

Cross-fertilization of ensemble repertoires:

A case for aspiring instrumental conductors to study choral music

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Thesis: By studying **choral music**, conductors can acquire rehearsal, score preparation and conducting skills to ensure successful collaborations and to perform transcriptions authentically.

Definition: **Choral music** includes choral repertoire (history, literature, text, language) and choral conducting (gestural vocabulary, score reading, rehearsal, directorship).

Examples of collaboration:

1. Choral-orchestral performances
 - i. Choral symphonies:
 1. Beethoven 9
 2. Mahler 2, 3, 8
 3. Shostakovich 13
 4. Hétu 5
 - ii. Orchestral works that employs a wordless chorus:
 1. Holst “Neptune” from *Planets*
 2. Scriabin *Prometheus*
 3. Ravel *Daphnis et Chloé*, Suite II
 - iii. Stand-alone choral-orchestral works:
 1. Elaborate:
 - a. Requiems (Verdi, Brahms, Britten)
 - b. Masses (Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Beethoven)
 - c. Oratorios (Bach *Passions*, Handel *Messiah*)
 2. Smaller-scaled:
 - a. Beethoven *Elegischer Gesang*
 - b. Brahms *Alto Rhapsody*
 - c. Mendelssohn Psalms 42, 95, 98, 114, 115 etc.
 - iv. Opera/Musical theatre choral numbers:
 1. Verdi from “Va, pensiero” from *Nabucco*
 2. Mascagni Easter Hymn from *Cavalleria Rusticana*
 3. “Do You Hear the People Sing?” from *Les Misérables*
 - v. Holiday concerts: Carols, Christmas songs

2. Choral-Wind Ensemble Performances:
 - a. Wind ensemble works that employ an optional chorus:
 - i. Husa *Apotheosis of this Earth*
 - ii. Berlioz *Grande symphonie funèbre et triomphale*
 - iii. Whitacre *Equus*
 - b. Wind ensemble works that requires members to sing as a choral section
 - i. Goldman *On the Mall*
 - ii. Grainger *Children's March*
 - iii. Xi Wang *Winter Blossom*
 - iv. Lots of Maslanka, Mackey etc.
 - c. Stand-alone choral works with wind ensemble accompaniment
 - i. Brahms *Begräbnisgesang*
 - ii. Hindemith *Apparebit Repentina Dies*
 - iii. Masses: Stravinsky/Bruckner (e minor)
 - iv. Pinkham Cantatas
 - v. Persichetti *Celebrations*
 - vi. Holsinger *A Song of Moses*
 - vii. Carols with brass quintet accompaniment
 - viii. E.g. [United States Air Force Singing Sergeant](#)
 - d. Ceremonies: National/school anthems, patriotic tunes
3. Other settings:
 - a. Appearing as a guest
 - i. Community: Guest conducting in your local choral societies/churches
 - ii. Public School: Guest conducting in your colleagues' choir concert
 - iii. College: Guest lecturing in your colleagues' choral conducting class
 - b. Emergency substitute conducting for rehearsals and performances
 - i. Sickness
 - ii. Accidents
 - iii. Maternity leaves
 - iv. COVID travel restrictions...
 - c. Commissions and consortiums of choral-orchestral works
 - d. Advising student composers

Skills acquired from studying choral repertoire: score preparation skills

1. General understanding the chorus as an instrument
 - a. Types of choruses and their main differences

- b. Understanding the human voice
 - i. Breath!!! Additional breath marks?
 - ii. Physical possibilities and limitations: range
 - iii. Pitch awareness
 - iv. Age: e.g. treble chorus
 - v. Level of training in stamina
- c. Homogeneity of a chorus
 - i. Range of timbre
 - ii. Solo vs choral singing
 - iii. Performing force: optimal numbers of singers per part
 - iv. Potential concerns with balance
- d. Composer
 - i. Comparing composers' vocal and instrumental outputs
E.g. Mozart's *Figaro* vs. Serenade No. 12 for Harmoniemusik
 - ii. Studying composers' choral oeuvre
E.g. Beethoven *Mass in C* vs. *Missa Solemnis*
 - iii. Comparing different composers' settings of the same text
E.g. Schubert *Masses* vs. Haydn *Masses*
 - iv. Studying the composer's choice of text and view on sociopolitical issues
E.g. Shostakovich 13 and Britten's *War Requiem*
- e. Poet/librettist
 - i. Knowledge of poet/ librettist/ other origins of text
 - 1. Historical background
 - 2. Their knowledge of language: e.g. Mendelssohn and English
 - ii. Knowledge of the composer's relationship with the poet/ librettist
E.g. Bach and Picander; Edward and Alice Elgar
- f. Text and language
 - i. Diction
 - 1. Imagining possibilities of different approaches to phonemes for drama
 - 2. **ENDING** consonants
 - 3. Matching instrumental bowing and articulation with the text
 - ii. Rhetoric and devices
 - 1. Music can enhance rhetoric with dramatic intensity, sonorities, choice of instruments, motifs etc.
 - 2. Musical depiction of rhetorical devices: E.g. Alliteration with repetition of notes

