

Rehearsal management

To grow or not to grow; that is the question

Let's begin with a fact: there is always a better way of doing things than our current method. Although our processes are well established, they may not guarantee the best results. Who knows how many better solutions there are than those I'm about to list. But, let's also consider some other ways to make our choir rehearsals more effective.

1. Main and supporting roles

When conductors decide to step up rehearsals – perhaps due to an upcoming important commitment – they choose to separate the choir into sections, and often, for convenience, they join two sections together at a time. When this happens, conductors usually have the men and women separate. In doing so, however, there are certain risks that we should look at carefully. First of all, during warm up vocalisations, particularly those focussing on vocality, one of the two sections will be forced to rest: the altos when the exercises become too high; the sopranos when the vocalisation returns to the lower ranges. Apart from the time lost in having to halt one of the two sections, this can prove to be ineffective from an instructional, and also psychological, point of view. It's often the altos and basses who suffer most from the inconvenience of having to miss out on the more coveted parts, those in the higher ranges. In other words, the conductor, though certainly without meaning to, runs the risk of implying that main and supporting roles exist, and this certainly does not encourage spiritual harmony before vocal. This is not, however, the only pitfall of working female and male voices separately, which is easily overcome by using warm up

exercises for two voices with different ranges. A more serious consequence to the continuation of this habit is possible contamination, such as causing the timbre of the two sections to begin to resemble each other. Both voices will unconsciously meet at a central point in the timbre characterisation, which does not reflect one or the other. Basically, men will acquire the characteristics of the baritones, and the women, of the mezzo-sopranos, without the higher voices striving for squillo or the lower voices reaching their typical depth.

2. Useful Combinations

If dividing the choir into two parts for separate rehearsals, it therefore makes more sense to have the sopranos rehearse with the tenors, and the altos with the basses. The dangers of the above-



mentioned point can be avoided: there will be no timbre contamination nor of vocal colour, since these grouped sections will have the same range even if an octave apart. Let's add another important factor that can save a lot of time in rehearsals, given that normally, at least in most polyphony, the sopranos and tenors sing the same motif in succession, as do the altos with the basses. When studying and constructing a piece, having the two sections sing the motif simultaneously until the moment when the two lines diverge can optimise the use of the time available. Moreover, the singers cannot fail to notice the attention to instruction and the care the conductor is taking with regards to pedagogical

aspects and this will only strengthen their trust in him or her. Let's look at one final consideration. When practicing ancient polyphony, it is very useful to combine the tenors with the altos. By having both sections sing *altus*, one might surprisingly discover potential countertenors amongst the men who would contribute a great deal to reproducing the practices of the time. If you are specifically looking for countertenors it is a good idea to explore the baritone section. There are often hidden gems that can fit this role.

3. Self-esteem and awareness

After each rehearsal the conductor could end each session with a different octet (two singers per section) as an extension to the rehearsal. In this way, vocal exercises can be avoided (the octet's voices will have already warmed up and they will be ready to go, within their respective ranges), and one can focus on perfecting pieces they know well or that the choir has been working on. This will increase the singers' self-esteem as well as highlighting the 'conductor's interest in them. Secondly, it will create excellent opportunities for meticulously perfecting some phrases, working on particular vocal emissions and achieving a smooth execution which is difficult to obtain with the whole choir. As regards ancient music, it allows the construction of a sound that is more truthful and close to the performance practice of the time, which, as we know, used small choral compositions. The best results, of course, are obtained by reviewing the same piece with all the octets. When the full choir then sings the piece, there will be a distinct improvement in vocality, phrasing, flexibility and overall performance.

If the choir is small then quartets can be used instead of octets, which are certainly the best solution. The choice of octet is designed to ensure the presence of all four sections. The plan would be to have one singer per part even for a bigger choir. In such a case, however, the absence of one singer would deprive the quartet of an entire section,

rendering the whole performance incomplete. If choosing this method, each singer would be involved just once in every eight rehearsals (assuming a choir of thirty people or thirty-two to be exact). With one rehearsal a week, this becomes one practice every two months, and this may be insufficient. In this case, if the conductor is able, he or she could meet a quartet before the main rehearsal, and meet with another quartet at the end. By dedicating half an hour to each quartet, the rehearsal would only last half an hour longer for the conductor, whilst for the singers the situation would remain unchanged (less half an hour for the main rehearsal).

