

Equipping the Wearer of Many Hats:
Considerations for a Classroom Choir Teacher and Theatrical Music Director

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Abstract

A high school choir teacher also serving as the theater music director is faced with the challenge of facilitating the learning process for a similar group of students at two different times of day in two different types of performance. One general key to success is to keep the aim in mind. For classroom choirs, the goal is to perform an intricately refined set of songs, calling for a long-term plan supplemented by learning moments. By contrast, the vocal rehearsal for theater must focus on efficiency because of the limited amount of rehearsal time considering the various other aspects of the performance. Both roles also require thorough planning to maximize rehearsal time and capitalize on every possible teaching moment.

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Introduction

The expression “wearer of many hats” is used to describe an individual who participates and exhibits competence in a multitude of areas. In the world of music education, a teacher might earn such a nickname in the frequently occurring scenario where a high school choir teacher is also called upon to be the music director for the musical theater production. In this situation, there is one teacher working with (mostly) the same students, yet the art form and process are completely different; as a result, this music educator must adopt an entirely different approach for each teaching setting. The question boils down to this: how does an educator effectively foster the efficient and enriching creation of art in the sphere of classroom choir and the sphere of musical theater?

The answer is not one statement, but rather a series of considerations that investigate the intricacies of choir and theater and what distinguishes the two. Some of these considerations relate to structure, the framework within which a rehearsal is designed and carried out, primarily established before the teaching begins; other considerations fall under the category of techniques, which are methods employed by the teacher to any end, including the music, the atmosphere, and the pace, to accomplish goals efficiently. The examination of each reveals practical wisdom for effective education in both settings.

Considerations for Rehearsal Structure: Choir

When approaching a school choir rehearsal, there are several considerations for the planned structure that lend themselves to higher effectiveness during the allotted time. The

concepts listed here will most easily transfer to a high school choir where the rehearsal schedule is consistent and the students are experienced enough for a fine-tuning process; however, slight adjustments could cater these suggestions to any type of vocal ensemble performing standard choral repertoire.

Organization

One consensus spanning choral direction research is that all successful conductors utilize a rehearsal organizational structure of some kind. However, the format of said rehearsal structure must vary across musical styles and performance media for directors to be effective. The nature of a secondary classroom choral rehearsal has specific elements that factor into a suitable plan because of its school setting and other variables. In a study by researcher James Cox to determine the preferred method of rehearsal organization (among three researched options), the method that organized the rehearsal by hosting faster-paced activities (run-throughs of familiar or enjoyable music) to start and end the rehearsal was the favorite of participating conductors by a significant margin.¹ A song that immediately engages students' attention helps them to focus as the class period begins. The remaining time in this method was characterized by a slower pace involving the detailed and analytical study of works in the early or middle stages of progress. There was an additional questionnaire to help validate the results, which also revealed a common opinion that running through a selection before moving on is a necessity. This allows the students to feel satisfaction through their progress and experience the sense of accomplishment that comes with making good music. Incorporating this as a non-negotiable pillar of the rehearsal

¹ James Cox, "Rehearsal Organizational Structures Used by Successful High School Choral Directors," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 37, no. 3 (1989): 201-218.

plan ensures that the students are refreshed often enough to be sustained for good music-making over the duration of the class period.

While these tactics can aid rehearsal efficiency, some conductors have the tendency to over-teach or take up too much time with unrelated matters that cripple the efforts toward a successful rehearsal. The *Journal of Research in Music Education* published an article analyzing the amount of nonperformance time in choir rehearsals in which the average results gathered from public school choirs under experienced directors indicated an almost equivalent amount of time in performance and in nonperformance.² Unsurprisingly, the teacher speaking accounted for the majority of this nonperformance time. The study also discovered that teacher-student interactions in the nonperformance times were primarily lower-order thinking interactions, especially in beginning-level choirs; critical thinking during nonperformance activity was only about six percent of the allotted time (activities included formal analysis of the work, reflective thinking on style, and audiation exercises). One consideration for structure that serves as an excellent solution to this problem is to develop a detailed plan that allows the director to transition consistently without down time and communicate expectations in few words. Early rehearsals could serve as a good time to agree on verbal cues, gestures, and procedures that make directions clear and concise going forward.

Score Study

These organizational tools are valuable when planning a rehearsal, but the foundation for creating a rehearsal structure should begin long before a conductor plots the elements of a rehearsal. Score study is an essential aspect of planning, and in the choir context, score study can

² Matthew L. Garrett, "An Examination of Critical Thinking Skills in High School Choral Rehearsals," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 61, no. 3 (August 2013): 303-317.

occur with the rehearsal process in mind. The following progression for score study is inspired by Steven Demorest, writing in the *Music Educators Journal*.³

The first step of planning is to identify the natural breaks of a piece, requiring an analysis of form, texture, and unifying elements. Dividing a piece into blocks that can be mastered in a single rehearsal contributes to a feeling of accomplishment and creates a polished section to be performed during each rehearsal. This can provide a substitute for the satisfaction of running a full piece in the early stages of rehearsal when instruction centers on notes and rhythms. The early days or weeks can be grueling for vocalists without a tangible reminder of how the final product will sound, so any prepared block of the piece should be leveraged to boost morale. The next step is to determine a starting point for the choir, ideally involving all voices, important material, and an achievable end. Sight-reading individual voice parts is important, but unifying the choir to sing a structurally important line helps the students understand the characteristics of the piece at the beginning of the learning process. While style and interpretation are often reserved for a later point in the rehearsal process, one such well-taught section can be recalled later as the teacher integrates stylistic accuracy into the performance.

