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PRAGMATIC CHORAL PROCEDURES

Russell A. Hammar

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by
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This book is affectionately dedicated
to my wife, Mickey, and to
all of my singing companions
who have taught me more
than I can ever acknowledge.

● ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could not have been written without the encouragement from the choristers with whom I have worked during the past forty-five years in the field of choral endeavor. Their patient support--even indulgence at times--has helped me to recognize the conditions under which the choral singer functions. My wish is that the ideas expressed in this manuscript will assist other conductors as they labor in the field to become more efficient and, most of all, understanding of the needs of the singers in their ensembles.

I want to acknowledge the loving support of my wife, who not only has sung in my choirs, but has patiently encouraged me to finish this project. Her valuable insights and challenges often have led to clearer statements and a more rational discussion of topics.

Finally, I wish to thank Eleanor Vander Linde, who typed and aided significantly in editing the manuscript.

● PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to examine the pertinent practical elements and experiences which I have found to be useful and necessary in working successfully with singers. My work in the field of music spans more than forty years with amateur and professional choral groups. I have also taught studio voice for more than thirty years. My approach to choral tone combines an understanding of the needs and demands that the vocalist experiences, whether it be as a choral singer only, or also as a soloist.

Many excellent books have been written about conducting gestures, i. e., the physical patterns and mannerisms relating to this art. Therefore, I find little need to stress these points of reference, except to provide illustrations for discussion of technical and interpretative conducting gestures. This book was prepared to be of practical use to both beginning choral directors and established conductors. Chapters ten and eleven are written mainly for church choir directors and clergymen; however, these two chapters also contain material which is pertinent for all choral conductors.

The material in this book deals with historical facts, tried and proven music education principles, practical advice about rehearsal problems, some ideas about the all-important interpretative aspects of choral music, and the problems facing choral music education.

It appears to me that not enough thought is given to the psychological concerns of singers, who must function in the group dynamic. I do not profess to be a psychologist; yet, during my four decades of experience in this field, dealing with almost every kind of choral group, I find that we conductors often exhibit a lack of awareness of the subtle personal needs of our singers. I have made my share of mistakes in dealing with my "charges." The school of hard knocks has brought to my attention many problems--and some solutions to them--which I want to share with my readers.

Some of these ideas may help others avoid a bit of the trauma I have experienced. Thus, chapters two and three will address some of the basic principles of learning which affect the overall morale and performance of ensemble singers. Usually, these persons are not soloists and, consequently, they are motivated to seek artistic expression within the security of the group dynamic so as to fulfill this musical desire. It is the conductor's responsibility, therefore, to help them find satisfaction of that need through thoughtful leadership and understanding.

The reader will find some statements repeated throughout the chapters of this book. These basic concepts are purposely reiterated in various contexts in order to emphasize their importance to the conductor. It is analogous to a wheel with spokes; the spokes converging at the center to give support to the entire wheel. On the other hand, I have made a special effort to include only the most practical matters which should concern the choral conductor. Many details omitted are to be left to the instincts and inclinations of the readers, who must develop and/or solidify their own techniques in keeping with their individual proclivities.

I wish to thank the persons, too numerous to list, for their contributions to my thinking and experience during the years in which I have worked in this rewarding--and, at times, frustrating--activity. There are "lows" along with the "highs" for the conductor. It is also hoped that the experienced choral directors who read this book will find some new insights into their work; or if they differ at times with what I have to say, their own ideas may be strengthened. It is my desire, in the final analysis, that my ideas will stimulate all readers (tyros and veterans alike) to become more effective leaders in their chosen field.

Russell A. Hammar
April 15, 1983

● INTRODUCTION

The responsibility which an individual assumes for the performance of a choral or instrumental ensemble is an awesome one. It is rare, and likely impossible, to find a conductor who can be all things to all people. There will always be critics. In no way can one expect to find agreement at all times within a group of musicians. Yet, the person who leads others must attract a significant number of followers in order to be successful. Even if the ensemble members cannot agree with all of the director's decisions, mutual respect must exist. Thus, a further and most important ingredient of the leader's personality is to be alert and willing to learn from mistakes. Committing the same errors repeatedly in music, or in dealing with others, breeds lack of respect on the part of the group for the person in charge. Again, to be respected as a director, one must exhibit respect in all ways for the singers and instrumentalists.

