

Working with the Orchestra NCCO Conference, 10/08

Notes from my piece of the panel presentation. This is geared toward the choral conductor who is NOT a string player. Forgive the style that makes this sound so “I know this and you don’t”!

In advance

1. Meet with your concertmaster in advance. (Be prepared to pay a regular fee if a union player.) If the concertmaster is inexperienced, meet with a string teacher. Discuss how you want the music to sound and get suggestions for bowings and articulations. This way the first rehearsal will already start with a musical shape.
- 2.. Prepare the parts well and completely. In addition to bowings, put in phrasings, dynamics, articulations, ritards, etc. Check rehearsal #s and letters and/or measure numbers, as these are sometimes wrong or not consistent with the full score or the choral scores.
3. Send out the parts with some brief information about the piece that will inform the players without overwhelming them. A text/translation *might* be helpful, but also consider a summary/character of the piece or each movement rather than every word of the piece (eg., Verdi Requiem - what instrumentalist will read every word and figure out how it matches their part?).
4. We all have choral ears, can hear everything we need to. If you don’t have orchestral ears because you are rarely in front of them, consider going to someone’s orchestra rehearsal(s) a week or two before and listen to orchestral sound and color, and also rehearsal techniques. It’s amazing how 2 ours with an orchestra will open our ears. (I don’t ever feel I’m really hearing the orchestra in front of me for the first half hour, or more!)

Planning the first rehearsal/Respect the orchestra’s time

1. Another pdf on this site talks about scheduling the rehearsals, possible rehearsal orders, etc., so you don’t waste anyone’s time. We can also plan *how* we will rehearse. If a movement is fugal, for example, instead of playing the whole movement, we could play the first exposition, go back and set the style, articulation, balance, etc, and then play the piece. At some point it’s not important to play the whole thing (despite what I say below) if the material returns over and over. Similarly, if there is a recap, is it necessary to play it, or can you skip it because the exposition was already good enough? In the Brahms *Requiem*, can we skip that large repeat in movement 2, or do we need to play it to cement the things we just rehearsed? Some of this will depend upon how the rehearsal goes, but possible skips can be planned in advance.
2. Don’t make people sit and do nothing. We wouldn’t make the basses and tenors sit for 20 minutes while we rehearsed the sopranos and altos. Maybe a string rehearsal is more important than a tutti rehearsal.

3. Plan the rehearsal to minimize the waiting. Send people home early when you can. (See the other pdfs on this site.) Do you need the timpani to hang around to play I and V in the last movement, or can it wait until the dress?

First rehearsal

1. Let them play. They are getting used to each other, the piece, the chorus, you, the bowings and articulations, the style...and they need to play. Orchestral players will make great improvements the second time through a piece on their own, so play a movement or section, then go back and play again and see what gets fixed, stopping when necessary but first seeing what they fix. If style is an issue, address general stylistic issues before they play a second time (e.g., play less legato on the whole).

2. If the rehearsal is combined with the chorus, address your first comments/corrections to the orchestra, so they know you are listening to them, and you not a “choral conductor” but a “conductor.”

3. The first time through, listen more and conduct less. They don’t need great emotion and shaping yet, and while we emote we often stop listening, as we are hearing what we want in our heads. Just be clear and start opening our orchestral ears.

4. Use your concertmaster and section principals. If you don’t speak instrumental language, don’t worry! The words “detaché,” “on the string,” and so on need never pass your lips. But sing the phrase the way you want it to sound, and let your concertmaster translate that into string language. You can say “shorter and lighter” and let the concertmaster decide about bow stroke, on or off, etc. We don’t have to know everything, we just have to know the sound we want to be musical.

5. Don’t be surprised if they don’t seem to be looking at you. Instrumentalists, especially the strings, have mastered the art of catching your beat peripherally. They have to look at lots of fast notes, and all those bowings, and you when they can. They really do watch, even if it doesn’t seem like it.

6. They will need to talk to make changes in bowings, and to agree. Let them talk. They aren’t being rude, they are fixing the things you want them to fix.

7. Talk to them about the piece, but keep it short. Things you tell them should inform their playing, not just give some interesting background. Do they care that the first half of the *B Minor Mass* is from 1733? If that’s an important educational component, put it in the notes with their parts. But they should care if a movement is majestic, or funereal, or about glory, or prayer. *Why* is the “tuba mirum” so loud and why is brass spread out around the hall? That information helps them play in the right character. Some of this can be put in the parts. I write “darkness” in the parts over that movement in *Messiah*, which is more helpful to them than a movement number, and “victory” and “death” and “resurrection” so they immediately have a sense, even when they are practicing.

8. Don’t be afraid of the orchestra. They are there for the same reason you are, to make great music. It’s not us vs. them, or chorus vs. orchestra. They all went into music because they wanted to make music. They want the performance to be good. We are all on the same side.