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Patrick K. Freer

Georgia State University, pfreer@gsu.edu

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GUIDELINES FOR GUEST CONDUCTORS OF HONOR CHOIRS

Patrick K. Freer

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of honor choir events each year across the United States. In Georgia alone, there are over one hundred MEA-sponsored annual honor choirs. Many conductors will additionally work with honor choirs at the city, municipal, and county levels. Still others will work with ensembles representing churches, private schools, and community-based programs. With so many annual opportunities, most choir directors will likely be invited to conduct an honor choir at one point or another.

It has been a few years since I began conducting honor choirs. My first experiences were fine, but they were not the transformative events that I'd hoped they would be for the students involved. As I received more and more invitations, I began to search for information about how I could become more effective, but I found few guidelines written specifically for conductors. However, I kept returning to John Dewey's analogy of the teacher as navigator.¹ This view of navigation suggests that our job is to steer students along a course of music learning, helping them avoid educational obstacles that would impede their progress. This presumes, however, that the teacher/conductor can see the course clearly ahead. This article presents an outline of the journey (or course) conductors embark upon when they accept the responsibility for navigating an honor choir toward a successful conclusion.

Honor Choir as Musical Experience

An honor choir can be seen in different ways, depending on whose point of view is being considered. A teacher might see an honor choir as a step in a student's ongoing musical

development. A student might view an honor choir as a series of discreet events, perhaps beginning with an audition and ending with a well-deserved celebration following the performance. An audience member might focus on the final concert itself, whether they were actually in attendance or hearing a recorded performance. Each of these viewpoints is important to consider when envisioning the functions of an honor choir's conductor, repertoire, instructional strategies, and logistics.

In the end, the task for the honor choir conductor is very simple: to ensure that everyone is proud of and satisfied by his or her involvement in a successful experience. That task depends on the support of many people, so the conductor must understand the broad logistical and philosophical framework within which he or she will be working. Honor choirs vary widely in audition requirements, advance preparation, rehearsal time, and expected outcomes. Guest conductors need to carefully consider each of these factors when beginning to plan for a successful honor choir experience.

What constitutes a successful experience for all? Applause will greet every performance, and participants will state that the experience was unlike any they could have received in their home schools. And, in most cases, that's completely true. But, does the mere experience of performing in an honor choir constitute a successful event? Or, is there a specific set of instructional goals that conductors should bring to this choir simply *because* it's unlike any other the youngsters will have encountered? The entire honor choir event is guided by carefully chosen instructional objectives, continual assessment of progress toward those objectives, and instructional strategies that support those objectives. The final concert clearly celebrates choral performance. Yet, the concert encompasses only a fraction of the total time that singers spend with their conductors. The foundation of the honor choir experience is the rehearsal. The

rehearsal room is where guest conductors reinforce what students already know and provide experiences that equip them to return to their schools as stronger musicians and ensemble leaders.

The musical goals for the honor choir experience are the responsibility of the conductor. These have been clearly articulated by influential choral educator Anthony Barresi: 1) meeting the musical needs of students which might not be possible in their home schools, 2) exposing participants to a new conductor's pedagogical and musical approaches, 3) expanding students' exposure to challenging and developmentally-appropriate literature, 4) developing musical skills that students can use beyond the honor choir event, and 5) inviting teachers to gauge the effectiveness of the guest conductor's rehearsal, conducting, and performance techniques.² In addition to these expansive goals, honor choir conductors often approach repertoire selection and rehearsal planning with more specific objectives.³ These can address such rudiments as vowel unification, vocal technique/tone quality, sensitivity to phrasing and dynamics, and rhythmic integrity, etc. For instance, I frequently convey specific musical goals to the choir in the opening moments of our first rehearsal, link them to skills during the warm-up process, and then refer to them in many ways during subsequent rehearsals. This provides a sense of cohesiveness between repertoire selections and allows students to more easily categorize the musical understandings they gain during the experience.

Thinking about the conductor's goals for an honor choir is important, but seeing those goals in action can be even more beneficial. Before accepting the first invitation to conduct an honor choir, potential conductors are encouraged to attend a similar event, observing from the very first moment (the students' arrival) to the very last moment (the way in which students, parents, teachers and guest conductor interact following the performance). It might be wise to

identify yourself as a future conductor of honor choirs and seek the opportunity to speak with organizers, teachers, and if possible, the guest conductor. In other cases, veteran honor choir conductors may happily share their experiences and advice over a meal or via telephone.

