



## Making the Most of Every Minute

### Challenge 5: Limited rehearsal time

By Katherine Tiefel

Carrie has been looking forward to leading Thursday night's rehearsal. The challenging new Thanksgiving anthem she ordered arrived last week and she's eager to show it to her choir. Traffic was bad, so she pulls into the church parking lot at 6:55 for a 7:00 rehearsal. If she hurries, she can make it up to the balcony by 7:01. First, she has to swing past the office to run twenty copies of Psalm 100. No problem, though. By the time she gets upstairs, only six of her twenty singers have arrived. It's 7:05. She waits a few more minutes for folks to trickle in and starts warm-ups at 7:09. Tom arrives ten minutes late and shuffles into place just as everyone is turning to the Psalm. He doesn't have the music he needs, so Carrie stops to look for a copy. By now, Amber has struck up a lively conversation with two other altos about her cousin coming into town. Carrie finally gets the women back on the same page as the men, but she doesn't notice that it's already 7:45. Next comes a quick run-through of the hymn for this coming Sunday. It sounds good, except for a few sour notes. As Carrie wheels around to reach for the stack of bright new octavos, the church's carillon rings 8:00 and everyone starts grabbing their coats.

And so, at the end of the rehearsal, the piece that she had hoped to introduce didn't even get passed out. We have all had rehearsals like Carrie's. What was the problem? She, like all church choir directors, has limited rehearsal time. One hour of rehearsal each week never seems like enough. Since directors don't have the luxury of time, they need to work harder and smarter. Directors must employ thorough planning, creative teaching, and better organization to make the most of every rehearsal minute.

#### Score Study

If we are honest, we must admit that our rehearsal plan often looks like Carrie's: show up, run through the music, and stop along the way to correct the mistakes we hear. But our teaching should be more than flaw-finding and note-pounding. When we rehearse, we should always be working toward a goal. One of the

*This issue is especially valuable  
for church choir directors.  
Please share it.*

greatest conductors of our time, Robert Shaw, once said, "Purity of purpose dignifies." What did he mean? Our rehearsals are most effective when we are focused on a clear musical vision. How do we identify that vision? In the same way your pastor finds the point of his sermon: through study. If he must spend time studying his text, then we must spend time studying our scores.

Score study should answer the question, "What would the ultimate performance of this piece sound like?" Imagine every detail of the final sound, from correct pitches, to dynamics, to the beauty of the choir's tone. Start by identifying the basic building blocks: the pitches and rhythms. Where are the challenging intervals and complex rhythms? Sing every vocal line to find out. If you struggle to sing the alto part accurately, your choir will too. How do the soprano and bass parts relate to one another? Sing one as you play the other on the piano. Mark all of your observations in your score. As you study, you will be able to predict where the choir's challenges and opportunities lie.

An excellent performance is more than just correct pitches, so consider musical elements as well. Where are the dynamic markings and do you want to add any? Where will the choir breathe and where is the peak of each phrase? Sing and speak the text out loud to make these decisions. Finally, look for opportunities to teach beautiful sound and build musical skills. Are there opportunities to work toward beautiful high notes, clean intonation, or unified vowels? (The next issue will discuss elements of beautiful

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sound and how to teach it.) Score study is a many-layered process. The more time you spend in study, the more sophisticated your musical vision will become and the more depth your teaching will have.

### Rehearsal Planning

After casting a vision and setting goals for each piece, the director needs a plan for teaching those goals efficiently. When rehearsal time is limited, the choir's success depends upon careful lesson planning. Just as a family writes a budget to plan how every dollar will be spent, the director must write a plan for how every rehearsal minute will be spent.

Your rehearsal may follow the same general structure each week:

1. Prayer/welcome (2-5 minutes)
2. Warm-ups (5-10 minutes)
3. Repertoire work (40-50 minutes)
4. Announcements/devotion (2-5 minutes)

Start by planning the repertoire. "Which two to four pieces must I rehearse *this week*?" "Is there a challenging piece for next month that I need to introduce?" Put the pieces in a rehearsal order. Start with something easy or familiar, move on to something difficult or new, and end with something upbeat and fun. Now, keep narrowing your focus: "What part of each piece do I want to teach tonight?" Select a few pages and recall the musical goals from your score study. Perhaps you choose to focus on the refrain of a new Psalm with the goal of teaching pitches and working on a challenging cut-off. Or perhaps you plan to work on the first stanza of an anthem, emphasizing the need for clear diction. How long do you think it will take to meet these goals? Set a time frame for each piece, to the minute, and do your best to stick to it.

