

Let's Talk Method

The Rehearsal

Cristian Grases

composer and conductor

"While choral singing reaches the audience or congregation in the public performance, it is, in reality, in the regular rehearsal that the choral experience finds its true identity; put more simply, the location of the choral experience is the rehearsal." [1]

This quote from Ray Robinson and Allen Winold's book *The Choral Experience* helps us understand that the rehearsal is much more than a time in which notes are learned, technical issues are resolved, and performances are polished. It is an occasion in which the conductor and singers rehearse a work with the purpose of moving a little closer to the true intentions of the composer. In other words, as Robinson and Winold put it: "...there are no rehearsals as we know them, only performances of the work 'in progress'." [2] Thus, the rehearsal becomes the goal (as well as the means), and the singers become the audience.



*Guangzhou Children's Palace
Choir at the International
Choir Contest Tolosa 2011,
Spain*

As conductors, we are constantly trying to make our rehearsal time as efficient as possible so that we can achieve our desired musical product in the best and fastest possible way. A conductor will run an effective rehearsal if certain principles are understood. I have grouped these into four general categories: Organization, Verbal Communication, Musical, and Personal.

Organization

- Organize your rehearsal ahead of time. Arriving at a rehearsal without a clear plan of what you want to achieve is unacceptable. A detailed plan will prove to be very helpful and it should contain the list of works you want to work on, in the order you want to rehearse them, and with the time you anticipate you need for each selection. It should also contain information on the section of the score you want to address, and what you want to achieve during rehearsal. This could include elements as varied as reading the notes, creating the right articulation, working on the proper diction, checking intonation, phrasing, expression, or even just running through it if the concert is fast approaching. There are many ways to organize a rehearsal, and it will

prove beneficial not always to plan in the same way. This will avoid boredom and will allow a constant renewal of the ensemble's energy. Here are some ideas you can use to prepare your rehearsal plan. You can use any one of them individually, or combine as many as you see fit depending on your goals for the day.

- Use Contrasts. Which implies alternating up-beat and slow songs, legato and articulated songs, difficult and easy pieces, etc., in order to maximize the attention and focus in the ensemble, optimizing the musical progress.
- Use the Golden Ratio ($\phi = 1.618$). As the rehearsal progresses, the focus and attention will inevitably fade. Some studies suggest that peak performance is reached close to the golden ratio (which in terms of percentage translates to 61.8%). This means that the ensemble will be most focused after 61.8% of the rehearsal has passed (simply divide the number of minutes in the rehearsal by 1.618). This would be the ideal moment to programme the rehearsal goal that requires maximum attention.
- Use the Fibonacci Series (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, etc.) This series described by Leonardo of Pisa (also known as Fibonacci) is related to the Golden Ratio, and is found in many patterns in nature (from the number of petals in flowers, to the design of the spiral in the Nautilus shell). It can also be used as a means to organize time. Applying it to our rehearsals, we could begin our work with a warm-up session that is no longer than 7 minutes (which is the result of adding the first five numbers of the series: $0+1+1+2+3=7$). We can then work on a piece for five minutes (the next number in the series), and so on. When approaching higher numbers (like the 10th number in the series, which is 34), we could divide the time block to rehearse more than one work (i.e. one for 15 minutes and the other for 19 minutes). All this, of

course, in close connection to our particular goals of the day.