Demorest added that the benefits of rehearsal structure include comprehensive musicianship development, the process of raising confidence and skill in many areas through individual tasks; greater enjoyment, as the students will thrive on a sense of logic and enjoy a sense of accomplishment; full ensemble involvement, since a proper plan is careful to ensure that no student sits idle for extended periods of time; and efficient use of time, for the most successful

³ Steven Demorest, "Structuring a Musical Choral Rehearsal," *Music Educators Journal* 82, no. 4 (January 1996): 25-30.

rehearsal will squeeze every minute for maximum productivity. Throughout these results, it stands to reason that one notable part of effective leadership during a choral rehearsal is the score study that precedes it. Score study also ensures that the teacher will have a thorough knowledge of the piece that will allow him to adapt to the unexpected during rehearsal. The prepared conductor will know the piece and have a plan so that the students can make progress in small amounts of time.

Score study will also reveal the expression of the piece and can inform the way the teacher will approach such instruction. Expressivity is important because it brings the text and music to life, and it requires unity of the choir and the interpretation of the conductor. There are many manners in which a teacher can bring out expressivity in the choir classroom, but they ultimately stem from the structure of the rehearsal. For instance, some conductors may opt to prioritize the interpretation of the music, but as nonperformance time it should be scheduled with caution. Such interpretation would include a background on the composer and the historical context of the time period.⁴ The structure of rehearsal could also be impacted by the conductor's reliance on the score; the especially prepared conductor could go long stretches without more than a glance at the music, meaning that the rehearsal can move rapidly from one thing to another. However, the conductor who pores over the score constantly will help the choir dissect the passage and make sense of stylistic choices. There is merit to both approaches, and there is also potential for overlap between the two if a particular conductor is able to yield benefits from each method. As a result, the ability of a conductor to self-assess is useful not just in reflection

⁴ Alethea De Villiers and Gustel Agenbag, "Music Expressivity in High School Choirs: The Case of Three Choirs," *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa* 15, no. 2 (November 2018): 3-16.

on a past performance but also in consideration of the rehearsal pace in upcoming opportunities. These observations will impact the way the conductor schedules teaching moments on expressivity into the rehearsal structure.

Awareness of Choir Health

The ideal choral conductor looks out for his students' well-being, as that is both the morally empathetic approach and one that best serves the choir. An evident implication of this tenet is that the conductor must take into consideration the vocal health of his students. This is especially applicable to classroom choirs because students should be learning or at least reinforcing proper technique along the way. That said, a conductor must consider the impact of rehearsal circumstances on vocal health. Collegiate choral conductor Dr. Daniel Suttles asserted that the flow of rehearsal must accommodate the voices' inherent need to rest.⁵ It is imperative that rehearsal planning provides all sections some sort of break or fluctuation of intensity that allows them to last the duration of the class without any damage (see the next section). Additionally, choral directors need to know the physiology of the voice and be aware of their functions, the characteristics of the rehearsal space (i.e., humidity, noise, and acoustics), availability of water, and conductor-singer visibility.⁶ In protecting the students' voices, the conductor also facilitates an overall higher-quality sound through uniform vowels, colors, and tone. The conductor would also be wise to include warmups and a cooldown within the rehearsal plan. Furthermore, the order of music selections for one rehearsal should consider the tessitura of vocal lines and how much stress will be put on each section as a result (specifically for high

⁵ Daniel Suttles, interview by author, Liberty University, May 6, 2021.

⁶ Jeffrey L. Webb, "Promoting Vocal Health in the Choral Rehearsal," *Music Educators Journal* 93, no. 5 (May 2007): 26-31.

school singers and older); for instance, if a voice part has particularly high notes in two songs, perhaps those two songs should not be rehearsed consecutively nor toward the very beginning of rehearsal.

Considerations for Rehearsal Techniques: Choir

Once the bell has rung for class to start and the singers are assembled, the planning process is through, and the execution of the plan is the new focus. Even the most particular and well-planned conductor must accept that rehearsal hardly ever happens as predicted to the minute. A detail-oriented conductor himself, Dr. Suttles admits:

I view rehearsal as an improvisation, which is to say I'm constantly reacting to what the choir is giving me, to who the personnel are that particular day; and any particular day in Chorale, we have ten percent of the choir not there...it's a little bit different dynamic every single rehearsal, so I'm reacting to that. I know the choir's reacting to me a little differently every day.⁷

Though Dr. Suttles, and most conductors for that matter, walk into rehearsal with goals and a plan by which to accomplish them, the reality of the rehearsal process is that there is a degree of thinking on one's feet every time. There are numerous rehearsal techniques suitable to the choral classroom that are proven to be effective; some of these will bolster a plan for the rehearsal structure, while others will function better as a tool to utilize when the occasion unexpectedly calls for it. Many of these techniques are subject to alterations based on teaching style preferences, but the majority will be compatible with any classroom setup and conductor style.