It's worth noting that a rehearsal structured in this way offers the conductor significant artistic fulfilment, as well as to the singers, due to the solo formation and the particular sound derived from it. If the singers are unaccustomed to singing alone, the first rehearsals can be challenging and full of interruptions. Later, the choristers will be looking forward to these meetings with enthusiasm, both for their usefulness and for the satisfaction and benefit that they will obtain on an artistic level.



4. Colour

A choir can be successfully divided into two complete and separate semichoruses. This step can also be seen as a first thinning down of the choir, aimed at achieving the composition described in the previous point. If the choir is not sufficiently developed, artistically and numerically, to withstand being halved, or if the singers were resistant to this request, the group could still be divided, positioning the two semichoruses one facing the other, in order to avoid weakening the whole. Indeed, great things can be achieved like this, for example by conducting alternate execution. It would mean asking the two choruses to sing the score alternating between the different phrases that form the piece, perhaps starting with a homorhythmic score in order to keep it simple. This will require the singers to follow different aspects at the same time: from the rhythmic flow of the other part of the choir, to the need to follow the intonation of their part in

their heads, to the greater dependence on the conductor's gestures (these will determine the alternation of the choruses without limiting them to being perfectly symmetrical and /or consequential), to striving for uniformity of the timbre with the other counterposed singers. In this sense the conductor can handle the situation as they see fit. They could, in fact, choose the two semichoruses based on voice colour (in one, those with a clear and subtle sound, in the other, those with the rounder and darker colour), and then ask each group to maintain this colour, or even to seek best possible characterisation of their timbres. This would mean a choir with two vocal colours: when performing ancient polyphony the conductor could ask the group from the lighter timbre to stand out slightly more than the others, whilst in music from the romantic period onwards they might ask the same of the singers with the darker voices. Otherwise, they could create the two semichoruses by conveniently mixing the singers with light timbre with those who have a darker colour. In this way, an overall uniform colour can easily be reached.

They could also divide the choir by keeping the less secure singers together, or those they consider weaker artistically or less musically gifted. In other words, those who need so-called 'mentors'. Usually, they will, on finding themselves without their usual support system, together with the encouragement of the conductor, feel an increased sense of responsibility, cease feeling inferior, and assume greater confidence in their own abilities. After some practice nothing will be out of reach, and if the conductor wants to have fun and take the alternation between the two semichoruses to extremes, they can. One bar for each semichorus would give a wonderful stereophonic quality to the sound, as well as the above-mentioned benefits. The conductor can indulge themselves, inventing all the devices and improvisations they want. Alternating the choirs with each bar requires vocal virtuosity. It is not a simple exercise of acrobatic dexterity, but a demonstration of achievement of remarkable

skill and awareness of the parts, which can successfully contribute to the execution.

Afterwards the choir will be able to move on to a piece of non-homorhythmic polyphony. Now random alternation will most certainly mean that some sections will enter in the middle of a musical phrase, engaging the singers much more than before in silently following their own line whilst listening to others singing. Better still to do it in the silence of one's mind. It's difficult, not impossible, and very effective. It is within the mind that the world of sounds knows a state of particular grace, far from potential contaminations and the physiological and anatomical difficulties of singing.

5. The mute choir

A very interesting variant arises precisely from this last consideration. That is, alternating the choir's singing with following the score in silence. This method can be effectively implemented with any division of the choir, with quartets, octets, and semichoruses, as well as for the whole choir. The piece starts as normal, then at some point the conductor continues to beat time whilst making a gesture to stop singing: the conductor's gestures and the beat continue regularly in silence. After a few lines of following the score in silence, a sign will be given for the choir to recommence singing aloud. In the meantime, the choir will have followed the score in their heads, while carefully observing the conductor's gestures. The great efficacy of this exercise lies in the fact that every singer has to build the missing musical phrases in their minds – and only there. The conductor will initially practice this exercise starting with a short silent passage and gradually lengthening it. This can be done either with polyphonic or homorhythmic pieces. If the silent part has been lengthy, coming in on a perfectly pitched chord will be an exciting achievement for everyone, including the conductor. Do not be discouraged by the first inevitable failures, and persist, because this method succeeds in making sure that

every singer can deeply internalise the melodies they have to sing. They will then know them inside out and be more adaptable and flexible in responding to anything the conductor might ask of them both vocally and melodically.

