

# Let's Talk Method

## Leadership

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As the editor for the World of Children's and Youth Choirs column in the ICB, I would like to introduce the concept of fixed themes in upcoming issues of the Choral Bulletin. *Let's Talk Method* is the first of these columns which will offer our readers information on technical aspects of choral conducting and thoughts from artistic and executive leaders. We will share ideas on conducting and rehearsing with children's and youth choirs and strategies to develop their supporting institutions which will be helpful to many colleagues. This thematic column will always appear in the January issue of the bulletin.

Previously, we discussed the importance of having a strategy to deal with crisis. In this article I would like to explore ideas in regard to what I consider to be the most fundamental aspect in the choral world: **Leadership**. This often overused term encompasses many diverse traits and characteristics in being a choral conductor.

Leadership is intimately linked with the notion of accomplishment since a successful leader is capable of generating effective cooperation from other people and is able to channel the efforts and results of this support to attaining one's final goal. The choral leader is immersed in an adventure that seeks the fulfillment of the mission and goals of the organization he/she leads. While reaching one's

ultimate goal, many facets may need constant reevaluation and adjustment. Following are several areas in which choral leaders should dedicate some thought:

## **Education**

One of the most important characteristics of choral music is that it can be performed with untrained musicians. Orchestral performers require a certain proficiency level on their respective instruments which is usually accompanied by a required level of musicianship. On the other hand, the chorister does not have to be musically trained to be a choral singer. Choirs composed of trained singers can attain very high levels of excellence in their music making; however, amateur choirs comprised of mostly untrained singers can also present beautifully crafted performances that are equally valuable.

Therefore, the choral leader must understand that a great deal of rehearsal time will be devoted to education—to prepare the singers in two most critical areas: 1) vocal production, and 2) musicianship and score reading; and in other complementary areas including music history, style, expression, repertoire, diction, acoustics, etc. This requires that a choral conductor be a Master Teacher who must be adequately prepared in all these areas in order to properly educate the ensemble.

Education is not only a concern within the ensemble. An important part of this facet is to educate and build an audience: to provide them with interesting programming throughout the year's activities; to include thoughtful and interesting, yet simple and short program notes; and to interact with the audience during and after the concert. We must also emphasize how important it is to educate our funders. The entities that offer financial support to our choral ensembles often need to understand our purpose and the

historical and artistic platform on which we operate and build our choral music programs and institutions.

## **Community and Service**

We have talked about how important it is to interact with our community, but the choral leader must also consider the importance of how the community is being served. Choral organizations must reach out to create solid partnerships with other organizations in the community other than their funders. Finding institutions that have similar missions, goals, or target populations is crucial so that the efforts can be aligned and the results can be multiplied—usually exponentially. The choral leader is responsible for finding such partners and for steering the choral institution into a communal effort in the service of society and its greater good. Music appears to be an ideal language to achieve these results under difficult circumstances.

## **Financial sustainability**

Finances are also an important part of a choral leader's duty. This involves a variety of aspects which deal with money matters. One of the most important components is to create an ambitious but realistic budget that allows the choral institution to fulfill its mission and goals and to find sufficient and reliable income streams that can successfully fund the organization. These revenue streams involve not only receiving grants from public or private institutions which are committed to the organization's ideals, but also the ensemble must develop projects to generate income from concerts, events, exchanges, etc. Creativity is also a key word in finding new streams of revenue or financial partners and in developing musical events that produce both artistic and economic success. Excellent financial leadership, fiscal

responsibility and accountability are important aspects of a true leader in choral music.



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## **Rehearsal and Ensemble**

A crucial aspect of a conductor's leadership is one's effectiveness and management of a choral rehearsal. A great choral leader understands that an outstanding choral ensemble and its artistic excellence are developed during rehearsals. We have already mentioned the importance of an ongoing educational approach during choral rehearsals—thus a successful and well-planned rehearsal is essential for all choral groups. Important personal qualities that choral leaders must cultivate which are directly related to leadership and personal interaction with the ensemble are:

- Know who you are and be true to yourself. Your choral institution will be a reflection of your core and uniqueness.
- Be respectful. Respect your colleagues, fellow musicians and singers. Their time, presence, and efforts are very valuable. Be equally respectful of yourself —of your time and your integrity as a musician and as a person.

And above all, respect the music, for staying true to it allows us to become solemn stewards and genuine artists.

- Expect superior scholarship and musicianship so that you cannot only be a master teacher but also an example of musical and academic integrity for others to follow.
- Strive for refined and effective communication skills which imply conveying your thoughts and wishes and also nurturing your listening skills.
- Good humor is a powerful tool to lead any group to success. It helps release the inevitable tensions, deal with difficulties, and it ultimately allows you to create a better environment for all.
- Self-evaluation and improvement are critical for you to constantly review your current situation—both mistakes and achievements are equally important—and to move your organization and ensemble forward toward a better and more improved entity.
- Set high attainable goals to keep your choristers both challenged and engaged. To achieve these goals, be enthusiastic and motivational while maintaining a strong but yet fair discipline.
- Most of all, love what you do, because many times your journey will be difficult but yet your leadership must always be inspiring to others.

Many choral music colleagues in numerous places around the world have fallen into the trap of thinking that a successful choral institution should be founded on outside components including trained singers, generous donors, state-of-the-arts facilities, etc; no doubt any ensemble can benefit with such components in place. Unfortunately, some choral leaders tend to have feelings of envy and jealousy for other colleagues'

successes. I truly believe that, despite the makeup of a choir, its infrastructure, and its support network, the success of any choir totally reflects the guidance, essence, skill, and degree of commitment of its choral leader. Always remember how significant our role and impact as a choral leader is for our choral organization and the communities in which we work and live.