

From the Bench



Facilitating
Collaborative
Support from the
Choral Accompanist
Kayla Liechty Paulk

Kayla Liechty Paulk, a graduate of Stetson University and The Florida State University, is in her seventh year as Vocal Coach/Collaborative Pianist at Eastern New Mexico University. Her collaborative experiences include residencies with Marilyn Horne and Sherrill Milnes, numerous professional recordings, and extensive choral accompanying for ACDA conference choirs, the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, numerous Carnegie Hall performances, and all-state and festival choirs both domestically and internationally <kayla.paulk@enmu.edu>.

Introduction

The group process of choral singing is comprised of several key players: the conductor, accompanist, choristers, endless permutations of collaborating musicians, and organizational supporters. Each individual serves a unique and vital role within the organization. Unlike athletes, choral participants are never relegated to the proverbial bench, a place reserved for players on the roster who are not on the game day line-up or are considered substitutes. Rather, as an instrument comprised of many people, each person serves an important and irreplaceable role within the team.

A bench is present, however, in every choral rehearsal, and it is warmed by an individual who has the potential to serve as the conductor's partner in training the voices, ears and musical sensibilities of the choristers. Redefining the term bench warmer, the well-trained and experienced choral accompanist eliminates the ineffective model of accompanist as note-pounder and elevates the accompanist as collaborating musician and co-trainer. As choral musicians know, an excellent choral accompanist can serve as "the conductor's partner in bringing the choir to performance-level singing. An experienced accompanist with a great ear and good musical instincts is a valuable asset."¹ With thoughtful guidance from the conductor, **collaborative pianists** can use their myriad foundational skills to significantly enhance the creative learning process in the choral rehearsal.

From the Bench

The Collaborative Accompanist

Although pianists may be active in a variety of roles, including vocal and operatic coaching, solo vocal and instrumental accompanying, operatic and musical theatre auditions, summer opera workshops, and church music, many accompanists invest a great deal of time and passion in their role as **choral accompanists**. For a collaborative pianist, the choral rehearsal process is a setting that fosters all aspects of foundational collaborative piano skills. Joyce Grill's *Accompanying Basics* identifies some necessary skills for a choral accompanist:

- using developed aural skills to identify choral parts that need assistance and judiciously providing that support;
- following and enhancing agogic stresses, inflection, and oratorical phrase shape;
- knowing a score sufficiently to follow the conductor;
- implementing stylistic phrasing and note teaching;
- anticipating the choral conductor's rehearsal strategies²

With thoughtful preparation and attentive rehearsal behaviors, the choral accompanist can enhance the rehearsal process far beyond the accurate and musical playing of accompaniments and parts. The accompanist can be a collaborative educator whose playing exhibits stylistically appropriate articulation, phrasing, rhythm, and pitches through technically fluent and historically informed playing, guiding singers to a "choral tone production focused on historically guided vocalism."³ Also serving as thermometer and thermostat in tandem with the conductor, accompanists constantly "take the musical temperature" in the room and respond to it by **helping regulate the environment**. This symbiotic process positively affects a climate change in the rehearsal as a result of our attitude, responsiveness to the conductor, and focus on the music and rehearsal process.



Collaborative Discussions and Observations

As a collaborative facilitator, the effective choral accompanist will seek understanding of the conductor's goals and philosophies through discussions about warm-ups, rehearsal style, and repertoire. In the non-verbal realm, the conducting gesture communicates to the accompanist precisely how the conductor wishes to shape each musical phrase. This marriage of verbal and non-verbal communication between conductor

and accompanist creates a unified musical vision for each piece, enabling the collaborative pianist to support the pedagogical goals of the conductor through skilled, attentive, and judicious playing in rehearsal and performance.

Choral conductors, when working with a technically facile pianist who is also an exemplary musician, are able to elicit far more assistance in the rehearsal and performance process from their collaborative pianist than they may realize. Left to their own devices

and not mentored by conductors to employ their full collaborative abilities, accompanists may not perform to their potential to assist in the choral learning process.

Additionally, dare one say it? Your pianist may even become unengaged or bored in rehearsal! This circumstance is certainly not desirable, since choral accompanists are usually positioned front and center in rehearsal, often as visible as the conductor. The pianist is either knowingly or unknowingly affecting the "temperature," and an engaged and effective pianist can be one of the most valuable assets in rehearsal.

