

STRUCTURING A MUSICAL CHORAL REHEARSAL

The way we rehearse a piece of music should be guided by its compositional structure. Here are some rehearsal ideas for chorus.

BY STEVEN M. DEMOREST

One of the first questions a novice conductor asks when faced with his or her first *real* rehearsal is "Where do I begin?" In his book *Choral Directing*, the late Wilhelm Ehmann offered this observation:

The approach of allowing the essential style and character of the musical work to determine the method of practicing the parts in the order in which they probably were composed, of taking note of the musical structure ... turns the whole learning process into a musical experience.¹

As Ehmann suggested, a structural approach to planning can provide a more musically satisfying rehearsal experience. It can also provide a more comprehensive music education within the choir rehearsal. Approaching a piece structurally offers numerous opportunities for guided listening, analytical thinking, and conceptual understanding that go beyond the literature under study.

Rehearsal Preparation

The first step in planning a rehearsal is to understand the compo-

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Planning ahead can help make rehearsals musically satisfying for all participants.

sitional structure of the work and then identify its natural breaks. Knowledge of these elements will provide a guideline for developing the most musical rehearsal sequence possible. Three aspects of compositional structure must be addressed: form, texture and unifying element. Does the piece have a repeating form such as strophic, ABA, or rondo, or is it through-composed? What is the texture of the piece? Is it primarily homophonic with a clear melody, contrapuntal with

greater equality of voicing, or a balance of both? The texture can often determine the order in which parts are sequenced for learning. Finally, what is the single unifying element of the work? Is it the formal structure, a recurring rhythmic or melodic motive, the text structure, or a single melodic idea? In a folk-song setting, the unifying element would be the original folk-song melody—the element on which the piece was based. Another way to think of the unifying element

is to ask, "What one musical idea can I teach the choir that will make learning and understanding the rest of the piece easier?" Whatever the answer, this will be the key to teaching the piece in the most efficient and musical way.

Where are the natural breaks in the piece? Finding these breaks will help you organize your teaching of the piece into blocks that can be successfully mastered in a single rehearsal. The "rehearsal blocks" are determined by both the natural section divisions of the piece and the ability of the group being rehearsed. The piece may divide naturally into sections that are twenty-four measures long, but a group may not be able to handle that much music successfully in one rehearsal. One must sometimes look for logical musical breaks within sections of the work to shorten the rehearsal block. Having a manageable rehearsal segment contributes to the overall feeling of accomplishment and allows for polished performances of at least a segment of a piece during each rehearsal. When rehearsing pieces in these smaller blocks, the conductor must be careful to attend to the transitions between sections so the choir develops a sense of the work as a whole.

Rehearsal Sequence

Next, the conductor must determine a starting point and a sequence for learning the music. The first rehearsal should begin with an introduction of the piece as a whole to give the singers a sense of the style and character of the work. This introduction can include a discussion of historical background and stylistic information, but initially should be based in sound. Have the choir listen to or perform something that gives a musical sense of the piece—whatever activity best introduces the overall character. This can be an excellent opportunity for guided, critical listening, with the clear goal for the singers of enhancing their own performance. Ask the singers to identify specific material or characteristics from hearing a recording of the piece, a performance on the piano, or a different piece with similar stylistic or structural characteristics.

This focused, sound-based introduction should lead naturally to the spot where they will begin rehearsing.

The starting point should be a portion of the piece that contains structurally important material, features all parts singing, and can be successfully learned in the first rehearsal. The conventional wisdom of starting with the hardest portion first to get it out of the way does not often promote a feeling of success or reveal as much about the musical organization of the piece.