What is more, during the silent phase of the performance, the singers have only two aids aside from their own memory: the conductor's gestures and the score. The result is the need to connect these two factors more closely than normal, when a singer can find themselves carried by their companions and when they can afford themselves the luxury of being lazily pulled along. This way everyone has to create the sounds and rhythms on their own, they must visualise and follow the unfolding of the correct intonation, they must implement the markings, they must look at the written notes and hear their sounds, and above all they must connect them with the gestures of the conductor.



6. Arrangement

Whatever the choice made regarding the arrangement of the

choir, it is strongly recommended to change the singer's positions frequently, so that they do not always sit next to the same two people. It is known that static positioning can create a feeling of inferiority in the weakest singers, and reinforce the dominance of the more enterprising choir members. It can also cause some negative aspects that should be actively avoided:

6.1. By its very nature, a choir can protectively and reassuringly envelop whoever sits in its semi-circle. The weaker singers feel even safer if they are next to the more experienced, and will have no incentive to mature and seek independence from these "mentors": useful figures in one sense and harmful in another. The temporary absence of one of the latter will push the whole choir into a state of insecurity since the less experienced singers will assume a meek and resigned attitude, certainly not suitable for a concert situation.

6.2 There are always bad habits lurking, including the flaws of others which can end up being assimilated. On hearing the emission of breath between one quaver and the other by one's neighbour, or a badly controlled vibrato or portamento, it is almost inevitable to succumb (especially if the conductor does not say anything). Location close to a singer making these errors could cause a certain suspicion in a newcomer.

6.3 Timbre becomes stagnant with immobility. It is definitely more difficult to correct a faulty vocal emission of a singer who is clinging to their timbre, if there is someone next to them who is copying them and so strengthening the vocal emission in question. Moving position is definitely beneficial, for better or for worse. If the newcomer sings well, they will be able to improve the voice their neighbour through imitation. If they do not, it will serve to reinforce the better singer's self-awareness. Indeed, the achievement of a good vocal emission is unlikely to be put at risk by a worse one.

6.4 There is always a risk of different factions forming within the choir. Continuous proximity with the same people does tend to create complicity that could lead to divisions that prove harmful to the spiritual unity of the choir. A change in position can instead guarantee a very useful interchange for the general cohesion of the choir. Every conductor knows how long those ten meters that separate the two ends of the semicircle can be, and how much distance, both psychological and physical, can exist in that small space.

6.5 Routine – is to be avoided like the plague, especially in an artistic environment that should instead be creative and reactive at any given time. Mixing the singers up is, surprisingly, enough to break the habit, and to rekindle potentially dormant enthusiasm.

7. Unusual directions



We recommend occasionally sitting the singers in a “disordered” way, without respect for the cohesion of sections, nor tradition, friendship, kinship, sympathies, alliances, etc. (see previous points). If there is enough space to allow a single line, this can prevent help coming

from a colleague sitting in the back row. On the other hand, an arrangement over several rows will reap the benefit of hearing other voices coming from “unusual” directions, thus becoming a source of acoustic and musical interest for each singer. A soprano might hear the bass melody from behind them, and the unusual origin of that sound would certainly ignite their acoustic and harmonic interest.

7.1 There are further advantages to be gained from singing the same piece twice in a row, making sure the line-up is random and different each time. In this way the singers can pinpoint the presence of a voice or of important melodic and harmonic passages which had been hidden or at least obscured up until that point. The conductor should handle the different combinations in order to exploit their full potential. For example, they could take one singer from their section and surround them with many different singers, thus empowering them and improving their singing contribution. This can serve both to further reinforce the confidence of an experienced singer and to encourage the blossoming of a less experienced one. Conversely, the conductor could take some members of the same section with one singer from each other section, obliging the latter to improve their vocal presence.