Introducing a Piece

There are innumerable approaches to introducing a piece of music creatively and productively. Students could be preparing for a piece before they receive it, or they could be

⁷ Suttles, interview.

equipped to interpret the style of the time period accurately before singing the first note. One easy way to introduce a piece is in the warmup portion of the rehearsal, where a melody or rhythm is taught by rote and thus can be reinforced as a recurring warmup after the music is learned.⁸ Music history can also be an asset to the teacher's arsenal; if there is a music history course at the school, currently enrolled students can teach the rest of the class about the context of the music, text, and composer; if not, the teacher can take this opportunity to lay the foundations of music history for those who want to do further research or study music in higher learning institutions. A conductor can also analyze the music theory of a piece, with similar stipulations to music history about the applications for a conjunct class. One other strong method for introducing a piece is starting with stylistic elements as prescribed by Steven Demorest earlier. This method could focus on the part of the score where the choir starts, or it could be integrated into the warmups; in either case, the idea would be to encapsulate the style of the piece with a prominent (and ideally, a returning) theme so that the students grasp the mood and restrictions of the style from the beginning. This method especially can pay dividends in future rehearsals because the students will learn the rest of the music with the style in mind, meaning that the interpretation will come faster and allow for more time to refine the final product.

Rest for the Voice

The rehearsal strategy should allow rest for the health of students' voices, but there are techniques that accomplish additional goals along with the preservation of healthy vocal cords. A choir conductor with concern for his ensemble's vocal health or a lack of visual presentation can employ a technique called the "mute" button, where the choir maintains every aspect of a

⁸ Lynn A. Corbin, "Enhancing Learning in the Choral Rehearsal," *Music Educators Journal* 88, no. 34 (September 2001): 34-39.

performance in rehearsal except for sound; the voices get a break, but the movements, breath control, and facial expressions continue with added focus.⁹ This allows for the isolation and correction of physical aspects without further taxing the singers' voices. It also heightens the chemistry of the choir through a sense of vulnerability and the dependability by combatting the adrenaline rush of a performance preemptively. This method also fights the possibility of choirs going on autopilot after learning notes by mandating that the singers always watch the conductor. Because the conductor is free to simply watch without audio intake, he will be able to spot lost students and ensure that everyone is following along. This is clearly a useful strategy for the ensemble performance dynamic, and it serves the conductor well by providing feedback that could otherwise be found only under intense scrutiny. Furthermore, this helps students develop the skill of audiation. The removal of sound but the necessity to remain engaged in the performance leads students to hear the music in their heads, and the development of this skill allows the individual and the choir to grow and learn faster in the future.

Much instruction will be in vain if the educator neglects vocal health in the rehearsal, for it is the job of the choral conductor to teach not only the music but also the correct and healthy ways to sing it. Healthy practices will help the singer avoid potentially dangerous vocal fatigue, as well as contribute to a better ensemble sound as previously mentioned. There are several techniques that the conductor can employ in rehearsal to aid this cause, such as singing high passages down the octave or speaking passages. These two techniques are wise early in the rehearsal process especially because they can help students learn the notes and rhythms easier than if they are focused on singing high notes uncertainly. The conductor should also be looking

⁹ Jose Calvar, "Rehearsal Break," *Choral Journal* 59, no. 2 (September 2018): 65-68.

for strain whenever the music could lend itself to improper technique due to extreme range;¹⁰ these could be moments to discuss technique or to work on it down the octave for the time being, depending on if it is an issue pertaining to poor form or fatigue brought about by repetition.

Expression

To enhance the music, the conductor needs to be thinking about several things in the moment at rehearsal. First, the conductor should be cognizant of the fundamentals of the choir's performance and prepared to point out areas for improvement. For instance, a choir without proper posture will fail to provide convincing expression nor a supported tone. The choir should also be using their eyebrows and other means of facial expression to convey the mood and story of the piece. The conductor is responsible for modeling this expression through his gestures, often exceeding the range of normal expressions to demand maximum effort from the choir members. Facial expressions will encourage the choir, but the conductor can also summon the best work from every individual by making eye contact.¹¹ This is another reason that score study preceding the rehearsal planning process is essential. Depending on the situation, some conductors can focus completely on drawing emotion out of the vocalists. With a competent accompanist, the beat pattern can dissolve into purely expressive conducting, yielding the best results possible.

For each expressive gesture to be meaningful to the choir, there needs to be a clarity of communication established from the beginning of the school year. Max Rudolf, an experienced director and the author of *The Grammar of Conducting*, likens communication in the rehearsal space to the manner of conducting in this way: "Similar to the conductor's baton technique,

¹⁰ Webb, "Promoting Vocal Health," 93.

