

Tone Bianca Dahl, Norway: Communication between choir and conductor

This workshop will be based on one of the chapters in my book *The Choir. Singing & leading & communicating*, which is about communicating. When it comes to communication between choir and conductor, I will focus on the work the conductor can do with him/herself to make the most out of this communication. The workshop is about

- What is communication?
- How do we prepare ourselves physically and mentally?
- The magic moments: can this be learned? How are they created?

A little taste from the book and the workshop:

A choir with the power to move

You can tell from a long way off that this choir and its conductor have something very special on the go. The choir seems to radiate something unique, and when you look more closely you can see that they all have the same expression on their faces. The conductor stands with his back to you, yet you sense that the movements he makes are connected with the open faces of the choir members. You can hear it too. Everyone is aiming for what the conductor is aiming for right now. You can sense that the choir and conductor breathe together, one organism, one sound, a moving, living collective. You can hear and see their mutual trust and devotion to each other and the music.

Wishful thinking?

No! It happens again and again. And it is just as beautiful each time.

There is a trend moving through the choir world today with a focus on innovation: choirs moving on stage, using the stage and the venue in new ways, incorporating scenography, light and multimedia to capture the audience's attention, to hold it, to generate interest. This is an excellent thing! But it is without effect unless there is good communication between choir and conductor.

This, in my opinion, is the only truly important factor for the audience's experience. Without this, stage directing and choreography is empty movement. The Norwegian conductor Carl Høgset says:

“My choir does not move on stage; it moves the audience!”

I think this is wonderfully put. It is the audience who should be moved.

Everybody is responsible for communication

Choir and conductor come close at rehearsals, in concert, and not least during recordings or on tour. In a stressful situation, in conjunction with concerts, recording, competitions etc, the interaction between choir and conductor is put to the test. At such times it is vital for the group to feel secure with each other and with their conductor. The conductor must also feel secure and comfortable.

Both parties can and must contribute to this. The conductor is the professional in most instances, and has the greatest responsibility, both for developing as a

person and as a leader, and for ensuring that the singers feel secure and have trust. Clear guidelines, efficient planning and a good dialogue with the singers is crucial. Qualities such as sincerity, humour, self-irony, clarity and firmness are also important. Within this there is also room for sudden change and ideas from the conductor, if everybody knows that it often happens. Creativity is a guideline too. The conductor must have the requisite expertise, so that the singers can place their voice in his hands without risking anything. They should leave each rehearsal feeling that they have learnt something new.

The conductor also needs to feel secure. The choristers can contribute by being open with the conductor, approaching him or her under four eyes if there are any matters to resolve, rather than talking about it to the other singers. Being aware that your reaction is your own and not your fellow singers' is a good start. If, for example, you feel that the conductor's comments are over the mark, speak about it with him or her in person. A lot of good can come from such an approach. And little good may come of doing the opposite: feeling offended (and compensating by continually interrupting the rehearsal to correct the conductor, for example) or telling the other singers about how offended you feel, causing some of them to feel offended on your behalf. It is important to have respect for the conductor's position and work, and not interrupt a rehearsal to tell him that it says *pianissimo* in the music or that the tempo is wrong! If you are not comfortable with the conductor as a professional expert, you might consider applying to another choir.

Infectious conditions

Why is it that we feel uncomfortable when listening to singers who force their sound and are tense? Why is it that many, after having heard a free and open voice, themselves feel uplifted and free? Why is it that we feel down after having been with somebody who is depressed, and happy when we've been together with somebody lively? How can a conductor say to his choir: 'What's wrong with you today? You're singing so out of tune and seem so tired!' or 'Perhaps the conductor himself is worn out?' Can a mood be infectious?