After The Invitation

When you receive an invitation to guest conduct, you receive a true honor – validation by a committee of peer teachers and conductors. You were selected because of your teaching and conducting skills, and the selection committee sees a match between those skills and the needs of the students who will comprise the honor choir. First-time guest conductors may be tempted to change their rehearsal techniques or select completely unfamiliar styles of repertoire to meet preconceived notions about the role of honor choir conductors. Instead, remember that the selection committee simply expects you to employ the same skills that brought you to their attention in the first place.

One of the primary tasks for guest conductors is the submission of proposed repertoire for the organizing committee's approval. Guest conductors are often provided with programs from previous years as a guide. However, just because a concert was performed does not necessarily imply that it was a success. Ask for candid, specific feedback on the programming of past concerts and try to ascertain whether the repertoire was the reason for any problems or whether other factors (such as rehearsal pacing) may have been the cause. Try to obtain recordings of performances from previous years. These will help you match repertoire to the ensemble. First-time guest conductors may otherwise be tempted to choose a program that is too complex, requires too many languages, or contains too many genres.

In general, the process of repertoire selection takes far more time than you expect. Some

conductors plan ahead for this process by maintaining lists of repertoire that they might specifically use with honor choirs. Then, when invitations come, they choose from those lists rather than sorting through their entire library. This is very helpful when repertoire needs to be determined quickly. Regardless of which titles are ultimately chosen, repertoire is only a vehicle through which students will musically engage with you and their fellow choristers. The choral music experience does not exist on the printed page; it is what occurs during the collective music-making of all participants. This principle may help ease the concerns of conductors who obsess about repertoire selection (myself included!). Repertoire is important, but it's not the most significant component of the honor choir experience. Nonetheless, there is no greater frustration than to spend hours upon hours programming for an honor choir event, only to discover that some of the music is unavailable. Check to see that the repertoire you are considering is actually in stock and available through the merchant your organizer will be using. This step may save you hours of work later in the process.

Many honor choir conductors write a letter to the school directors who will teach the repertoire to students in advance of the first rehearsal. This letter presents a prime opportunity to provide directors with specific information that will help ensure success when the full ensemble finally meets together. Use this letter to indicate any deviations from or clarifications about the printed score, explain how students will be divided for various voicings, provide assistance with pronunciation issues, and offer background information that is not printed in the octavos themselves. This letter should not give details about choral tone or interpretation unless that information is critical to how the piece is to be taught. At this point in the process, teachers need just enough information to be helpful, but not so much information that the process of preparing the singers becomes burdensome. It is also helpful to provide a

recording of the more challenging pieces so that teachers and students can hear how the individual parts “fit” together.

Through the preparatory rehearsal process, “students should gain an increased understanding of the discipline, care, love, and work that must necessarily be a precondition to excellence in musical performance.”⁴ The most important person in this process is *not* the guest conductor, but is the school director who prepares the student prior to the first rehearsal. Guest conductors should see themselves as partners in the rehearsal process from the moment the repertoire reaches the hands of the students to the moment the concert begins. School directors and their students will appreciate any efforts that make the preparation of repertoire as clear and efficient as possible.

Planning Ahead for Rehearsals

The initial rehearsal of an honor choir event begins with a bit of nervousness and “controlled chaos” as students arrive, find their places among many unfamiliar faces, and prepare to meet their guest conductor. Several issues can be managed ahead of time so that these first moments can be productive. These include discipline, schedule, and, above all, score preparation.

Honor choir organizing committees differ in the approaches they take toward disciplinary issues within the ensemble rehearsal. It is important that guest conductors discuss this with the organizers prior to arrival. For instance, some organizers feel it is their responsibility to reprimand students for misbehavior while the guest conductor might prefer to deal with the situation in another way. If the committee knows what you expect, they will be able to support you in ways that complement your philosophical approach toward rehearsing.

Honor choir committees may determine the schedule for rehearsal days, but it is just as frequently up to the conductor to set the schedule with only a few restrictions (meal times, etc.). Be certain to schedule time for breaks, sectional rehearsals and logistical rehearsals (movement to and from the risers). The sooner you can determine the overall structure of the rehearsal days, the more thorough you can be in planning the content of the individual rehearsal sessions. Early and frequent communication with the organizing committee will assist in developing a schedule that works well for you and the choir.