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Having chosen a starting point, the conductor must decide on the order in which to teach the parts. Most of us do not have groups that sing a work flawlessly at the first reading. Although a choir should be challenged to sight-read, we must also acknowledge the students' ability level when we approach choral literature. A structural sequence to part-learning will challenge the group to sight-read, but at an appropriate level. It also allows the conductor to begin working on the musical characteristics of the piece in the first rehearsal. For example, we may do a great deal of sight-reading practice in unison and then move to

four-part music, a quantum leap that is often beyond our singers' reading level. An intermediate step would be to have the entire choir sight-read a single, structurally important line in unison before adding other parts. Starting with a single line provides a reading experience at the appropriate level and allows the conductor to work on musical elements such as phrasing, dynamics, and diction; this knowledge can then be transferred to singing the individual parts. This is a more musical approach to part-learning than is the notion of "getting through" the notes first before getting to the music.

To illustrate a structural approach in greater detail, we can turn to three choral works that represent three distinct styles and compositional structures: Guillaume Costeley's "Allon, gay Bergeres"—a Renaissance chanson in rondo form; Gustav Holst's "I Love My Love"—a strophic-variation setting of a well-known folk song; and George Frideric Handel's "For unto Us a Child Is Born"—a fugal work with contrasting homophonic material from *Messiah*. Although these pieces are most appropriate for high school or college level, the teaching principles may be applied to choral groups working on almost any level of literature. For each piece, we can consider how the compositional structure suggests a possible strategy for introducing and teaching the piece.

A Renaissance Chanson

"Allon, gay Bergeres" has a straight rondo form (A-B-A-C-A-D-A'-E-A) with a homophonic A section and imitative counterpoint in the contrasting sections. The unifying element is the repeating A section, particularly the rhythm pattern of that section. The form provides relatively short, manageable rehearsal blocks. If the group is more advanced, the director might combine several sections of the piece in one rehearsal. To introduce the work, have the students speak the rhythm pattern of the A section on rhythm syllables, solfège, or a neutral syllable. Then ask them to identify repetitions of that pattern in the score while they listen to the piece, either played on the piano or presented in an excellent recording.

Help your students make the connection of that pattern with the A section material and its variations and, from that, have them determine the form of the piece. Any of the A sections could serve as a starting point; however, the first A section contains three measures that do not recur in later A sections. If we start with the second A section (figure 1), we must determine a teaching sequence (remember that we have already presented the rhythm and the form in the introduction). Three possibilities are suggested by the structure; the choice among them depends on the group's ability:

- Because of the harmonic nature of the A sections, all four parts could read slowly in rhythm on a solfège or neutral syllable. This helps the choir to think vertically about their parts, but it may create problems with the tenor syncope.

- To clarify the harmonic outline, introduce the outer voices first, with the altos and basses singing the bass part and the tenors and sopranos singing the soprano part. Then add the tenors and altos singing their own

parts. An intermediate step would be to add the tenors, speaking their rhythm first to ensure a clean syncope, and then have them sing their part.

- Teach the text when teaching the rhythm. Although in French, the text is relatively simple and, as with many Renaissance pieces, the accents are text-based so it can help to introduce articulation early. One can then sequence the part-learning in one of the two previously suggested ways.

Regardless of the choice made, each step in the sequence should focus on musical elements. When reading the rhythm alone, for example, make sure that the articulation and text accents are in the singers' minds before adding the text or the pitches, and then continue to reinforce these elements throughout rehearsal. Focusing on musical characteristics strengthens rather than weakens a choir's memory for the new material. The piece becomes more than just a series of notes; it becomes music. The first rehearsal segment could finish with a sense of the whole by performing the entire piece, singing the A sections

while sight-reading or chanting the other material, either with or without piano doubling. The choir has achieved a polished and musically satisfying performance of six measures of music, and those six measures unlock the structure of the entire piece.