7.2 One could also keep a complete quartet united within the “confusion” of the other singers. It will then be possible to alternate the quartet with the sound of the whole choir, or to temporarily silence the choir or quartet and have them join back in at potentially irregular intervals, retaining their intonation and rhythm each time. All this will help to better “discover” the repertoire of every singer, and to recognise the points of view and treasures that might otherwise remain hidden within the sound of the whole choir.

8. Dissonance

This next case is an apparently difficult exercise, but one that certainly rewards with educational feedback on many

aspects. The choir sings a well-known score – preferably homorhythmic the first few times – with the two male, or female, sections starting a bar behind. The result will be full of dissonance, but the singers will be required to keep to their melodic line despite the constant disturbance from the other two section voices, even though they normally sing in undisturbed harmony. At the first cadenza, or after a sufficient number of bars, the sections that started in advance will wait for the others who are a bar behind, and finally, if it all goes to plan, the singers will be able to meet on their first harmonious chord. The satisfaction will not last long because it immediately restarts; there is just enough time to recognise the accuracy of the harmony. It is a demanding exercise, but also in this case, implementation that is neither fleeting nor superficial can guarantee a real immunity to the dangers of intonation, especially from harmonic intervals consciously built on true dissonance. The singers are pushed to deeply internalise their melodic line, both from a rhythmic and melodic point of view, and it will render their entrances more independent and aware than before.

8.1 A possible initial approach to this difficult exercise could be to divide the choir into two parts (see point 2 – it's better to put the sopranos with the tenors and the basses with the altos), and to ask the singers to sing a very simple scale of C major, ascending and descending. As before, however, they should start one beat behind. The arrival of the second section onto the same note will momentarily bring them together, and then it will start again towards the next discordance. Again the variants are numerous. However, it is recommended that the same section does not always start first but rather that the dissonance be created by both, alternating at the end of the exercise or for the descending scale. The dissonance heard while singing the lower note is completely different to that heard while singing the higher.

8.2 As regards the fusion of sounds and the veracity of

dissonance, the best result is achieved by singing the same vowel, even if the name of the notes would help the singers to keep their place within the scale, or at least with the position of the semitones. Indeed, exercises like this deeply undermine the tonal hierarchy of the melodic intervals of the scale. For this reason, the pronunciation of the note's name can help link the relative sound with what remains of the structure of the major scale, after the destruction of the organisation of the various degrees of the scale due to the continuous dissonance.

9. Listening Skills

Separate a section from the rest of the choir, progressively moving it away by a few metres. Where there is a weaker section, its separation from the choir will allow its singers to better unite, both vocally and psychologically. At the same time, their listening skills will improve. This practice can be further developed by asking of the separated section to do what we previously defined as silent singing in point 5. It involves interrupting their singing for a while whilst the others continue to sing, asking them to follow their parts carefully, and then to resume singing when the conductor asks them to do so. This way the rest of the choir will also have the opportunity to extend their attention spans and ability to concentrate, trying to recreate in their minds the sounds that are momentarily missing, in a harmonic context related to their melody, but with different parameters to the usual. The remaining three-part harmony will in fact create new interests and uncover relationships between the remaining sections. A perfect fifth, for example, shows stability when sung as an empty fifth, without the third. In the same way, a minor seventh belonging to a dominant seventh chord – but above all in its second inversion – shows all of its dynamic force if isolated from the harmonic context of its own chord, etc.

10. Sharing analysis

Although it does not fall exactly within the context of rehearsal management, the next suggestion may prove a useful tool to improve the choir's performance and that's why we shall discuss it. If you have a recording of the choir in concert, listen to it after a decent interval of time, preferably a few years. You will notice that the pieces in the stable repertoire, those the choir sings over the years, undergo a slow but inexorable transformation over time. They change phrasing little by little, but so slow and measured that they seem the same. This means that, after many years, a score can be profoundly transformed without anyone – perhaps even the conductor – consciously intervening to change it. So listening carefully in reverse can be very useful.