- Do not use the same pattern in rehearsal or warm-up. Include new and creative ideas so the choir does not fall into a mechanical way of working.
- Sectionals: Consider splitting the group in sectionals so that parts can be learned faster.
- Pacing. In the choral rehearsal, pacing is the ability to advance at a particular rate. Here are some ideas that relate to pacing:
- Keep the rehearsal moving. Do not allow the energy of the rehearsal to become stagnate. Be willing to modify your original plan based on the result you are getting from the choir that day. If you find that the ensemble is having difficulties in one passage, do not become stubbornly focused on it. Move to something different.
- Use breaks when needed. Take into consideration that a break can certainly renew the focus in the ensemble, but after it the choir will need a period of time to become fully focused again.
- Consider recording your rehearsal (video or audio or both) so you can observe yourself working.
- Make the end of the rehearsal meaningful. You can achieve this by planning to finish with a catchy up-tempo tune or a work that the ensemble can sing successfully. This will make your choir feel empowered, in good spirits, and eager to return to the next rehearsal. This is, by all means, the preferred ending to a rehearsal period. However, do not be scared to end occasionally with a tense reminder of the work they have failed to do, which could translate into a very productive period between rehearsals.
- Consider re-seating your ensemble or just some singers.
- Evaluate your rehearsal at the end.

Verbal Communication

- Talk little, sing a lot. The rule I was taught was 'say it in five words or fewer'.
- Give clear indications
- Talk slowly, loudly, and clearly.
- Indicate where you want to begin rehearsing in an organized way: from big to small (page number, system, measure, beat)
- Do not give instructions to an inattentive group.

Musical

- Listen. Do not just execute your plan based entirely on your expectations. Actually listen to what and how the ensemble is singing.
- Repeat with purpose. Announce what the problem is and offer a solution.
- Do not always start at the beginning of the piece.
- Ask your ensemble to use a pencil and mark the scores.
- Be brave in isolating difficult sections and allocating more rehearsal time to them.
- Correct mistakes as soon as possible. Nonetheless, let the choir sing, especially when singing a piece for the first time that day. Do not stop the all the time. This is a difficult balance to achieve.
- Rehearse slowly when needed. If it does not work at a slow tempo, it will also be inaccurate at a fast one.
- At times when there are harmonic difficulties and challenging chords, ask the singers to hold the chord so they can perceive the internal relationships amongst the notes. You can also build the chords one note at a time.
- Rhythm and text can be isolated to work on diction issues (including onsets and releases).
- Chanting the words (in unison or on a fixed chord) allows singers to focus on the text while using their

singing voice.

- Be careful with extreme tessitura. Consider rehearsing sections that are too high or too low at a more comfortable octave.
- From macro to micro. Do not get obsessed with small details if the overall structure is still not in place.
- Consider occasionally rehearsing loud passages soft to check intonation and rhythmic precision.
- Do not use the piano all the time. Remember that the piano is a tempered instrument but the voice is not.
- Keep all sections engaged as much as possible. If you have to check a passage for one section, ask the singers to sing it at their own octave, or ask them to hum their part.
- Do not be afraid to ask one section to support another, i.e. if the tenors have a very high passage and the altos are not singing, consider asking some altos to sing with the tenors.
- Use articulated notes to check for pitch accuracy.
- Build vocal technique at all times, not only during warm-ups, but also during the entire rehearsal.
- Combine sections to help solve a problem. Do not always isolate one section, you can ask combinations of two or three sections to sing together so there is a harmonic or rhythmic reference or both.

Personal

- Lead by example. Do not ask something from your singers that you would not do yourself.
- Be personable and accessible to your singers.
- Be vulnerable. When you open yourself for your singers, they will do the same for you.
- The result is a very special and intimate connection that will make the rendition of the music uniquely special.

- Be socially conscientious and nourish your sensibility.
- Use good humour as much as possible (occasionally even if you are disciplining the ensemble).

These are some of the ideas I use on a regular basis during my rehearsals. Almost all of them have been 'borrowed' from other conductors, as well as many from my teachers Alberto Grau, María Guinand, and Jo-Michael Scheibe, or books on the subject. The art of effective rehearsing is a difficult one. Inevitably there will be good rehearsals and others that will not be as successful, for we work with a living ensemble that exists in ever-changing circumstances. Nevertheless, applying some of these concepts might increase your ability to lead successful rehearsals. So always keep in mind that some of the most profound moments of music-making are frequently achieved during these 'performances' of the works 'in progress.'

[1] Waveland Press, Illinois, 1992, p. 154

[2] *Ibid*, p. 155