A Folk Song Arrangement

Holst's "I Love My Love" is a folk song in the form of a strophic variation with the verses providing the rehearsal blocks. The folk melody provides the unifying element in pieces of this type, and that is where the introduction should begin. As Ehmann observed, "If the harmonic structure of a composition is bound to a melody, the entire choir should first sing the tune until it is thoroughly familiar to everyone."²

The choir should first sing the melody a cappella, lowered to a more comfortable key if necessary. This is a good reading challenge and an excellent introduction to the Dorian mode. It is also the way the song was originally conceived. Directors will probably find that many of their basses can sing the bass line to songs the choir

Figure 1. Second refrain of Costeley's "Allon, gay Bergeres"

The musical score is written for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. It is in 4/4 time and consists of six measures. The lyrics are: "Al - lon, gay, gay, gay Ber - ge - res, al - lon, gay, Al - lon, gay, soy - ez le - ge - res, Suy - vez moy." The Soprano and Alto parts have identical lyrics. The Tenor part has the same lyrics but includes a syncope on "Suy - vez moy." The Bass part has the same lyrics but includes a syncope on "Suy - vez moy." and ends with "Un beau".

has learned, but these same singers would be hard-pressed to sing the melody. If the other voices don't know what the melody sounds like, how can they listen for it and balance to it in performance? Work first for a musical performance of the folk melody, emphasizing the shape of the high-arching phrases and the word stresses that sometimes counter the pitch level (such as "walk-ing" in the segment shown in figure 2). After a musical performance of the melody, ask the singers to trace the location of the melody in each verse while they listen to a good recording, hear it played on the piano, or sight-read. This becomes a particular challenge in verse four, where the melody is traded from part to part.

The purpose of playing a recording for a choral group is to give an initial sense of the character of the work; however, the recording should not be used to teach the parts or to set an interpretation. The conductor should use the recording to help the choir focus on listening to key elements, not as a sing-along tool. We all recognize the need to emphasize sight-reading skills in the choral rehearsal, but the ability to listen intelligently is an equally important part of comprehensive musicianship.

There are two possible starting points, and each suggests a different sequence for the rehearsal of the Holst:

■ Verse 1 (see figure 3): This is an

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The starting point should be a portion of the piece that contains structurally important material, features all parts singing, and can be successfully learned in the first rehearsal.

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instance where starting at the beginning can be beneficial. All voices are singing, and it is the simplest presentation of the melody. In addition, the first two verses are set identically, so the choir learns a good portion of the piece. After reading the melody line together, the altos and basses could move to the bass part. This is the logical sequence of parts in a homophonic setting because it helps students understand the outlines of the harmony. The tenors and altos can then be

moved to their parts as the conductor sees fit. Although students may initially read different voice parts, once a section sings their part, they should stay on it. This provides a sense of "building up" as the texture becomes more complex, rather than a random skipping from part to part.

■ Verse 4 provides a more climactic starting point and an interesting challenge to choral balance because the melody moves quickly from voice to voice. Begin by having the students sing only when the melody is in their part. Although this is a more difficult task than singing Verse 1, it complements the introduction of the piece because all of the voices share a portion of the melody in this verse. Then the voices can gradually begin to sing their entire part, being careful to keep the balance relative to the melody.

The focus of the rehearsal must be on maintaining the original character and beauty of the folk melody. In the first rehearsal, one might only achieve a musical performance of the folk melody and an understanding of where it fits in Holst's setting. This will still be more musically satisfying than slogging through parts verse by verse, and it will pay musical dividends in future rehearsals.

A Choral Fugue

For any fugue, the subject and countersubject provide important unifying elements. "For unto Us a Child

Figure 2. The first eight measures of the "I Love My Love" melody

Andante

Figure 3. The beginning of Verse 1 of "I Love My Love" by Gustav Holst

Andante
p
A - broad as I was walk - ing, one eve - ning in the spring,
A - broad as I was walk - ing, one eve - ning in the spring,
A - broad as I was walk - ing, one eve - ning in the spring,
A - broad as I was walk - ing, one eve - ning in the spring,

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Is Born" from Handel's *Messiah* also features homophonic writing and prominent rhythmic motives. The sections of the piece are long, but there is a great deal of repeating material, so the key is to learn the musically important lines first and then fill in the rest.

The best way to introduce this piece is to find a statement of the fugue subject that falls in a comfortable tessitura. The alto answer to the subject in measure 18 (Figure 4) is a better choice for tessitura than the opening subject in the soprano. Having all voices sing the alto line simplifies the reading challenge. The conductor can focus on achieving unified diction and articulation with all voices on the fugue subject, which the singers can then transfer to their own parts. Since it is a "real" answer (the exact intervals are maintained at all pitch levels), the choir can also solidify intonation.