Planning for Successful Collaboration

Following are five ideas for engaging your accompanist more fully in rehearsal.

Thoughtful Warm-ups

An outstanding choral conductor recognizes the value of a thoughtful warm-up experience that prepares singers for optimal body, breath, and cognitive processes preceding the rehearsal of the repertoire. A thoughtful warm-up requires vocalises far more substantive than the interminable rote ascending and descending five-tone scale. According to Wilhelm Ehmann and Frauke Haasemann, such a routine "may not harm the choir, but it probably does not help it either."¹⁴ It can be assumed the conductor spends time developing the most effective warm-ups for each day's rehearsal, based upon the textual and musical demands of the repertoire to be rehearsed, and the needs of the singers at their given stage of vocal and musical development. Does the conductor communicate these warm-ups, and their nature and purpose, in advance to the rehearsal pianist? If a conductor creatively designs an effective warm-up, it would be beneficial to share them *a priori* with the pianist, so they can emphasize not only the educative concepts (breath, articulation, textual expression, etc.), but also reinforce the correct pitches and rhythms of each exercise.

All too often while accompanying choral rehearsals, accompanists observe a



conductor introducing a new, complex, and pedagogically perfect warm-up example to the choristers. Seated at the bench, first-rate accompanists are eager to "give it their best." Having established tonality at the piano, the choir sings the example through once and, as they sing and the pianist accompanies, it becomes readily apparent to accompanists, midstream through the warm-ups, that, although they clearly understand the rhythm and pitch of a warm-up, they have no idea the rhythmic duration the conductor might intend (or, at times, has not yet considered) for the choral breath during transpositions to a new key.

When choral accompanists must make a choice, should they make a quick judgment based upon their good musicianship skills? Sometimes they "luck out," choosing an option the conductor either likes or has considered in advance. Other times, accompanists get it wrong. When accompanists are inadvertently wrong, the conductor immediately realizes the need for instruction, and becomes clearer and more communicative after beginning in the new key. This non-verbal interchange usually occurs quickly.

How much better it would be for the conductor to take a few minutes before rehearsal to meet with the pianist to communicate the structure, nature, and purpose

of any new warm-ups, thereby setting the stage for a fluent and successful warm-up experience. Such a strategy demonstrates good organizational skills, thoughtfulness, and respect for the shared goal of facilitating a productive rehearsal. The objective in a warm-up is "to make the whole singer—voice, mind, and ear—ready to work."¹⁵

If an accompanist is new to the choral experience, provide them with either a printed sample of standard warm-ups or, better yet, schedule a one-on-one session with them to sing/play through a repertoire of warm-ups. The time dedicated to this en-

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deavor will pay huge dividends in the choral rehearsal. Equipped with the knowledge of the conductor's unique approach to warm-ups, a pianist can rehearse these exercises in advance, becoming comfortable and facile with each example. With practice, a creative accompanist can tastefully incorporate advanced harmonic and rhythmic figurations to accompany melodic material such as jazz harmonies, syncopated rhythms, horn fifths in an ascending step-wise movement when the melody spans a major third. Additionally, advanced preparation allows the accompanist to become more comfortable with the transitions and modulations of these exercises. Providing accurate rhythmic durations for these exercises will also be of great value.

Providing Repertoire in Advance

Giving repertoire to the pianist in advance of rehearsal is a good and necessary thing. Just as the conductor would not want to sight conduct music at each choral rehearsal, so a pianist will be apprehensive about score reading sans prior preparation. As noted piano pedagogue Barbara Fast states in her article, "Building Blocks to Effective Sight Reading," several studies have shown that, "better sight readers spend time previewing and evaluating musical material."⁶ Because choirs sing a vast and varied repertoire, choral accompanists are usually excellent sight-readers. Because this is true, there is a secret part of their psyche that actually enjoys the challenge of sight-reading! For many reasons, however, it is best for the pianist to have studied, in advance, any music that is new to the choristers.

