music should be placed in the position of an application of that music.

I believe that too much emphasis on individuality at the learning stage should not be welcomed too much in terms of developing basic skills. I would like students to thoroughly acquire the basic skills and then show their individuality to the fullest. Finally, I would like to strongly assert that deepening one’s understanding of the folk and traditional

music of one's own country is also very important in learning choral conducting. Basically, I think that choral conductors should be active in their home countries, because their occupation requires them to contribute to the inheritance and development of their folk and traditional music.

Dictation assignments – Score
Modulation assignment for sight singing – Score

Edited by Karin Rockstad, USA

Composer and conductor born and raised in Tokyo, **Ko Matsushita** is currently the conductor and artistic director of 15 choirs, which are often invited to perform not only in Japan, but all over the world. They have also achieved excellent showings in the choral circuit and have won awards in international competitions. Matsushita is a prolific composer and arranger and his works are performed around the world. His compositions have various styles, such as works based on traditional Japanese music, Masses, motets, etudes for choirs, and so on. His work has been published extensively in Japan, Europe, and the United States, such as in Edition KAWAI Tokyo, Edition ICOT Tokyo, Carus-Verlag Stuttgart, SULASOL Helsinki, among others. In 2005, he was awarded the Robert Edler Prize for Choral Music. Recently, in 2019, he gave a keynote speech at the International Kodály Symposium in Kuching, Malaysia. He is currently the CEO of the International Choral Organization of Tokyo, the Artistic Director of the Karuizawa International Choral Festival, Tokyo International Choir Competition, and Japan International Choral Composition Competition. He is also an Honorary Member of the National Association of Italian Choir Directors, a member of the Founding Directors of the Asian Choral Association, and a member of the World Choir Council. Furthermore, he is a Special Guest Professor at Kobe College. https://komatsushita.com/en/