There are three obvious possibilities: the choir has deteriorated, it has remained the same or it has improved. Each of them has a positive effect on the choir, even the first one. If it has deteriorated it means that it is not impossible to return to previous artistic level, taking into consideration a healthy pride at having been so good. To return to former splendor they simply need to revive their articulation, the elegance of phrasing and the variety of colour that has fogged gradually due to habit, routine or fatigue. If the decline is due to the loss of many experienced singers and/or the arrival of new members, then it is necessary to remedy the situation right away, to prevent the level from falling too far and becoming impossible to fully recover.

In the event that the level has remained the same there is cause to rejoice that the passage of time has not affected the quality of the choir. It means that the path that the conductor has chosen continues to be successful and that the singers have confidence in him or her.

If the choir's level has improved, it speaks for itself. However, it is worth noting that a choir's development happens slowly. Improvements are measured along a line with only a

slight incline. The quantitative evaluation of the choir's level, measured by the disparity of this slight incline, therefore, gives minimal results if carried out in the short term.

In other words, the singers are not aware of their improvements from one rehearsal to the next, so listening to a recording from a much earlier time gives them the opportunity to appreciate the work of the conductor as well as, of course, their own. As a result the conductor gains professional credibility and the singers' motivation is strengthened. If we think about city choirs, where there are hopefully many groups and the transition from one to another creates a certain instability within each choir, this can act as a persuasive antidote to unwanted migration.

11. Growth of the individual singer

It would be appropriate to adopt a similar approach to accompany and highlight the vocal maturation of each singer. They follow the advice and instruction of their conductor regarding vocal emissions, doing exercises as directed, the usefulness and purpose of which they sometimes do not fully understand. As a result, sometimes mistrust or, indeed, scepticism can be seen in their eyes, to which the conductor can but offer results. These results, however, slowly travel that incline discussed earlier, and this does not allow the individual singer to see a consistent improvement. It is, therefore, very effective to listen and comment, together with the singer, on past recordings even if just of simple vocalisations.



12. New singers

How should one deal with new singers? It is not advisable to throw them straight into the magic semicircle. It is better to place them next to the conductor for a few rehearsals, before definitively joining the choir. There are several reasons for this:

1. They should view joining the choir as a goal to be achieved and, above all deserved, after some training. Even if they are a tenor and you desperately need them – resist!
2. Positioning new singers into the midst of the choir will make them feel like the worst singer of the choir. They will not be able to recognise what they hear as the sound that fascinated them during the concert they attended, and for which they decided to join the choir in the first place. Their conviction could waver, along with their enthusiasm;
3. A confusion of sounds will overwhelm their unprepared ears if sitting within the choir so that, often, at the

end of their first rehearsal they might approach the conductor to tell them that they don't think they can to do it;

4. The temptation to put them next to the best singers so that they can learn quicker and better does more harm than good: it creates an addictive attitude that is difficult to break further down the line;
5. One cannot overestimate the value of giving adequate compliments to the 'tenured' singers which recognises their greater degree of skill than the newcomer;
6. Similarly the new singers will also bask the conductor's attention; he or she should dedicate half an hour before or after the rehearsal to the newcomer on their own.

13. Away from the "hold"

During the rehearsal before a concert, to get to know the acoustics of the venue, there are great psychological benefits in taking one or two singers out of the choir one by one, so that they can listen from the outside, to a sound that they know only from the inside. They will be surprised to hear, from a distance, a sound and combination that from the "hold" of the choir they could never have imagined. It is well known that the best way to listen to a choir is to place oneself a certain distance from it (Do you understand, dear sound technicians? You always want to place the microphones too close to the choir in order to increase its presence, but this results in much less blend!): Unfortunately for the singers, it has to be said that the worst place for them is their positioning. If the rehearsal room is spacious enough, this process can also be used during ordinary rehearsals, seating singers well behind the conductor, a few at a time. It is the opposite of the unpleasant sensation felt when one first hears, from a distance, the beautiful sound of a mechanical organ, and then, when getting closer, one hears the clacking of the valves, the air moving through the pipes, the clatter of the transmission, the plunging rods. The magic of sound

fades irreparably when coming into close contact with the physicality of the source that generates it, and the ethereal wave of sounds reveals all the unexpected rigidity of the true nature of its mechanisms. It is true for the organ as it is for the violin and the annoying rustle of the bow scraping the strings (so close to the violinist's ear), it is as true for the breath at the mouthpiece of a flute as it is for the choir. And to think that singers are always imprisoned in the depths of this choral body, immersed in a pneumatic/mechanical system filled with human moods and noises. For these reasons, giving them the possibility of hearing the choir from outside will ignite great enthusiasm.