If accompanists have music prior to its first introduction in rehearsal, they can practice technically challenging passages in the accompaniment, find and listen to varied recordings, identify and prepare to assist with challenging intervallic and rhythmic passages, practice choral voice crossings that present pianistic challenges, understand the "roadmap" that is the form of the piece (repeats, da capos, etc.), and much more. Many pianists like to either dog-ear page turns or photocopy first or last pages to eliminate challenging page turns. Advanced distribution



of music allows the pianists to prepare their scores for optimal rehearsal success.

Verbally Communicating Gestural Intent

In most instances, a conductor's gesture will be clear and needs no verbal explanation. There are times, however, that some explanation will be necessary and helpful for your collaborating musicians. If a piece begins with an awkwardly or metrically incomplete rhythmic figuration, or at a brisk tempo, it may be necessary to conduct a certain number of beats prior to the beginning measure. Setting the tempo in advance is especially important when practicing for performance and rehearsal time is minimal. For a fast piece that requires rhythmic precision and unanimity among forces (four-hand piano, piano and other instruments, etc.), it can be helpful to conduct one measure "for good measure." Communicating this to the pianist in advance can save time in rehearsal and, once again, demonstrates good score study and organizational skills.

Another gestural nuance that might require explanation is what this writer likes to call "the stop." Conducting a recitative is a good example of this gesture. Elizabeth Green writes that the conductor's role in

recitative is "to see that chords and changes in harmony occur at exactly the right instant, regardless of the unrhythmic character of the general takt."⁷ In recitative, the conductor cues a sustained chord, stops gestural movement (or gesturally holds) that chord for the duration of time the singer sings until the next beat, then cues the next chord, "stops," and so forth.

It has been the experience of this author that choral conductors sometimes make use of "the stop" in repertoire other than recitatives. *Fermati* are one logical example of a good place to use a stop gesture. According to Max Rudolf, "the proper handling of holds and interruptions is one of the hardest problems confronting the conductor."⁸ This gesture becomes confusing when an accompaniment continues in time while the choir is "stopped" on a specific chord. Another example of where we can get into trouble would be a very slow composition that contains many beats or measures of rest. If conductors decide they like a slow tempo, but want to "move it along" during the rests, they might just "stop" the choir on their chord, give a release, then cue the next entrance.

This practice, of course, is frustrating not only to the good singers in the room, who are keeping an internal metronome going

all the while, but also to the pianist who, along with the conductor, likely possesses the internal metronome in the room with the best lifetime warranty! If conductors decide to employ "the stop" after studying the score and believe freedom of tempo is appropriate in a particular piece of music, then it would be beneficial to communicate that in advance to the accompanist. Such a collaboration allows the accompanist to be watchful for a gestural change in the representation of time rather than keeping strict internal time, therefore supporting the freer sense of time. Otherwise, the accompanist (heaven forbid!) might be tempted to think the conductor cannot count!

Guiding Listening During Piano Introductions and Transitions

When conductors are on the podium, they are teaching 100 percent of the time. Verbal instructions given during piano introductions, interludes or play outs are ineffective. This practice devalues the importance of the complete musical composition and the performance contributions of the accompanist, resulting in many lost educational and musical opportunities.

When we engage in irrelevant talk, we distract from the music. Music occurs from the downbeat to the final release, and that includes moments when the choir is not singing. Good accompanists will demonstrate

appropriate articulation, phrasing, dynamic contrast, and style during solo piano passages, and choristers will learn to imitate those concepts through guided listening. Simply by talking over the piano accompaniment, the implicit message (likely unintended) is sent that what is occurring as background to what **the conductor is saying is less important.** One can understand why conductors are tempted to do this: difficulty remembering the **fifteen** things needing correction in the current sing-through; limited rehearsal time, in which every moment counts; needing to respond to Toby's **twelfth** sung invention of a D^b instead of the printed D[♯]; and the list goes on.

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However, conductors almost *never* speak over the choir's singing. Why is that? First of all, when the choir is singing, the choristers are most likely not listening for instructions from the conductor. Second, a large choir most likely will not be able to hear us speaking while singing. Either the ensemble is stopped and given instruction, or the information is saved for the next stopping point in the rehearsal. The same should be done when the choir is not singing. If the conductor simply cannot remember a list of instructions for the choir while they are singing, and, keeping a list does not improve the ability to remember, then just stop the choir. If what needs to be said is important (and it usually is), then stop the music and say it. You will have the choir's complete attention, and instruction will be much more effective.

