

# Expressing Emotions in Music

## Expressing Emotions<sup>1</sup> in Music

From the notes to the sound – for young and old<sup>2</sup>

*Rudolf de Beer*

*choral conductor and teacher*

The performances of many amateur youth choirs are filled with a vibrancy that is sometimes lost when these musicians mature. Although it is more likely that youth normally expresses personal feelings more than mature personalities do, the expression of emotion in music would not wane if singers (old and young) were guided by a solid scientific knowledge of the music performed. This knowledge should be conveyed to the choir by skilled conductors in ways that would allow the meaning of a composer to speak as clearly as possible to the audience. As Coward advocated as long ago as 1914, “Always endeavour to get inside the subtleties of a piece.” (270).

Fundamental elements in music, namely melody, harmony, rhythm, tone, form, tempo, and dynamics can be enhanced by expressive elements such as phrasing, rubato, sound quality, intonation, and by more technical elements such as singing and conducting technique. In any pre-documented musical work, the creative process revolves around the fundamental elements, while expressive elements can be included into a written score, such as phrasing and rubato. However, it is up to the performer (in this case the conductor) to decide on more technical aspects, for example sound quality and intonation, and especially aspects of conducting such as weight of the arms, posture, and the importance of gravity in gesture. It is also important

that the choral musician, especially the conductor, should decide on the level of incorporation of some or all of these elements to mirror as far as possible the composer's heart, without ignoring the performer's understanding and experience of the music.

This article will focus on the expression of emotion in music as an example of this phenomenon, while exploring the different possibilities that a conductor may be confronted with. Because the conductor's instrument is the singing voice which is activated or 'controlled' by gestures, it is important to understand how these different elements can be conveyed to the choir through verbal, but especially non-verbal, means. Much has been written on these aspects, but how the use of gestures should be applied to reach these goals is very often overlooked. Choral musicians mostly understand how to analyse and prepare music<sup>3</sup> and even how to rehearse it with or teach it to choirs, but many conductors fail then to use appropriate conducting gestures, thus limiting the singers in carrying the true message of the music over to the audience.

However, it is impossible to touch on all these elements in an article. These could be dealt with over the course of a whole degree in choral conducting and choral singing. It is firstly important to look at the *music* itself, including guidance by composers, after which singing and especially conducting *technique* in accomplishing these goals will be discussed.

## **The Music**

This is the sound itself that is conveyed to the audience via the performer of either written notation of some sort, or orally/aurally transmitted renditions. In most choral music it is a combination of combined pitches and words, while the latter also influences the colour and style of the sound chosen by the performer. Aspects that a performer can choose

from in this decision-making process include phrasing, tempo, dynamics, and rubato. All of these aspects will enhance musical 'emotion', though some of these aspects in music can receive specific attention to highlight the meaning of the text and sounds. Some of these aspects are suspensions, overtones, phrasing, and articulation.

Suspensions between voices can be enhanced though either dynamic differences or articulation, for example *marcato* or *tenuto*. A suspended note against changed harmonic movement can thus be enhanced by giving it more dynamic importance than the other notes or voices.

Different overtones created by different combinations of sounds can also change by knowledge and use of resonance cavities and changing dynamic levels. More important, though, is a focus on overtones for good intonation, one frequently overlooked aspect of which is consistency in pronunciation, especially of vowels. The effect of temperament and intonation on the emotional perception of music should not be underestimated, even if perception differs between individuals.

The treatment of phrase climaxes (highpoints) and destinations (gravity points normally towards the end of phrases) needs a focus attitude in energy by both the choir (singers) and conductor. This is directly linked to singing and/or conducting technique, which is a combination of mind and body forces. Composers highlight climaxes in many phrases with harmonic changes, which could again be enhanced by performers through aspects such as *rubato*. An acceleration in tempo towards a climax with the reduction in tempo just before the climax, is a typical example of this technique.

Articulation in music, both of the text (through diction) and of different musical articulated elements such as staccato, legato, and accents (including *marcato* and *tenuto*), is also an important tool through which musical feeling or emotion can be

expressed.

## **Technique**

There is a need for all singers in the choir and the conductor to have a solid knowledge of the vocal production and singing technique necessary to unlock the emotion in the music. The text and notes naturally have a huge influence on the decision that the performers will make to convey the message of the music.