¹¹ Suttles, interview.

which may be defined as a highly individualized craft to evoke specific responses on the part of the players with the most effective gestures, his verbal communication in rehearsal must be equally specific, easily understandable, and congruous with his musical intentions.”¹² Rudolf establishes three facets of effective communication worth assessing for any conductor. First, the verbal directives must be specific. The conductor must specify to whom the feedback and instructions are intended. This clarity of expectation will allow the ensemble to succeed faster, preventing unnecessary frustration on either side of the podium. Consistency is also a key component of effective communication. The conductor who asks for certain things in the same manner every time is likely to reach an understanding of that particular ‘language’ that will allow for quicker agreement in the future. Thirdly, the communication must match the intention behind the words. This goes back to the idea of a well-planned rehearsal, for the conductor with a purpose in mind will command the rehearsal confidently, while the conductor without a direction to go will fumble over words and squander precious rehearsal time.

Experienced conductor, music director, and freelance artist Denise Grat introduced the idea of a “monk rehearsal” in which the conductor only interacts with the ensemble non-verbally.¹³ This would in fact be very hard to accomplish for maximum productivity, but there are many benefits that could lead to enhanced expression. For one thing, the ensemble will henceforth have a heightened sense of the importance of the conductor’s words because of the noticeability of their absence. Conversely, the conductor will be able to see how much can be accomplished without filler verbal content and learn a lesson about concision. An additional

¹² Max Rudolf, *The Grammar of Conducting* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980), 382.

¹³ Denise Grat, “Making the Most of Your Rehearsal Time: Creative Warm Ups and Rehearsal Techniques,” *The Canadian Music Educator* 47, no. 4 (2006): 55-56.

benefit would be the ensemble taking the gestures during conducting more seriously and trying to interpret them, leading to more effective conducting on the conductor's part going forward and ultimately resulting in unified expression. This also gives the group the opportunity to see what unclear gestures require further explanation so that all involved can be on the same page about the range of expressive conducting motions.

Vision and Atmosphere

One element of leading an ensemble that precedes the rehearsal itself is vision. The scope of vision encompasses specific rehearsal goals, season or performance goals, and long-term goals. However, the matter of communicating and sharing the vision with the ensemble can be a longer endeavor of greater difficulty. Despite the process, the discussion of vision for the group should be an important aspect of communication in the choir classroom. An observational panel of collegiate professors pointed out that one director under their analysis clued the ensemble in on his vision of the final product; as a result, the students showed a drive to reach this goal, and the teacher focused on creating a healthy environment where students would feel comfortable making mistakes and receiving correction.¹⁴ These observations show that the effective communication of vision will make it more realistic to accomplish because the students will direct their efforts toward that specific end. The panel also picked up on an important extension of rehearsal talking in the form of feedback. Positive reinforcement is crucial to the morale of the group, but so is an atmosphere that allows students to try and fail. The students who are afraid of making mistakes on the path of growth will find themselves stagnant, discouraged, and indifferent; by contrast, the ensemble that feels comfortable attempting to improve will

¹⁴ David Holley, "Vocal Ensemble," *American Music Teacher* 48, no. 2 (October 1998): 32-33.

experience a more enjoyable and productive journey. The conductor should be listening for good things to repeat and incorrect things to discuss, but the feedback should be addressed in terms of techniques and not individual competence, as the voice is a very personal instrument.

The music classroom should be a team-like atmosphere from the outset of rehearsal, emphasizing the common goal toward which all members of the team are striving. The teacher who gives of the impression of authority and expectation can be effective, especially in a professional setting, but students in the early learning stages of performing challenging repertoire need someone they can trust to produce their best work with consistency. This inspirational quality is fueled not by the teacher's motivational attempts but the students' attitudes, making the teamwork perspective crucial for the choir's progress. Rehearsal communication also encompasses student responses when the teacher allows, for students will learn more effectively if the teacher fosters an environment where this is acceptable and important. Perhaps in a professional symphony there would be less discourse and more time spent catering to the conductor's wishes, but students will get more out of their education if they are actively participating in the classroom conversation. One way to ensure this is to let students voice their opinions on types of music to perform and how they learn best; beyond that, the teacher must follow through on these suggestions when beneficial to the class so the students see that the conductor is invested in their ideal educational experience.¹⁵ Students will be most motivated to accomplish their best work if the experience matches their learning styles and takes into account their opinions. The teacher should maintain control and have the final say as to not lose the

¹⁵ Renee Duncan, "Simple Strategies for Co-Planning with Students," *Teaching Music* 28, no. 4 (April 2021): 16-17.

respect necessary for classroom/rehearsal management, but a form of two-way communication will boost student morale.