It is essential that guest conductors know their scores completely before the first rehearsal begins. Students arrive with various degrees of familiarity with the selected repertoire. Students who are not prepared to sing the literature can upend even the most careful process of repertoire selection. Successful guest conductors pre-plan for these situations by studying their scores for instances where, instead of what is printed, a small ensemble might sing a particular section, a unison melody line might be sung instead of the four-part harmony, or the full choir might sing refrains while a soloist sings verses. I've even seen an honor choir performance where the ensemble sang on rhythm syllables instead of the printed German language. None of these solutions is ideal, but they are practical options for when students cannot meet the challenge of the repertoire. After all, the experience of the singers is paramount, and they need to feel that they have performed successfully at the peak of their ability levels. Be careful not to convey to the choir that you're making alterations because they have failed. Rather, simply make the changes and continue to insist on high levels of musicianship as rehearsals proceed on the altered sections. Deliberate score study and some forward thinking will prepare you for almost any situation related to student preparedness.

Two other musical issues should be determined before the first rehearsal day. First, evaluate any movement or choreography suggested by the repertoire. There will never seem to be enough rehearsal time for honor choirs, and the teaching of choreography that is complex or physically strenuous may not make the most efficient use of time. Second, consider whether students should memorize the music for performance. My general policy is not to require memorization, but to invite students to memorize their music. I want the experience to be enjoyable, and it simply will not be enjoyable if a singer is anxious about memorization. If only one student wishes to hold music, then everyone holds music (keep in mind that you may need to modify any movement that involves hands!). Whatever your decision, it is helpful to know how you will handle memorization before rehearsals begin.

Finally, several authors have written articles for organizers of honor choir events, with specific attention to caring for the needs of guest conductors.^{5,6} You might review these articles to better understand the expectations of your hosts. Here are some additional considerations that you can address before rehearsals begin:

- take care of yourself by packing snacks, water, and throat lozenges;
- think about what you will wear and the message your attire will send during rehearsals and performance; a tuxedo may not be appropriate if students are in khakis and t-shirts!
- review different approaches you might need for early morning or late night rehearsals.

Arrival and First Rehearsal

On the day of the first rehearsal, plan to arrive early to familiarize yourself with the venue, become acquainted with your hosts, and get a sense of the mood of the choristers and teachers as they arrive. Use the pre-rehearsal time in the venue to mentally rehearse any special logistical

needs you envision for the choir, especially if you will utilize distinctive staging or incorporate a processional. At all times, be aware that your role as a model of professionalism and musicianship never stops (much like a very lengthy job interview!). Teachers and students will watch you from the moment you arrive in the parking lot until you drive away after the concert.

As the time nears for the first rehearsal, think about how you will greet students. Do you want to mingle and converse with students as they arrive, or would you rather wait for a formal introduction by your hosts? The opening of the first rehearsal is critically important. Some honor choir conductors begin with an inspirational speech enumerating the goals of the event. Other conductors begin with a full warm-up session that sets musical parameters for the work ahead. Still others begin with a brief warm-up and then lead students through a complete run-through of the concert program to gauge their preparedness.

No matter how you begin the first rehearsal, it is important that this be the most carefully planned segment of the entire honor choir event. A host of an all-state choir I recently conducted said he could tell within 5 minutes of the opening rehearsal whether the entire event would be a success. Key to this success is the students' first impression of the conductor.

During Rehearsals

If the initial rehearsal segment has been carefully planned, the content of subsequent rehearsals will easily fall into place. There are two basic duties of the conductor during these rehearsals: 1) present the repertoire and related skills, and 2) respond to the choir's work. Conductors can determine how they will complete the first task (presenting) as they sketch their overall rehearsal plans. The second task (responding) is more difficult to predetermine and requires a great deal of skill and sensitivity.

Effective response to the choir's work involves the cycle of error *prediction*, error *detection*, and error *correction*. Honor choir conductors complete this cycle many times during each minute of the rehearsal. Care and judgment is needed to determine which errors to correct and which to ignore. Some conductors believe that any error is significant; these tend to be ineffective honor choir conductors because the choristers perceive them as overly critical and pedantic. Rather, the conductor needs to determine which errors precipitate other errors. Many small errors will disappear as larger issues are resolved. Use the time between rehearsals to decode any persistent errors, decipher the underlying problem, and define the best course of action toward achieving a positive result.

As rehearsals proceed, be mindful that honor choir events are physically and mentally exhausting for all participants. The length of time that students are required to remain attentive is unusual. For this reason, consider incorporating many shifts of activity, focus, grouping, and instructional techniques within the rehearsal process. (It is helpful for school directors working within block schedules to see how you maintain student attention during lengthy rehearsals.)