Complete your rehearsal plan by selecting 5-10 minutes of warm-up exercises. Think of them as a group voice lesson. Use these exercises to teach beautiful singing and to introduce some concepts from your repertoire. Finally, round out your lesson plan by gathering resources for a devotion or prayer and by jotting down any business items or announcements to be handled.

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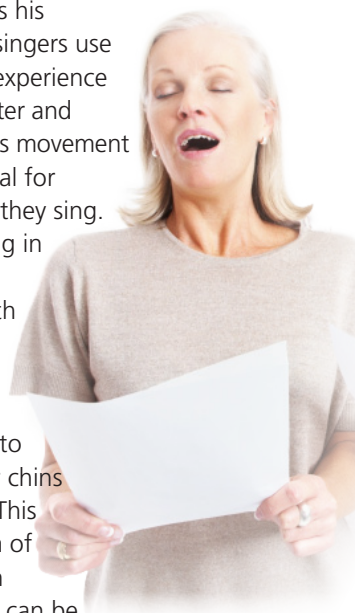
### Teaching methods

Now you have a streamlined plan for what you will teach each minute of your rehearsal. How will you teach it? The Swedish proverb says, "Talk less, say more." Your teaching will be more effective and efficient when you use non-verbal teaching strategies. Instead of saying it, *sing it, show it, or feel it.*

1. **Sing it:** Your own singing voice is the most powerful teaching tool at your disposal. Good modeling is packed with musical information: tone color, vowels, dynamics, articulation, pronunciation, intonation, and more. Rather than explaining that you "want a crescendo in measure three," sing the crescendo and have your singers echo what they hear. Give a few words to focus their listening, "Listen to this crescendo," then sing, and immediately invite them to echo. The choir will likely replicate only half of the musical idea you demonstrate, so your modeling will have to be intentionally exaggerated to get the results you want. If you are insecure about your singing voice, rely on a strong singer in the choir to model for you, or play your musical ideas on the piano. Nevertheless, do not give up on your own voice. Consider taking voice lessons to strengthen your voice and build your confidence.

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2. **Show it:** Your conducting gesture is another powerful teaching tool. Gesture is extremely efficient because it communicates a great deal of information in real time, as the choir sings. Even those who have little experience with conducting can use simple hand gestures to communicate musical ideas. If you want the choir to sing *legato*, gently move your hand back and forth through the air as they sing. If you want to elicit a strong *marcato* sound, pound your fist into your hand or stomp in place as they sing. Creativity can abound as you consider ways to use your hands and body to communicate musical ideas.
3. **Feel it:** A singer's body is his instrument. When your singers use a kinesthetic motion to experience the music, they learn faster and retain more. Since there is movement in all music, it is unnatural for singers to remain still as they sing. If you are teaching a song in triple meter, invite the choir sway back and forth to feel the emphasis on the downbeat. Or, if you are working for a taller "ah" vowel, ask singers to put their fingers on their chins as they drop their jaws. This motion will remind them of what it feels like to open their mouth to sing, and can be easily transferred to warm-ups or new repertoire.



We trick ourselves into thinking that our singers need our lengthy instructions in order to improve. In reality, our talking gets in the way of music-making. Choirs learn the most when they are singing. Challenge yourself to use non-verbal teaching methods more often and to give directions using seven words or less. You will be amazed at how much more you accomplish when your directions are concise and your strategies are clear. See the online resources listed on the back page for more information on non-verbal teaching techniques.

While creative rehearsal techniques are important, the fact remains that we often need to do the dirty work of fixing incorrect pitches and rhythms. We have all led rehearsals where we spent 20 minutes pounding out notes for the tenors and basses while the women sat idle. How can we improve on this? As we teach notes, we must involve as many singers as possible as often as possible. One idea is to invite all the singers to sing along with those who struggle. When altos sing bass and basses sing alto, everyone's sight-reading abilities are strengthened. Or, invite the singers to *think* their parts silently to themselves or softly tap the beat while another section works. You might ask the women to give feedback on the vowels they heard as the men practiced a phrase, and vice versa. Of course, when starting from scratch and teaching everyone their notes, it is most efficient to break the choir into sectionals and teach in small groups before bringing everyone together.

When more people are actively involved in the learning, you may also avoid the chatter of idle singers. Choral singing must be a community effort, but the choral rehearsal should not become a social gathering. When your choir sings a passage and you cut them off, what happens next? The singers start talking—sometimes about the music and sometimes about the new grandchild. When the choir stops singing, have something to say immediately. Hesitating as you give directions creates “dead air” that wastes time and tempts singers to socialize. Singers will also be tempted to talk when they transition from one piece to another. Post your rehearsal plan on an easel before rehearsal starts. Singers can arrange their pieces in order as they arrive, eliminating paper shuffling and talking. Advise your singers: when in choir, please make friends, but when in rehearsal, please make music.