Considerations for Rehearsal Structure: Theater

Even if the context involves the same teacher, students, and vocal rehearsal space, the factors that play into the structure and formatting of the rehearsal are vastly different from those in the realm of musical theater. One of the most fundamental differences between vocal rehearsals for a musical and a choir rehearsal is the role of singing in the performance. For choirs, singing is typically the only element of performance, complete with facial expressions and slight movements, though some ambitious groups may add elements such as a spoken portion or basic choreography. By contrast, singing comprises only a segment of the musical theater performance; the vocals are paired with choreography, and dialogue scenes are scattered throughout the show. There is also an emphasis on dramatizing the song to portray consistency across the art forms that comprise the final product. As a result, the singing is often covered early in the process and largely overlooked as it quickly blends with the other rapidly developing aspects covered in rehearsals. On top of that, the time devoted to learning the music for a musical is far less than that given to a classroom choir, yet the amount of vocal material tends to be far greater in a musical theater score. This changes everything about the approach to vocal rehearsals including the main goals, the pacing, and the sacrifices necessary to achieve proficiency by opening night.

Importance of Fundamentals

Due to this unique nature of vocal rehearsals, the primary aim must be the basic education of the music, centering around notes and rhythms. While the adept musical director

will integrate relevant context and characterization throughout the process, seasoned music director Joseph Church insists that the fundamentals remain of primary importance.¹⁶ This is true because of the limited rehearsal time as well as the great responsibility placed on every individual to synthesize all the taught elements to arrive at rehearsal prepared. For a show's vocals to be both competent and balanced in a performance, everyone must achieve mastery, meaning that the teaching must consider the slowest learner's pace in planning.

The slowest pace may not be determined by a lack of talent but simply a shortage of vocal experience due to expertise in other areas that makes an individual integral to the ensemble or role. Even in the professional world, there are times in musical theater casting when an actor with less than Broadway-caliber vocals will be cast in a show. Basing the discussion on a story where an actress booked the tour of *An American in Paris* without any recent vocal training, experts identified several reasons that shows will cast less-than-adept vocalists.¹⁷ For one thing, the choreographer might convince the music director that a strong dancer is valuable enough to the choreography to be cast. Cases like this are limited to ensemble vocals for the most part, but this still poses a challenge to the music director. There are also some larger ensemble shows that can afford some weaker singers because of a dance emphasis; some productions lend themselves to big company numbers where the vocals are hardly the focal point. Thirdly, it may be a preference of the casting team to look for acting or dancing primarily, which could be especially common in high schools with students specializing in one or maybe two performing arts

¹⁶ Joseph Church, *Music Direction for the Stage: A View from the Podium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 210.

¹⁷ Haley Hilton, "But Can You Sing? How Much Vocal Training You Really Need to Book Musical Theatre," *Dance Magazine* 94, no. 4 (April 2020): 54-55.

disciplines. In this instance, some casting directors are willing to cast on the basis of work ethic and a willingness to practice, though voice lessons often follow this decision.

Vocalists with less training or experience can improve their singing technique in several ways. Infrequent lessons can still be effective, and mid-level vocal coaches working under well-respected teachers may have flexible scheduling options. Online training and apps can also provide assistance and tips, and community or church singing opportunities will stretch one's vocal abilities (though it will not suffice as preparation for solo singing). Music directors should bear in mind that dancers and performers specializing in arts not involving vocals at the high school level may be sensitive about how they compare to their more experienced peers, but recommending these methods and adjusting the pace would assist the full ensemble in mastering the vocal demands of the show.

Another factor about the structure of rehearsal that separates musical theater from choirs in a major way is the constantly changing group of people assigned to vocal rehearsal. Most rehearsal schedules will have multiple aspects of the production in rehearsal at the same time with the respective personnel present. As a hypothetical example, a day in the production of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* at a high school could find the ensemble learning the vocals for "Gaston"; Beast, Belle, and the household objects learning the blocking for "Something There"; and Gaston and Lefou reviewing the choreography for "Gaston Reprise". However, there are occasions where a great amount of people or the whole company is called for a large vocal block covering several songs, leaving some students sitting idle for stretches of time. Though this is an issue to be discussed in part with the full creative team, the music director can alleviate the problem singlehandedly by dismissing students until the next block of time if the schedule is

planned thoroughly.¹⁸ This process is not abnormal across the world of musical theater, but this tends to be a wasteful practice on a timeline where no minutes can be squandered. Therefore, this is an opportunity for the music director to split the vocal rehearsal for increased productivity and reinforcement by dismissing students not presently needed with a separate task. Under the supervision of an assistant music director, a rehearsal pianist, a vocal captain, or some reliable students, a portion of the cast could learn less complex harmonies in a different location to be reviewed later. Students could also utilize this time to review tricky sections, making use of tools like a piano, a keyboard app, or a tuner app to further cement what has already been taught. This review would serve them well when the music is paired with choreography in the greater production context.