Here are some other ideas for promoting effective rehearsals:

- decide how you will call the choir into session following a break; some conductors want their hosts to manage these moments, while others incorporate musical activity into transitions so that rehearsals emerge seamlessly from breaks;
- establish how much verbal interaction you want with singers during rehearsals; you might opt to build some time for reflective discussion into the rehearsal plan;
- save simple movements, clapping, and body percussion for introduction during final rehearsals when attention can be flagging; however, if these “extras” are complex, consider incorporating them into rehearsals from the very first moment;

- determine when and how you will efficiently audition students for solos or small ensembles; this process can become overwhelming if large numbers of students are involved; think about what you will do if the audition reveals, for example, two gifted soloists instead of the one you had imagined; let other teachers write down the names of auditionees so that you can focus on the musical issues.

The Performance Day

Much of the performance day will be driven by the logistics of dress rehearsals, time for students to eat and change into concert attire, and the final pre-concert rehearsal. As the performance nears, avoid the urge to address large numbers of musical issues by increasing the pace of rehearsal instruction. Doing so will only change a healthy sense of anticipation into an unhealthy sense of tension. Instead, continue to calmly reinforce the goals you introduced during the first rehearsal. Reassure students that you are teammates who will work together for a successful performance. This is especially important during “dress rehearsals” that occur several hours before the concert, when they are dominated by logistical concerns, or when there is not enough time to sing through all of the music in its entirety. Students may not recognize that there will be a final pre-concert rehearsal during which any problems can be addressed.

The final pre-concert rehearsal is usually scheduled for the moments before students proceed to the stage. Think carefully about the concert experience you want students to have and what you can do during that rehearsal to positively affect the outcome. For example, I encourage laughter and relaxation during the pre-concert rehearsal, have students articulate their progress since the first rehearsal, and remind singers that the process of working together has been more important than the concert could ever be. Then, I lead the choir through the initial and final

entrances of their repertoire as a way to remind them of what is to follow. I find that this relaxes students and puts them in a positive mindset prior to the concert.

The Concert

There is no need to outline here what occurs in a well-managed performance situation.

But, guest conductors should be cognizant of several issues unique to honor choir concerts:

- students will likely be standing for an extended period of time, whether onstage or backstage; where possible, ask the organizing host to limit the number of speeches that will be given while students are assembled onstage;
- think ahead about how you will manage onstage situations that don't go as planned; for instance, if a soloist forgets his words, it might be appropriate to re-sing the piece after providing an octavo for the student's use so that he has a successful experience;
- speak with the organizing host about what will happen in the case of student illness during the concert;
- plan ahead for where you will stand during applause and how you will acknowledge that applause; I prefer to stand beside the first row of singers and simply let the students receive the applause rather than take my own personal bows;
- if the students will be dismissed immediately upon the conclusion of the concert, you may wish to shake each student's hand as they step off the risers; this allows you to acknowledge the efforts of every singer and it makes the dismissal slower and safer; and, yes, bring plenty of hand sanitizer for washing up afterward!;
- think about where you will be positioned immediately following the concert; consider being available so that singers can have their parents take photos with you;

- be sure to plan for what you will do after you leave the concert venue; the drive home after an exhilarating concert can be extraordinarily lonely, so try to plan a romantic dinner with a loved one or an informal social gathering with friends.

Following the Event

I find it helpful to keep a journal of my thoughts following each honor choir event. I save all lesson plans and marked scores so that I can refer to them in the future. Ask the organizing committee if you can see any questionnaires the singers may have completed about their experience during the event. These questionnaires can be valuable when reflecting on the repertoire selection, the effectiveness of instructional approaches, and the overall pacing of the event.⁷ I also try to send handwritten thank-you notes to the school directors, student soloists, the accompanist, the organizing host, and any individuals who made my job easier.

In the end, the role of the guest conductor in “navigating” an honor choir requires a set of skills unlike any other instructional task that teachers normally encounter. The length of time from invitation to first rehearsal can be extremely long, and the success of the event can be influenced by how the conductor responds to each segment of the journey. It is my hope that the suggestions in this article will promote honor choir experiences that are musically, educationally, and personally satisfying for all involved.

NOTES

- ¹Simpson, Douglas J., Michael J. B. Jackson, and Judy C. Aycock. *John Dewey and the Art of Teaching: Toward Reflective and Imaginative Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005.
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- ⁴Cox, Dennis K. "The Choral Music Festival: Some Thoughts on How Better to Achieve High-Level Educational and Musical Goals through a Well-Planned Event." *Choral Journal* 26, no. 2 (September 1985): 23.
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