*The director must write a plan for how every rehearsal minute will be spent.*

Let's say you write a lesson plan and follow it to the minute. No one sits idle as you teach the four-part refrain of a new piece and you model with your singing voice to help the sopranos improve their high notes. The basses even fixed all their note problems on page six of the anthem. Congratulations! You've had a great rehearsal! So, when everyone shows up the following week, what happens? The sopranos sound shrill, the altos forget their part in the new piece, and the basses mess up their notes on page six . . . again. “Didn't they remember anything I taught them?” Since we only see our singers once a week, we must help them retain what

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## Self-evaluation

To improve our rehearsals, we must first be willing to evaluate our current habits, strengths, and weaknesses. Start by reflecting on the following:

As a choral director . . .

**You are a musician:** How much musical training do you have? Some may have college music degrees, while others may have only sung in choirs or played organ. Invest in continuing education, read books, attend excellent concerts, or schedule a coaching session with a musical friend or colleague.

**You are a singer:** How confident are you with your own singing voice? Perhaps you are proficient on a different instrument but have never studied singing. Take voice lessons! It is never too late to start, and what you learn will help you and your choir sound better.

**You are a teacher:** Do you know what you want the choir to sound like but aren't sure how to teach them to do it? Attend workshops and subscribe to music education journals. Most importantly, sing in excellent choirs and sit in on the rehearsals of directors you respect.

**You are an individual:** Are you naturally funny or serious? Intense or laid-back? Personality traits are intensified when we're on the podium and can work for or against us. Ask a trusted choir member for honest feedback on your mannerisms and work to change them, if necessary.

After you look at yourself, look at your rehearsals. Record a rehearsal and watch it, or ask a trusted colleague to sit in and give you feedback. Reflect on the following:

- Did rehearsal start on time? End on time?
- How many minutes did I talk?
- How many minutes did the choir sing?
- Did the choir's sound improve during warm-ups?
- Was anyone idle for an extended period?
- How efficient were transitions (after warm-ups, between pieces)?
- Did chatter interrupt learning?
- How many non-verbal teaching methods did I use?
- Did I teach musical concepts and beautiful sound, or just notes and rhythms?
- Was my rehearsal pace rushed? Too slow?
- Was my teaching manner kind, patient, and encouraging?

Celebrate your rehearsal successes and make a plan to build up your weaknesses.

they learn. Follow this pattern: 1) sing a section of music, 2) stop and correct something within that section, and 3) sing the entire section again. This enables the singers to repeat what they learned within a larger context. Repetition increases retention. Additionally, encourage your singers to write rehearsal notes in their music. Everything from vowel sounds to breath markings should appear in every singer's score. These notes will jog their memories from week to week and you can move on to new material faster.

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### Organization

Thus far, we have considered new ways to make the most of our limited rehearsal time through study, planning, and teaching. The last area to consider is organization. Rehearsal time is often wasted handling logistics such as distributing or collecting music. Just last week, I started rehearsing a piece and was interrupted by a singer who had been absent the previous week and needed a copy of the music. Several minutes were wasted as I walked to the file cabinet, got him a copy, and struggled to regain the group's attention. A director can eliminate these intrusions by establishing routines for all non-musical business.

Begin rehearsal the same way each week so that your singers know exactly what to do when they arrive. Always start on time,

even with three singers present, and always end on time, even before Easter. Every director should also make a plan for handling the printed music. How will you hand it out? How will you collect it? What will you do about singers who arrive late or are absent? What if your recruitment program works and a new singer shows up unexpectedly? Put systems in place for all of these situations. Some choirs appoint volunteer librarians who work behind the scenes to manage this business. You know about the various interruptions that are specific to your setting and your singers. Are there chairs to be set up? A coffee pot to turn on? Are pencils readily accessible? Organize solutions in advance, and you will gain more minutes for music-making.

So, will Carrie's choir be ready for the Hallelujah Chorus this Easter? Absolutely! Not because she had more minutes, but because she made the most of them. She studied her score and broke it into specific goals. She addressed those goals in rehearsals that were planned down to the minute. She talked less and used her singing voice and hand gestures to teach more. Everyone knew where to pick up and drop off music, because Dave was helping out as the choir librarian. And Amber found the time to catch up with friends while setting up the coffee pot each week. Rather than lamenting our limited rehearsal time, let us take steps to improve our planning, teaching, and organization, and make the most of every minute.



### Online resources

More information on lesson planning and non-verbal teaching techniques is available at <https://connect.wels.net/AOM/ps/worship> under Worship Conferences. Look for "Wolfe-Great Sound" from 2008 under both Presentations and Video and "Tiefel . . ." from 2011.