3. Phonetics, Phonology and Prosody: sounds and rhythm of the text
E.g. Iambic foot with swung rhythm
- iii. Foreign language
 1. Always acquiring two sets of translation
 - a. Word-for-word translation
 - b. Poetic translation
 2. Pronunciation
 - a. Performance practice: Lyric diction e.g. Russian and German
 - b. Regional diction: Ecclesiastical Latin vs. German Latin
- iv. Choral score reading
 1. Clefs; e.g. BGA vs. NBA
 2. Reading opening scores and orchestral reductions
 3. Unusual text underlay
- v. Theoretical implications
 1. Harmony:
 - a. Choice of doubling in triadic harmony
 - b. Spacing in relation to vocal timbre and range
 - c. Voice leading: Poulenc vs. Brahms
 2. Texture:
 - a. Homophonic and chordal sections
 - b. Polyphonic sections

Skills acquired from studying choral conducting

1. **Rehearsal skills** with choral singers: necessary for effective collaboration
 - a. Tradition and culture
 - i. Psychology of members
 - ii. Level of competence
 - iii. Pitch awareness
 - b. Number of rehearsals: orch vs choir; should you attend a chorus rehearsal?
 - c. Coaching rehearsals with vocal soloists
 - d. Differences between choral and instrumental scores/parts
 - i. Editions and discrepancies
 1. Rehearsal figures
 2. Pitches
 3. Underlay and slurs
 - ii. Choral members have information about other parts (orchestral reduction)

- iii. Good diction can help instrumentalists stay together: *recit.* sections
- e. Providing pitch: Is a rehearsal piano needed?
- f. Potential adjustments in orchestration: Additional doubling?
- g. Pulse: who provides pulse?
- h. Balance between chorus and instruments
- i. Blend
 - i. Internal blend in the chorus
 - ii. Between chorus and instruments
- j. Seating of the choral sections: mixed or in sections?
- k. Internal communication and leadership
 - i. Visual leadership
 - 1. String bow
 - 2. Percussion mallets
 - ii. Aural leadership: Rhythmic element
- l. Stopping and restarting: singers and instruments respond differently

2. Directorship skills

This presentation focuses on the music, but the following are important points:

- a. Administrative and managerial awareness: Knowing who is in charge
 - i. Avoiding conflict of interest with the choral director
- b. Other parties:
 - i. Composer
 - ii. Lyricist/librettist/poet
 - iii. Publisher, licensing and copyright

3. Adjustments in the gestural language of conducting

DISCLAIMER: *Conducting is conducting; 4/4 is 4/4. There is no **inherent** difference in gestural language between conducting voices and instruments. Over-conducting is over-conducting.*

That being said, some, but not all, discrepancies in scoring call for gestural adjustments. I think of the differences between conducting voices and instruments as different “accents” of the same language.

Working with different ensembles exposes the conductor to a **wider range of repertoire and styles.** The following are some skills that studying choral music will potentially equip you with:

- a. Minor gestural adjustments: Beats, rebounds and patterns
 - i. Lyricism informed by text
 - ii. Physics of sound production
 1. Consonants vs. instrumental articulation
 2. Vowels vs. sustaining instrumental sounds
 - iii. Prep beat examples
 1. Vague: Soft clarinet/strings/timpani roll/choral humming
 2. Clear: pizzicato/brass marcato/percussive hit/plosive consonants
 - iv. Beat/rebound size in relation to geography
 - v. Direction of cues
 - vi. Patterns and when to use them
- b. Listening: Conductors **model** good listening
 - i. Dramatic intensity
 - ii. Should a conductor mouth the text?
- c. Breath: Quality of breath affects certain musicians more than others
 - i. String/Percussion vs. Wind/Voice (Latter: usually more eye contact)
 - ii. Professional vs. Amateur
- d. Posture: All musicians are prone to negative effects of conductors' tension; singers are perhaps especially so.
- e. Trust: Connection with musicians

It's OK if you are not experienced in working with a choir!!!

Case studies

Choral-orchestral **collaboration**:

Case study 1: Bach, opening chorus from *St. John Passion*

Case study 2: Bach, first chorale from *Christmas Oratorio*

Instrumental **transcriptions** of choral works and *vice versa*

- "Authentic" rendition:
 - Why does it matter?
 - How to achieve that?
- Many types of instrumental transcriptions: we will focus on relatively **homogenous** ensembles
 - Choral: *a cappella* works
 - Instrumental: brass and string ensembles

Case study 3: Bruckner, 'Os justi' (trombone octet transcription by Gazda)

Case study 4: Barber, 'Agnus Dei' (composer's own choral transcription of *Adagio for Strings*)

Final thoughts: How should we go about studying choral music?

1. **SING** in a choir!
2. Choral method books
3. Guided observations (**CAUTION**: “Guided”)
 - a. Observe your choral conductor colleagues’ rehearsals
 - b. Reach out to the local choirs: professional AND amateur
 - c. What about YouTube videos?
4. Interviews, biographies, podcasts etc.