Research and Preparation

Beyond the personnel participating in vocals for the production, there are many factors related to rehearsal structure that are relevant before rehearsals begin. In a guide for conductors published in *Music Educators Journal*, Jerry Ulrich of Ashland University touched on a noteworthy point when discussing the importance of score study: “Ninety percent of score preparation should occur before the conductor enters the first rehearsal. It is the conductor’s responsibility to know each part of the composition. Any conductor who has carefully prepared the music should be able to sing any part any time in the musical rehearsal.”¹⁹ Score study is involved heavily in approaching choir rehearsals and theater vocal rehearsals, but the function of

¹⁸ Rudolf, *The Grammar of Conducting*, 384.

¹⁹ Jerry Ulrich, “Conductor’s Guide to Successful Rehearsals,” *Music Educators Journal* 79, no. 7 (March 1993): 34-35.

efficiency is all the more important in the time crunch of the musical theater rehearsal schedule. Tips relating to the mood of the piece or the greater context of the musical number for balance purposes (such as a male ensemble feature or the background harmonies for a lead soloist) are immensely valuable to the forward movement of the agenda. The music director can also equip the vocalists by giving the instrumental context of their entrances or contrasting sections. This could be anything from a prominent trumpet solo cueing the big entrance or even an explanation of the swelling instrumentation not as noticeable in the rehearsal piano score that the ensemble should echo. A conductor's complete knowledge of the score also makes a world of difference as it pertains to rehearsal piano. While some music directors will play piano themselves or work seamlessly with a seasoned rehearsal pianist, the ability to sing any part in the score out of necessity or convenience can save precious seconds. This mastery over the score also allows the conductor to answer questions about harmony lines authoritatively or even sing along with one voice part to reinforce difficult intervals. Clearly, the hours of painstaking score study pay dividends when the seconds saved through efficiency and the concision of additional contextual ideas outside of the basic notes and rhythms add up.

Rehearsal Schedule and the Creative Team

A wise music director must have a keen awareness of the vocal health of the company throughout the rehearsal process. Actors are under tremendous strain through the long hours of repetitions, so the music director must encourage sustainable practices and look out for potentially harmful habits. One fundamental way to promote health for theatrical vocalists is to plan rehearsals with this concept in mind. Perhaps the male lead should not sing the most difficult pieces consecutively before leading a massive production number with the ensemble;

while these songs will be performed all in the same night later in the process, the repetitions that trademark high school vocal rehearsals could lead to fatigue quickly. Rehearsal health also involves the previously mentioned system of rotating out students that are not needed at that moment; the conductor must use discernment to determine which students are excused with a task and which students are excused to take a vocal break and perhaps review lines or blocking.

David Shrubsole, a composer, lyricist, arranger, orchestrator, and musical director with Broadway credits, concluded that clarity among the creative team on director decisions is essential to pulling all the pieces together for the final product.²⁰ The rehearsal process thus taps into the creative balance in the nature of the music director role. The music director is a presence contributing to creative decisions who also needs to be aware of the boundaries of his role in that particular production, speaking into the musical aspects (such as tempo and expression) of the production while embracing the acting and movement decisions of the show. Scheduling has the potential to pose an impasse where the overseers of the various aspects of the production come into conflict vying for adequate time to accomplish their goals. In that situation, the music director may only have a limited say on the time allocated to vocals, but he will hopefully be able to speak into the breakdown of songs in each rehearsal block. Such decisions should feature health considerations as of first importance for the sake of vocalists' longevity on the project.

In all of this, Church explains that one of the ultimate rules of thumb for vocal rehearsals is to prioritize instruction over style because of the liability of the director's authority.²¹ The music director should certainly incorporate character influences on how to sing and the style for

²⁰ George Rodosthenous, "Musical Direction in Theatre: Interpreting, Composing and Singing in the 'Real' – An Interview with David Shrubsole," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 12, no. 3 (December 2018): 387-396.

²¹ Church, *Music Direction for the Stage*, 206.

which the historical and cultural contexts call, but the primary focus should always be the basic education of music fundamentals. For one thing, the director could have a different vision (at that time or further along in the process) for that song or moment, meaning that the minutes used to set the scene in vocal rehearsal were essentially wasted. On a grander scale, the director can add character choices and preferences later in the process, but the teaching of music typically ceases past vocal rehearsals. While the director and the music director are always on the same team despite the occasionally offsetting priorities, it often leaves the music director in a position where making the absolute best of the time given is the ultimate aim.

Considerations for Rehearsal Techniques: Theater

Once the music director enters the room with the vocalists to conduct a rehearsal, the plan should be at the forefront of his mind, but the same must be true for the end goal. In musical theater, music is simply one of many vehicles relaying a coherent story across a substantial duration of time. Thus, effective communication of the lyrics and mood takes high priority in the rehearsal room. Many of the techniques most relevant to a vocal rehearsal revolve around ensuring that everyone in the room is agreed in terms of clarity and expression while simultaneously presenting the music fundamentals in an efficient and attainable fashion.

