

Choral Conducting Master Class

WELS Worship Conference – 2014

OBJECTIVE

Provide at least one idea that will help to improve choral sound and choral performance.

INITIAL COMMENTS

1. Choirs need a sense of progress. Conductors set the pace and the path for progress.
 - a. Consider using a **“grading scale.”** Where are we performing in October? December?
 - b. The goal of every rehearsal is to move the ensemble forward toward a consistently better sound.

2. Methods to promote progress.
 - a. **Have a philosophy of conducting.** What is your goal as a musician? educator? leader? What do you want your ensemble to be? How do you want it to sound? Is developing musicianship in singers part of your goal?
 - a. **Create new choral habits. Set longer term goals to save rehearsal time.** E.g. By December the ensemble will always approach the “ee” vowel the way I want to hear it. Or, by October words that end with “i” will always be pronounced “luh.”(It is easy to get caught up in the press of rehearsal time. The result is no long term progress and *no saving of rehearsal time by pursuing some long term goals.*)
 - b. From the podium – insist that there is progress on long term goals. E.g. vowel production, shaping of notes, shaping of lines, careful production of consonants, listening, etc. **Insist on compliance – singers will eventually get tired of hearing you and will comply!**
 - c. Score study, score study, score study. **“Hear” the finished work before the first rehearsal. Identify long term goals that apply to the work at hand and develop a plan to implement them.**
 - d. Work at **listening** to the ensemble from the perspective of long term goals.
 - e. **Honest feedback** is critical. If the ensemble achieves a new consistent level of performance, tell them and everyone in the room will be smiling. More difficult, is avoiding the artificial compliment.
 - f. Involve the ensemble in evaluation of the sound. E.g. What did **you hear** in the room when we sang the text “Still, my soul?” Or, how did **we sound** on Sunday?
 - g. Ask the ensemble to anticipate the sound of a new piece. E.g. Before a first reading, have singers mark their music. E.g. Ask them to circle a particular vowel every time it occurs, look at horizontal line and indicate shaping, mark a repeated rhythm, identify long notes that need shape. Don’t tell them the specific things to mark – let them make their own decisions. You can add to or change what they mark later. **Let them think and work as musicians.**

g. ***“Seat” the choir.*** The results of just doing this can have dramatic impact of the overall sound and tuning of the ensemble. ***Seat the individual sections. Experiment with the overall arrangement of the sections.***

h. Consider a set of choir ***“rules.”*** - see example on a separate sheet.

i. ***Design warm-ups*** that support the long term goals and apply to the immediate work at hand.

THE WORK TODAY

1. Work on two contrasting anthems with different requirements for conducting and vocal approach in a master class format.

2. Demonstrate and use techniques to achieve progress in choral sound.

3. Some topics we may encounter in the work today:

a. The Weston Noble/Robert Shaw seating system.

b. Warmups related to long term goals, related to the immediate music, related to the work of the conductor.

c. Tuning. The primary factors are vowel unification, breath support, attention, and seating.

d. Vowel unification is necessary to achieve an improved sound and to secure tuning.

e. Consonants need attention for their beauty and clarity in the choral fabric (we tend to think of them mainly as sounds that affect pronunciation.)

f. Rule #1 TRANSFER.

g. Conducting gestures and their relationship to the sound of the ensemble. E.g. Prep beat and breath; ictus; pattern or line or both.

FOLLOW-UP –ASSISTANCE FOR INDIVIDUAL ENSEMBLES

I have worked with a few individual choirs in their own rehearsals to work at overall sound and the specific issues they may have. If anyone is interested in this type of hands-on workshop with your choir, contact me or stop by after this session.

Kermit Moldenhauer
41524 593rd Ave
New Ulm, MN 56073
moldenk@gmail.com
507-351-7857

CHOIR RULES

1. TRANSFER!!!!
2. The tempo is steady.
3. Notes longer than the basic rhythmic unit are shaped. (Especially if they approach or cross the bar line.)
4. The first vowel of a diphthong is the primary vowel.
5. “r” is flipped or silent.
6. Short “i” needs some “ee.”
7. Consonants need time.

Note: This is too long of a list for a rehearsal. Use 1, 2, or 3 “rules” to start, then add additional “rules” after the initial rules become habits.