A suspended note demands the correct dynamic balance between the voices in order to shine. The conductor and singers should also be able to hear and understand (like a good organ tuner) which frequencies to utilise for specific temperaments (for example with piano or without). To convey for example the correct emotion through clear intonation in the music, it is the conductor who should guide the singers in vowel homogeneity, tonal context (Alldahl, 2008: 27), and the relation between vocal resonance and overtones. When the musicians focus on the text, the phrasing is normally good, though it is important to maintain the energy up to the end of a phrase, and not only to the phrase climax. If all singers apply the same percentage of energy, the choir as a whole will be able to highlight the emotion of the music better. A clear understanding of articulation in text pronunciation, but also in musical elements such as legato and staccato, should be an inherent part of every singer's technique. A conductor should also "...work hard to achieve a conducting technique that is clear, yet expressive..." (Marvin, 1989: 15-16).

The conductor must furthermore have a solid knowledge of conducting technique, which apart from gestures, includes the use of muscle energy and gravity (Jordan, 1996: 24-25). The flow or movement in the hands should never cease, nor should the line in the music and energy of the singers. All small

details such as dynamics, articulation, phrase energy, rubato, tempo, and even intonation can be incorporated in a gesture that never stops the movement. The flow between the ictus points is thus just as important as the ictus itself.

A conductor should also learn not to work against gravity, but with gravity. For a singer to produce the correct sound through good singing technique, which again has an influence on aspects like intonation and colour, the flow of energy through breathing is very important. A conductor can work against this if gravity is not guiding the gestural technique. Take for example an upbeat: the movement is upwards, but singers should breathe in the opposite direction. A very small downward bounce at the start of the upbeat helps the singers to breathe correctly, which again results in easier production of tone colour and phrasing. Most conductors do this instinctively because they breathe with the music. Conductors could also work with the singers when energy fields, especially in the palm of the hands, are utilised for checking intonation, and not the typical old fashioned upward or downward pointing of the finger. A solid theoretical knowledge should therefore be put into practice in a logical and practical manner.

I hope these brief examples will allow readers an insight into the importance of knowledge in order to unlock the emotions hidden in each musical work. Not only will the true meaning of the music reach the audience, but every performer as well as every audience member will be moved by the music in some way or another, whatever the age of the performers. As Lannom (1989: 66) stated, "...the choral conductor needs to say to himself: "I have honestly studied the music and have tried to understand it in its historical, intellectual, and emotional context."

## Bibliography

- Alldahl, P-G. 2008. *Choral Intonation*. Stockholm: Gehrmans Musikförlag.
- Coward, H. 1914. *Choral Technique and Interpretation*. New York: H.W. Gray.
- Jordan, J. 1996. *Evoking Sound: Fundamentals of Choral Conducting and Rehearsing*. Chicago: GIA Publications.
- Juslin, P.N. & Västfjäll, D. 2008. *Emotional responses to music: The need to consider underlying mechanisms*. In *Behavioral And Brain Sciences* (2008) 31, USA: Online. p. 559–621.
- Lannom, A. 1989. *The Creative Experience: Implication for the Choral Conductor*. In Paine, G. & Swan, H. *Five Centuries of Choral Music: Essays in Honor Howard Swan*. New York: Pendragon Print. p. 49-66.
- Marvin, J. 1989. *The Conductor's Process*. In Paine, G. & Swan, H. *Five Centuries of Choral Music: Essays in Honor Howard Swan*. New York: Pendragon Print. p. 15-34.

<sup>1</sup> When referring to the term emotion, not disregarding the discrepancies in the research of this term (especially in music), the author refers to 'Music Perception [-] All instances where a listener perceives or recognizes expressed emotions in music (e.g., a sad expression), without necessarily feeling an emotion' as defined by Juslin and Västfjäll (2008: 561).

<sup>2</sup> A practical application of this article, which will focus on the expression of emotion in music while exploring the different possibilities that a conductor may be confronted with, will be given in a workshop lecture format at the 10<sup>th</sup> World Symposium on Choral Music in Seoul, Korea, 2014, with the theme *Healing and Youth*.

<sup>3</sup> *The applicant refers to music and not scores due to the fact that many musical works are not notated.*



Cantor in Steinkjer and Egge Churches (Norway), **Rudolf de Beer** also conducts the Steinkjer Chamber Choir, the Sakshaug Mixed Voice Choir, the Trønderkor, and the Steinkjer Male Voice Choir. A native of South Africa, he previously was head of choral conducting and music education at Stellenbosch University, and conducted, amongst others, Schola Cantorum Stellenbosch, and the Drakensberg Boys' Choir. He studied at Potchefstroom University, while his Master's in choir conducting is from the University of Oslo. He completed his DMus through a joint venture between the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth and the Norwegian State Academy of Music in Oslo. He further publishes research articles and composes music for choirs of which some has been published by Hal Leonard (USA), Norsk Musikforlag, and Cambridge University Press (UK). Email: [rdbchorale@gmail.com](mailto:rdbchorale@gmail.com)