Context and Interpretation

Joseph Church asserts that content, sound, and form of the music are rooted in the content of the text in any good theater composition.²² This claim in and of itself may not be particularly useful to high school vocalists as a flippant comment, but the implications of the concept can influence many techniques for a music director. Training students to embrace appropriate

²² Church, *Music Direction for the Stage*, 150.

expressivity in musical theater numbers is a tall order for a high school teacher, but it will multiply the performers' future success if they learn the process of interpreting the text and the fitting vocal inflections and tone to accompany it. One simple technique worth its forty-five seconds in rehearsal is to ask a student to describe the context of the song in history, in culture, and/or in the show. This will help the students delve beyond notions of happy or sad into the depth of emotion that carries weighty convictions, atmospherically dense fear, or a telling plot point. In later instances of the same strategy when the historical and cultural contexts are typically similar, the music director can reiterate previously stated points the students contributed or briefly quiz them to embed the ideas in their minds.

This method of interpreting the text in the process of rehearsing notes and rhythms can also encourage the students to digest and consider the words they are singing. In this age, students rely heavily on cast album recordings to form the foundation for learning the music, so studying lyrics more intently (particularly how they can be delivered most effectively) will impact the degree of natural and stylistically acceptable flexibility with the prescribed notation, which is an asset to any vocal genre with repetitive rhythms and pitches. This plus explicit reminders will improve diction in performance because the students will be inspired to communicate the meaning they have found to audiences hearing the words for the first time. An increased awareness of lyrical intensity or beauty can also help students when they walk into their scenes, as well as ease the transition between dialogue and song because the emotional bridge is constant. Yet another benefit is that the additional connections made in the process of learning notes and rhythms can aid in memory retention. With lyrical emphasis and mindfulness, the key for the conductor is prior score study so these things can be woven throughout the

rehearsal seamlessly; additional research to further contextualize the show and its songs could prove beneficial as well.

Music Director/Actor Dynamic

John Doyle, a Princeton University professor with experience working on Sondheim musicals, fielded a student question in an interview by introducing the concept of smelling the play, which describes the state of sensing what a play will be without having predetermined a path for the actor.²³ He emphasized the importance of the journey that the music director and actor venture on together to interpret a piece, acknowledging that language and methodology should make people feel secure, but the process of creating a journey for the company is the true answer to running a rehearsal with less-than-ideal certainty or planning. This again hints at the music director's ability to implement prior score study and interpretation into the quick pace of rehearsal. It also introduces another facet of effective music directing (especially with students), the idea that the music director should partner with the actor in discovery so that the student may grow as a performer while also receiving guidance for what is contextually appropriate and the writer's intent. This dynamic allows concrete music fundamentals and flexible interpretation to take place in the confines of vocal rehearsal time through an intertwined approach.

Another technique that results from ample score study is for a music director to draw the actors' attention to nuances in the music that are worth the time of discussion for increased understanding or potential impact. One type of nuance that occasionally warrants attention is the placement of rests in the vocal lines. Some breaks in the middle of lines are significant, while others exist to preserve the natural flow of discourse that young singers are prone to overlook.

²³ Stacy Wolf and John Doyle, "A Conversation with John Doyle About the Musicals of Stephen Sondheim," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 13, no. 2 (June 2019): 187-195.

Pauses in theater can be immensely powerful as a response to something else or as an exclamation on a stance toward the surrounding characters.²⁴ Whenever possible, a music director should instruct his students to practice vocals with the correct mentality, including the character arc of the role. A rest on the page may seem routine and miniscule, but the moments dedicated to the implications of that moment could spawn a jaw-dropping effect simply through the pointedly intentional absence of vocal sound.

Healthy Technique and Choreography Integration

Techniques for theater vocal rehearsal are not limited to teaching music unto the final product but should include consideration of the individuals in the room and their physical needs. Safety must always be a priority given the strain over the full rehearsal process. The key to a safe vocal rehearsal is to foster mastery of the various types of singing, not just in terms of style but regarding technique. To healthily sing above the natural *passagio*, singers will often belt in a mix.²⁵ It is increasingly common in professional musical theater for performers to span various styles of singing (e.g., a *Les Misérables* swing covering Eponine, a belter, and Cosette, a legitimate soprano), but an undeveloped mix will stand in the way of this ability. Some basic tips to develop this mix include practicing vowel modification or substitution, identifying sections of the music that belong to various registers, observing masterful demonstrations of the transitions, and singing at a comfortable volume in practice. Interestingly, some studies found belting to utilize a higher larynx position, while others noted the possibility of producing a belt from a low

²⁴ Augustin Lefebvre, "Reading and Embodying the Script during the Theatrical Rehearsal," *Language & Dialogue* 8, no. 2 (2018): 261-288.

²⁵ Michael Goodrich, "Technique Transcends Style," *Back Stage East* 48, no. 40 (October 2007): 31.

larynx position.²⁶ These conflicting reports suggest that anatomical approaches to pursuing a uniform sound across a group of singers should perhaps be abandoned in exchange for vowel modification and tone. In the case of a particularly demanding role, the music director might want to schedule additional one-on-one time with a lead to hash out these methods in greater detail, but a fast learner or a student with prior training may respond well to quick allusions to these basic tips.