Additionally, by making a practice of not speaking when the piano alone is playing, the choir is taught by example that the music that happens when singing does not occur is equally important from a compositional perspective. Choristers will learn to value *all* of the music contained in each piece, and listen more actively and attentively. Again, with a pianist who is expressive in a stylistically appropriate manner, the choir will benefit from guided listening.

In discussing this concept with a colleague, he mostly agreed, but said he has difficulty not talking over an accompaniment when it seems trivial or musically innocuous. If that is the case, perhaps the conductor should consider why the piece was programmed in the first *place*. If the music is worthy of programming, use all of the music, including the accompaniment as teaching material.

Acknowledge the Accompanist's Rehearsal Contributions

Verbally acknowledging the accompanist's contributions to the rehearsal is essential; yes, verbally—out loud! Why? So the choir hears it spoken from the podium. Excellent collaborative pianists model well-structured phrase shapes (at times in the form of an orchestral reduction), appropriate articulation,



historically informed performance practice, good execution of rhythmically and technically challenging passages, and so much more, because it is an extension of their comprehensive musicianship. When conductors recognize any of the above practices occurring in the rehearsal, it would be beneficial to acknowledge it.

When the accompanist tosses off a difficult orchestral Bach or Haydn reduction with panache, the conductor could quip: "Who needs the New York Philharmonic when we have Samuel at the piano?!" In Brahms's *Nänie*, following a significant, musically profound performance of the extended piano introduction (yes, this should be rehearsed with the choir prior to performance!), perhaps: "If we can sing our initial phrases with an ounce of the musical sensitivity with which Sarah Grace played those opening measures, we'll have our audience *in the palm of our hands!*" Through verbal praise, the accompanist will feel valued by the conductor and choir and, as the import of their shared musicianship in rehearsal is acknowledged, conductors can inspire the pianist to consider even more ways to assist the ensemble in the music-making process from the keyboard.

Choral accompanists enjoy working with choirs and being a part of something *more communal* than the solo piano experience. The pianist is an integral part of the music-learning *process* and performance aspects

of choral music, and helping the pianist feel like a highly valued member of the ensemble will pay huge dividends in future music-making collaborations, both in rehearsal and performance.

Employing these practices in rehearsal will guide choral singers toward more attentive and informed listening and singing, and actively demonstrate the conductor's *respect* for the collaborative pianist. This beneficent tactic augments the conductor's relationship with the choral accompanist, facilitating additional instruction through excellent collaboration in each rehearsal. When the *conductor/coach* steps up to the plate to partner with the pianist on the bench, the choral ensemble will find themselves in a brand new ballgame.

NOTES

- ¹ Shirlee Emmons and Constance Chase, *Prescriptions for Choral Excellence: Tone, Text, Dynamic Leadership*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 209.
- ² Joyce Grill, *Accompanying Basics*. (San Diego: Kjos West, 1987), 31–32.
- ³ Jason D. Paulk, "Preparing Choral Voices for Historically Guided Vocalism in the Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Contemporary Styles" (DMA diss., University of Oklahoma, 2005), 8.
- ⁴ Wilhelm Ehmann and Frauke Haasemann, *Voice Building for Choirs*, transl. Brenda Smith. (Chapel Hill: Hinshaw Music, 1981), 24.
- ⁵ Edward Cetto and Gabrielle Dietrich (2003), "Aural Theory Training in the Choral Warm-up Curriculum," *Choral Journal* 43:25.
- ⁶ Barbara Fast, "Building Blocks to Effective Sight Reading," *Piano Pedagogy Forum*, v. 11, No. 1, <<http://www.music.sc.edu/ea/keyboards/PPF/11.1/11.1.PPFast.html>> (July 1, 2008).
- ⁷ Elizabeth Green, *The Modern Conductor*, 4th. ed., (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1987), 195.
- ⁸ Max Rudolf, *The Grammar of Conducting: A Practical Study of Modern Baton Technique*. (New York: G. Schirmer; 1950), 166.

