Profane Commandments for the Sacred Process: Rehearsing

Deanna Joseph
Georgia State University, djoseph@gsu.edu

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In this issue...

A *Delayed Introduction*, Bryan Black, GA ACDA President
A message from our chapter president

**College and University News**, Dr. Michael Fuchs, Director of Choral Activities, Clayton State University
Georgia ACDA R & S Chair for Colleges and Universities

*Dr. Fuchs introduces himself and reports some wonderful news from our colleges and universities.*

**The Music of Dan Forrest**, Dr. Susan Roe, Professor of Voice, Director of Choral Music, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College,
Georgia ACDA R & S Chair for Two-Year Music Programs

*Dr. Roe shares her experience working with South Carolina-based composer Dan Forrest and offers insight on his music.*

**Profane Commandments for the Sacred Process: Rehearsing—Also known as “Dehning’s Dozen” From “Chorus Confidential” by William Dehning**
Dr. Deanna Joseph, Director of Choral Activities, Georgia State University

*Dr. Joseph describes William Dehning’s book and offers important rules for conductors to follow in rehearsal.*

**The Middle School Choral Program – A Great Place to Build Community and Develop Leaders**, Suzanne Woodruff, Choral Director, Woodward Academy, Georgia ACDA R & S Chair for Middle School

*Our Chair for Middle School offers perspective on the importance of middle school choral education to the child for musical and personal growth and describes some techniques she uses to achieve these goals.*

**Sing ON! Developing a Successful A Cappella Group for Your Choral Program**, Dr. Timothy Powell, Director of Choral Activities, Davidson Fine Arts School, Georgia ACDA R & S Chair for High School Choirs

*In our last issue, Dr. Leslie Blackwell interviewed Dr. Jeff Johnson about the acoUstiKats and the emergence of a cappella pop groups at the college level. In this issue, Dr. Timothy Powell continues the discussion with Dr. Johnson and includes Dr. Jeff Bauman on the conversation.*
Profane Commandments for the Sacred Process: Rehearsing—
Also known as “Dehning’s Dozen”

From “Chorus Confidential” by William Dehning

Dr. Deanna Joseph, Director of Choral Activities,
Georgia State University

It’s the time of year again. By this point, all of our ensembles are running on all cylinders. Fall concerts have come and gone and most of us are preparing for various holiday performances.

For choral conductors, this time of year holds great potential. We are at that point where we know the strengths and weaknesses of our ensembles, and yet we still have time to make significant improvements in how they sound.

I’ve come to adore William Dehning’s book, Chorus Confidential. It’s smart, funny, not too long-winded, and best of all, very true and extraordinarily practical and useful. (It’s also very affordable. You can obtain a new copy on Amazon for $24.00.) Below is an excerpt from the book on rehearsal technique. It’s his take on the Ten Commandments: a choral credo, if you will. I hope you find it as useful as I do.

I. Thou shalt know and love thy score with all thy soul and all thy mind. You know it by playing it, singing it, and staring at it for hours. Learn a score from the inside out. Recordings teach it to you from the outside in and are not the shortcut that they appear to be.

II. Thou shalt know exactly what thou wantest to accomplish in every rehearsal. How long will each task take and how will it be done? Enter with a plan.

III. Thou shalt give a reason for stopping. And then speak to that point. Know what you want to say before you stop. If you don’t know, don’t stop.

IV. Thou shalt talk only when necessary. Conduct more. Talk less. If you think you want to talk about the “cloud-like buoyancy” of a rhythm, try singing it for them. Modeling is more powerful than words. You should also be able to show it (with the baton) instead of describing it with words. Now, if you have tried both of the above without results, then you
may try “cloud-like buoyancy.”)

V. Thou shalt make certain that the “second time around” is really different. You have made a suggestion or a correction and they are doing it again. Hold their feet to the fire!

VI. Thou shalt admit thine own mistakes. If you make a mistake, just admit it openly. It’s okay. What’s not okay is assuming that the ensemble doesn’t notice or blaming the ensemble for our own mistakes.

VII. Thou shalt not create problems; wait for them to happen. Lines to avoid: 1. “Okay, let’s start and see how far we get.” 2. This is tough – I hope we can do it.” They can if we can!

VIII. Thou shalt not waste time on minute details, which are in inverse proportion to the total effect. Scene at a conducting workshop of college choral conductors working with chorus and orchestra under the tutelage of a mentor: music plays, conductor conducts, things are generally okay, but altos sang F instead of F#, basses were late on an entrance, articulation of the winds was long instead of short, and the violins were virtually swimming in difficult 32nd-note passage. Music stops. Mentor to supplicant: “Did you like it?” Supplicant (after some pause): “Yes, well, the chorus could have exploded the final ‘t’ a bit more…” Even the gods wept.

IX. Thou shalt speak loudly, slowly, clearly. …And almost never while the choir is singing. This is usually futile and, to them, often maddening.

X. Thou shalt be schizophrenic. With gesture, inspire — with ears, correct. One function tends to cancel out the other, so beware. In fact, avoid doing anything in rehearsal (except praising them) that you cannot do in performance: singing, snapping, clapping, stomping, yelling “shh”, and such.

XI. Thou shalt make music at least once in every rehearsal. We owe it to each other. This is why we all choose to be here. Save time to go through a section of the piece, let mistakes happen, and do not stop. Their attention is greater and so is yours. It will help everyone fall in love with the piece and enjoy the rehearsal process more.

XII. Thou shalt know when to quit. Sense the point of diminishing returns on an interval, a mood, a difficult section, and a particular tone quality. Try it again at the next rehearsal. Admitting defeat is not wrong. “Plodding along in the face of certain doom” (Garrison Keillor) is wrong.