In an effort to protect the health of the performers, music directors should keep the big picture in mind while teaching vocals, constantly pondering questions of whether the students can replicate these vocals while carrying out a fully choreographed dance number. While the music director usually will not have the input to simplify the movements, he is postured to prepare the vocalists accordingly. Stephens and Wyon wrote on the immense impact choreography has on vocals in *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*:

Choreographers should be aware that the combination of singing and dancing can compromise metabolic recovery dynamics and could negatively affect (through increased blood lactate) subsequent dance sequences. Over a prolonged performance this could lead to reduced dance intensity and/or compromised movement and/or singing. Choreographically, lead singers have simplified dance repertoire so that their singing is not compromised but the chorus line choreography maintains its complexity and therefore is potentially vulnerable to compromised movement quality.²⁷

This excerpt implies that the ensemble should be the target audience for precautionary measures related to vocals paired with choreography, though leads would benefit as well because their movements are often the most featured and need to be solid in conjunction with difficult yet

²⁶ Matthias Echternach, Lisa Popeil, Louisa Traser, Sascha Wienhausen, and Bernard Richter, "Vocal Tract Shapes in Different Singing Functions Used in Musical Theater Singing—A Pilot Study," *Journal of Voice* 28, no. 5 (September 2014): 653-657.

²⁷ N. Stephens and Matthew Wyon, "Physiological Characteristics of Musical Theatre Performers and the Effect on Cardiorespiratory Demand Whilst Singing and Dancing," *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 35, no. 1 (March 2020): 54-58.

confident vocals. A music director can encourage ensembles to sing harmonies in choreography rehearsal, but that may be counterproductive in the eyes of the supervisor there; that being said, the music director can certainly implement movement into the vocal rehearsal. Notes and rhythms must be isolated first, but review sessions could involve movement to prepare the singers for the performance exertion to come later. If the actors cannot fully recreate their choreography in the rehearsal space available for vocals, there can be a modified version executed in place; similarly, if the actors have not yet learned the choreography for a number but know that it will be physically demanding, they could jog in place or do a simple pattern of movements that simulate the metabolic recovery process. Benefits of this modified movement include increased endurance, realistic practice, and more accurate feedback (for example, intonation fluctuation due to low breath support).

The reality of musical theater, especially at the high school level, is that the ensemble will not retain all that is taught in the first vocal rehearsal for each song. The music director should advocate for review opportunities to cover the ensemble numbers and reinforce what was initially taught, building on it wherever possible. Church testified from his experiences that performers will turn their attention mainly to staging and the technological side of the process after some time, meaning that well-taught material can slip the mind easily.²⁸ Review sessions could be the ideal time to implement some of these rehearsal techniques. While efficiency remains a critical consideration for a music review, there is more space for specificity in the areas that would make a difference in the performance as a whole.

²⁸ Church, *Music Direction for the Stage*, 184.

Conclusion

It is evident that a high school music teacher tasked with overseeing classroom choirs and musical theater vocals faces a daunting challenge. In both settings, effectiveness is the result of thorough planning, but the execution of an efficient rehearsal plays out very differently between the two art forms in terms of structure and techniques.

For a high school choir, the final destination is a performance that relies heavily or exclusively on the vocals. As a result, the rehearsals must be structured in such a way that all the fundamentals are taught with clarity and understanding, followed by a deep and precise coverage of the intricacies that transform a concert from good to great. There are many ways conductors can keep the pace of rehearsal moving fast while protecting the voices of the choir members, from tactics that change student approaches to methods that affect the communication style of the conductor. Ultimately, there are a multitude of moments dedicated to purely educational purposes, and the depth of musical analysis in the classroom will far supersede that of a musical theater vocal rehearsal.

Musical theater vocal rehearsals serve a different purpose because of their residence in a larger process. In a broad view, the main commonality between choir and vocal rehearsals is the instruction of notes and rhythms, but the priorities change drastically in theater because of the fast pace. One factor that sets vocal rehearsals apart is the creative team making decisions, as the music director is not the final authority on all acting ideas. Additionally, the vocals will later be paired with dance and interspersed with dialogue, meaning that every moment of instructional and review time is essential. Another consideration is the historical and cultural context along

with the greater context of the plot of the musical, driving the music director to know the show well and help other vocalists to be mindful in the same way.

There are a few general concepts that apply to any type of music ensemble at any age that will prove useful to a conductor. First and foremost is the importance of score study. Sufficient preparation will inform a good plan, which leads to rehearsal efficiency, a greater awareness from the podium, and a more wholistic approach to the education process (whether in a scholastic context or not). Another important element that should spill over into any music or teaching environment is clarity of expectations and goals; students and performers will achieve greater success if they are able to understand what is expected of them and can partner with the leader of the group toward common aims.

The “wearer of many hats” must be careful to know how the various performing arts forms are to be handled effectively. When this skill set meets a passion for facilitating performance, the beautiful display of human expression exceeds all objectives of student learning and audience entertainment through quality work and a positive learning experience.

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