Once the subject has been mastered, go back and read through the entire piece, having each section sing their own part, but only when they have the subject or its answer. This technique clarifies the relationship between the subject and the melismatic countersubject, while simplifying the musical demands. It also helps the choir identify when their line is most important. That will solve balance problems in the middle section where two entrances of the subject head are

followed by the tenors and basses sharing the complete subject against the alto countersubject.



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After the introduction, one could return to the opening and have everyone sing the countersubject as it appears in the bass part (figure 5). This is a more comfortable tessitura, and it allows the choir to establish a uniform articulation and intonation on the sixteenth-note melisma. If the choir is less advanced, one could add the countersubject one or two voices at a time while the other voices sing their subject material. The new mater-

ial could be introduced on solfège or a neutral "doo." The consonant of each syllable would clean up the sixteenth-note articulation and using a syllable against the text of the subject would ensure the proper balance.

The B material, beginning with the phrase "Wonderful Counsellor," is very rhythmic and could be introduced in this rehearsal by speaking and then taught later. The rehearsal could end by singing the A sections and speaking the B sections with their prominent rhythmic motives. Everyone has sung during the entire rehearsal and has focused on musical elements such as balance and articulation while learning some difficult material.

Potential Benefits

A structural approach to rehearsing requires that the conductor have a thorough knowledge of the formal characteristics of the score. Translating that knowledge into an individualized rehearsal sequence for each piece may seem time-consuming at first, but the time saved in rehearsal is worth the effort. The benefits to the choir can be summarized in the following four points:

- *Development of comprehensive musicianship*—We are not just conductors; we are teachers with choral literature as our medium of instruction. We must use the musical properties of that literature to teach larger concepts. By teaching structurally, we

Figure 4. The statement of the subject in the alto part of "For unto Us a Child Is Born" from *Messiah* by G. F. Handel

For un - to us a child is born, un - to us a son is giv - en, un - to us a son is giv - en;

Figure 5. The statement of the countersubject in the bass part of "For unto Us a Child Is Born" from *Messiah* by G. F. Handel

For un - to us a child is born, un - to us a son is giv - en;

develop a choir's ability to think analytically about what they are doing.

■ *Promoting an aesthetic experience*—As choral directors, we spend roughly 95 percent of our time with the choir rehearsing music, but only 5 percent performing it. If we do not provide aesthetic experiences in each rehearsal, we are cheating ourselves and our choirs out of a great deal of enjoyment. By teaching in shorter blocks based on the musical structure, we can work to bring a portion of the piece to a musically satisfying point each day and give the choir a sense of the finished product. They shouldn't have to wait until the concert to "make music."

■ *Involvement in the rehearsal*—We all know how important it is to have everyone in the choir singing as often as possible in rehearsal. Teaching

structural lines to the group in unison provides this kind of involvement and promotes the transfer of musical principles from one part to another. It is also crucial that they be involved mentally. The use of questions to promote critical listening in rehearsal to identify important lines and expressive elements keeps the rehearsal challenging even when students are not singing.

■ *Efficient use of rehearsal time*—Conductors, regardless of their schedule, never feel that they have enough rehearsal time. Structural teaching provides an efficient and better remembered sequence for learning. When the students learn not only the notes but also the musical character of a work, their memory of the piece is improved. In later rehearsals, one can reestablish the character of the piece

by starting with the well-learned block from the previous rehearsal before going on to new material. A structural and musical approach to a new piece can make rehearsals much more efficient and enjoyable for *all* participants. All the choral techniques in the world can't compensate for a poorly chosen rehearsal sequence. By developing a choir's understanding of musical structure, the conductor can improve both the quality of a work's final performance and the quality of the students' musical education.

Notes

1. Wilhelm Ehmann, *Choral Directing*, translated by G. Wiebe (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1968), 201. (Original work published in 1949.)

2. Ehmann, 186. ■