In the same way that moods can be said to be 'infectious', we are connected in a strange way to the people around us when we sing. Many singers have experienced that it is difficult to stand next to certain people and sing, especially when they sing differently from themselves. It is not easy to maintain a relaxed posture when your neighbour is tense or has poor voice production. In addition there is a conductor at the front who affects the voice production of each individual singer with his own posture, breathing and voice production. Of course you can't blame a conductor for having a bad day! But when that happens it is important to remember that it isn't the singers' fault, and that they are influenced by you. The conductor is also influenced by his singers, for example if someone is dissatisfied or in opposition, or if singers are dissatisfied with each other, the repertoire or the conductor's way of doing things. It is important to bear in mind that this might be the choir member's own problem,

and not the fault of the conductor; to sort out what your responsibilities are, and what they are not.

Exercises for conductors:

Balance between interior and exterior:
stretching
slow movements
rotating

ÉRaise your arms above your head, holding your palms towards the ceiling, with relaxed shoulders. Stretch your arms out from your body all the way down, with your fingers pointing towards the ceiling. Stretch well.

ÉRise slowly up your toes with your eyes closed, and down again. Imagine your whole body stretching on a vertical axis.

ÉRotate around the central axis of your body letting your arms hang. The movement comes from your hips: bend your right leg and rotate to the left; bend your left leg and rotate to the right. Continue and gradually increase the tempo.

ÉRaise one arm slowly in front of your body and above your head with your fingers pointing towards the ceiling. Lower your arm slowly while raising the other ó your arms meet half-way and continue in their own direction. This also helps to train balance between right and left.

Balance between right and left:

diagonal exercises
Using the right and left sides of your body at the same time

ÉStand in a ring; let your right hand lead your neighbour's left, then swap hands. (See the chapter "Voice production and warming up; examples of exercises").

ÉConduct with one arm and do other things with the other at the same time. For example: slow movements in all directions, imaginary entries, page pretend to drink a glass of water, brush your hair etc.

ÉPut your right elbow to your left knee, bend your leg up and the upper part of your body down. Then put your left elbow to your right knee. Repeat several times.

ÉLie on your back with your arms stretched out at right angles to your body, palms facing up. Bend your right leg, keeping your foot on the floor. Let your leg fall to the right, raise it again, and let it fall to the left, keeping your knee bent all the time. Repeat a few times. Then repeat,

turning your head in the opposite direction to the way your leg falls.
Stretch your leg out and lie with your hands to your sides. Is there any difference between the two sides of your body?
Repeat the exercise with your left leg.

ÉStand with your feet a little apart. Raise one arm slowly from the side of your body while shaking it gently; release tension in your arm. Keep shaking it until you reach 90 degrees, then shake it slowly back down. Notice how relaxed your shoulders become after a few repetitions. Repeat with the other arm. Repeat with both arms at the same time. This releases tension in your shoulders and arms while at the same time lowering your body's centre of gravity.

Feel the floor beneath your feet after having done this exercise; notice if there is any difference between before and after.

Conducting an unstrained, slow legato:

Stand firmly on both feet, hold your hands out in front of you with the palms facing each other 30-50 cm apart. Bring your hands slowly towards each other. Focus on the area between them, feeling any warmth, resistance, prickling or any other sensations that might occur. Do not let your hands touch, but focus on and sense the space between them. Move your hands slowly apart while focusing on the energy between them. Do not move them further apart than that you feel some form of contact between them ó reverse the motion and bring your hands towards each other again. Repeat a few times and feel whether the heat and resistance between your hands increases. Remain standing with your hands almost together, then let them drop in a rapid movement. If energy has built up, this movement will feel unstrained and smooth. Begin beating a slow two-beat figure, focusing on maintaining an energy-filled, smooth and unstrained movement. You can try this with other time-signatures. This is a key to conducting a slow legato with smoothly flowing movements even at a very slow tempo.

Centring:

Hold your hands a few cm below your navel. This point is what we refer to as the "core" (it is the same point where a singer activates support). Raise your hands and imagine that they are attached by means of a thick elastic band to the core point. Feel the contact between your hands and the core as you raise your hands.

Tense the core point, then relax. Repeat several times. Then try something in between: activate the core without being either tense or slack. Take note of any facial tension. Exaggerate it. Release it gradually, mentally moving the tension down to the core point. Repeat several times.