

What Do We Do as Choral Conductors

Ana María Raga, conductor, Venezuela

How many kinds of knowledge should we have? What types of practice should we lead? What different skills do we need? Can you teach someone how to become a choral conductor? Should choral conductors have the same issues in mind regardless of the group in front of them or the country they're working in? These questions are constantly running through my mind. Our discipline is part of the arts, and more specifically music, but it is inseparable from the question of human relations and the social context of the place and the group we are conducting.

Choral conductors need tools in various fields, and I like to describe them as interpreters, sound builders, musical trainers and leaders. With regard to the music, there are five pillars which I think are the core of what choral conductors should always work on: vocal technique, gesture technique, how to study, how to rehearse, and musical skills. Choral conductors who have also learnt to play instruments have the advantage that they can play repertoire from different eras and styles, and can give the choir the flexibility to resolve the technical issues they're having. Playing an instrument also tunes their ears to sound qualities that can enrich their internal sound palette, and thereby that of the choir.

When I say "sound builder", I mean in the sense of an instrument maker. Conductors are the makers of their living instruments – instruments that are constantly changing as people come and go, young singers grow up and move on, others move away, and so on – and are always building, improving and moulding the sound of the group. As well as the ability to

sing in order to demonstrate what they want their singers to do, they also need the ability to listen and detect the various issues that any singer may have in order for the choir to produce the best possible sound, which after all is the “business card” of any choir. If they’re leading a children’s choir, they need to be aware of how children’s voices sound and how to organically enhance the sound of the choir: for example, if there are mixed voices, are conductors fully aware of the minimum and maximum volume they can produce? What different qualities could the choir have, and how are these qualities influenced by the gestures they make?

Conductors who are interested in making every singer in their choir better are what I refer to as musical trainers. They’re people who believe that if every singer not only sings better but also listens better, understands the unique features of the music, is conscious of the dynamic roles they have to play and takes responsibility as part of the team, the choir will constantly improve. The more musical skills the conductor has, the more they can be transferred to the singers. This is important for every amateur choir, but I believe it applies to professional choirs too, as the musical skills conveyed by their conductors should be maintained throughout their careers. What changes are the exercises conductors use, which vary to suit the level of the choirs they’re working with.

Although choral conductors must of course have appropriate musical training and cultural awareness, above all they must be aware of the potential that choral music has as a tool for human development.



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