An alphabet of useful tips for conductors:

- A. Mark a convenient point in each system of the score from which to resume the rehearsal after a mistake. The choir does not like it when you waste time looking for where best to resume.
- B. Do not talk too much or give long explanations: remember that the choir has come to sing.
- C. Request silence before resuming, particularly after stopping for mistakes: often the singers speak to each other (in vain but in good faith) to try to highlight or resolve the error.
- D. After a stop and correction, clearly state where you want to resume (page-system-bar-movement and not the other way round!), Give the singers time to find the place (but not too much time because or they will start talking amongst themselves).
- E. Simply repeating a passage will not correct mistakes and nor will the correct rendition by the conductor: the section that made the mistake must work on the isolated execution.

- F. Do not repeat a passage without explanation.
- G. Pay attention to long and repeated notes: they can easily sag in pitch.
- H. Wait for the score to have lost a semitone before correcting the choir: the singers cannot hear the quarter tones and cannot correct them.
- I. If the choir becomes sharp by a semitone, it means that we are in the zone of 'register shift, and the elevation will facilitate this.
- J. Check the pitch at the end of a piece: if the choir has become flat you will have to go over it again..
- K. Do not use a pitch pipe for A: if you blow hard it will pitch flat and if you blow too softly, sharp.
- L. If you really want to use the piano to give the pitch, then just play the tonic and build the other notes independently: tempered intonation dampen the sound of any choir!
- M. If the rehearsal is long, get the choir stand up from time to time to sing a passage or even a whole piece.
- N. Study a slow piece by performing it at a higher speed: the singers will memorise the melodies better.
- O. Watch out for changes in octave: they are often sung incorrectly because they do not have a goal as those of the fourth or fifth do.
Watch out for compound times: choirs tend to slow them down.
- P. If you want to highlight the rhythmic weavings of a piece of music, replace the text with the phoneme, *Linn*, for each note: you will all be pleasantly surprised.
- Q. If you see the singers slouching, you must find

something to rekindle their interest. Perhaps you have talked too much.

R. Do not always sing *mezzoforte*. And if want *piano* do not put your finger to your mouth with the other arm stretched out: a small gesture will suffice.

S. Do not always indicate something using your index finger, as if you have dipped it in jam...

T. Try using a metronome to beat time and then silence it for a few bars: if you are not still in time when it starts up again, think hard before you next tell the choir to 'keep in time, for goodness sake!'

U. Do you prefer to conduct in two time rather than in four? Also for Mozart's *L'Ave Verum*? Clever you!

V. Consider your left hand as an opportunity, not another nuisance to handle!

W. If you want to instantly improve the sound of the choir, teach them diaphragmatic breathing!

X. Never lack enthusiasm. It's highly contagious.!

Y. The old sayings are always true: the conductor must have the score in their head, and not their head in the score. This also applies to the singers.

To conclude, we conductors should carry out an examination of conscience. At the end of a hard and demanding rehearsal, after having asked so much from our singers, sometimes more than they can give, we are rewarded with the joy of having achieved a great final result, even if it is a passage that lasts only two or three seconds! But can the singers say the same? Or must they be content with our satisfaction, blindly trusting that they have achieved an excellent result that the

most distracted of them perhaps has not even heard? Should our “Thank you” be enough for them, even though sometimes we forget to say it? Perhaps we forget that our motivations are strictly musical, while those that push a singer to leave their family to come to the rehearsal are largely sociological and therefore they are more vulnerable, probably weaker in terms of resistance and determination. There’s no need to highlight how the psychosocial aspects constitute an essential component of making music with a choir. If only for the fact that the conductor is not playing wooden and metal objects, but is moving the hearts, sensitivities and souls of so many.



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