In the final analysis, the effective conductor of any musical ensemble must be able to mold it into a unit which successfully translates the abstract score into meaningful sound. The listeners, as well as the participants, should be able to grasp some of the intrinsic qualities lying dormant in the musical language called notation.

Lazare Saminsky's profile of an orchestral conductor certainly applies to the choral director as well. He states that a conductor is a peculiar complex of artists. He is all in one:

- a psychophysical metronome;
- a pedagogue amalgamated with virtuoso handling [of] a gigantic instrument;
- a mime, but one whose gesture is for the orchestra only.*

*Lazare Saminsky, Essentials of Conducting (London: Dennis Dobson, 1958), p. 61.

Whatever the personal reasons that lead individuals into the music leadership field, the responsibility reaches far beyond the glamour of the public performance. Yet, there are many inherent rewards to be experienced, such as these:

Personal satisfaction achieved from a successful performance;

The buoyant feeling resulting from a rehearsal in which much progress has been made;

The satisfaction of working together toward an experience which is more significant than any one individual in the group can achieve alone (including the conductor);

The satisfaction gained from non-verbal communication between leader and singers.

The latter item is one of the most significant points to be made in this treatise--that of achieving the level of communication whereby the ensemble and the director are working together. The singers should never feel that they are working for the conductor; rather, that they are working with the conductor to reach the highest level of achievement of which the group is capable. The director must "roll up his or her sleeves" and work as an integral part of the unit --neither above, nor as a separate part of it. As cited above, the group must admire and respect the personal and professional qualities of its leader. There must exist a mutual respect between the director and the singers.

The conducting (leading) of ensembles has come a long way since the early efforts of group endeavors, when the leader waved his hand, or beat time with a large stick, or tapped his foot while sitting at the harpsichord in an effort to keep the performers together.

At the writing of this book the entire world is in a state of great upheaval and uncertainty about values and commitments--as well as economic survival. Young people, preparing to enter the professional world, rightly have a great sense of apprehension. Those desiring to enter the teaching profession are told by demographers that the pool of students in the 1980's will greatly diminish as a result of the zero or possible minus population growth in the Western world. This

condition underscores the need for courageous, dedicated musician-teachers (including church choral directors) to develop into superb and sensitive musicians who will also be able to work effectively with both their charges and their employers--school principals, music committees and the public at large. In the next decade or two there will emerge a great opportunity for choral directors to capitalize upon the opportunity to organize community choruses since there may well be a great lack of artistic activity in the schools owing to the financial crunch which is already occurring.

It is also of prime importance that these future conductor-teachers attain a broad, liberal education, so as to cope with our radically changing society. Superb technicians who can function brilliantly only in a narrow and limited area of activity surely will be frustrated by problems that cannot be anticipated during their years of preparation. Therefore, the successful choral director must be able to understand and handle a wide variety of issues relating to our society in addition to possessing a comprehensive understanding of musical styles. He or she must be capable of working with persons whose attitudes are very diverse and be sensitive to their needs and desires. The "revolutionary" attitudes of students, who face such an unstable world in both economic and social terms, will constantly present unpredictable challenges to their leaders. The students' tastes in music will reflect the nature of the society in which they have been reared. Their motivation to sing--or lack of it--and their backgrounds (including poor musical training because of budget cuts in schools) will sharply reinforce this unstable feeling of what the future holds for them. Adolescents are increasingly rebellious of authority, constantly questioning the ability and decisions of their elders. This is not all bad in the final analysis, because young people need to have the freedom to develop into independent, creative persons. Moreover, students are becoming more and more discerning and vocal about the kind of education they are receiving and the uses of their own time to pursue the ends they desire.

Thus, the personally tactful and well-qualified teacher-musician will be the individual who will be able to cope with the situation described above. He or she must be dynamic in all phases of work with young people as they attempt to adjust to the life-style of the future.

Specifically, it is more important than ever before that choral conductors attain a comprehensive knowledge of their

field including how to teach "class voice" to the members of their ensembles, whether it be the public or private grade school or high school, college-university or community choral organizations. Certainly, church musicians will continue to be confronted with similar problems, even more than they have experienced in the past. They will need to be able to teach elements of music as well as to prepare choirs for church services.

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