

# The First Rehearsal: A Guide for Choral Conductors

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What do choral conductors do in the first rehearsal of a new work? What is the most efficient way to rehearse? How do we prepare? Can we avoid the drudgery of “wood shedding”? How do we keep the choir engaged? Careful planning and mindful techniques will help us create a productive initial rehearsal. Before the first rehearsal, conductors must learn the score comprehensively. They should sing every part. They are ready to conduct the concert, and the music might even be memorized. It is unthinkable that a major conductor, with a world-class orchestra, would not know the score thoroughly before the first of only two or three rehearsals usually allotted for a concert. There simply is not enough time.

A community chorus or a school choir usually has more time to rehearse since the singers may not be as well trained. Thus the conductor may think the music can be learned during the rehearsal. But if we do not know beforehand exactly how we want the music

to sound and we keep changing our minds during rehearsals, we waste rehearsal time. Playing the music at the piano is a good way to learn the score. If you are not proficient at the keyboard, listen to a recording to get an idea how the work sounds. Try to listen to several renditions. It is better to listen to recordings after the score is learned because hearing a single performance may influence your interpretation and stifle creativity.

With older works, a scholarly edition should be consulted in order to know the composer’s intent. Many editions of the works of William Billings, for example, switch the soprano and tenor parts without any indication. In this article, the opening chorale of Bach’s motet, *Jesu, meine Freude*, BWV 227, will serve as a guide. We should compare whichever edition we are using with the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (Figure 1 on the next page).

Phrasing is marked above the score with numbers. The first part of the chorale, or *Stollen*, is 2+2+2, meaning 2 measures plus 2 measures plus 2 measures for a six-measure phrase, which is repeated. The second part, or *Abgesang*, is 2+2.5+2.5, for a total of seven bars. Thus, the overall form is easily memorized: 6+6+7.

Dynamics are marked above the score. Some conductors use the color blue for diminuendo, soft dynam-

*Jesu my joy etc.*

2+2+2  
*mp legato*

[E]

S  
Je - su, mei - ne Freu - de, mei - nes Her - zen Wei - de,  
ach wie lang, ach lan - ge ist dem Her - zen ban - ge

A  
Je - su, mei - ne Freu - de, mei - nes Her - zen Wei - de,  
ach wie lang, ach lan - ge ist dem Her - zen ban - ge

T  
Je - su, mei - ne Freu - de, mei - nes Her - zens Wei - de,  
ach wie lang, ach lan - ge ist dem Her - zen ban - ge

B  
Je - su, mei - ne Freu - de, mei - nes Her - zens Wei - de,  
ach wie lang, ach lan - ge ist dem Her - zen ban - ge

5 (11) [ts] 2+2.5+2.5  
*p*

S  
Je - su, mei - ne Zier, Got - tes Lamm, mein Bräu - ti - gam,  
und ver - langt nach dir!

A  
Je - su, mei - ne Zier, Got - tes Lamm, mein Bräu - ti - gam,  
und ver - langt nach dir!

T  
Je - su, mei - ne Zier, Got - tes Lamm, mein Bräu - ti - gam,  
und ver - langt nach dir!

B  
Je - su, mei - ne Zier, Got - tes Lamm, mein Bräu - ti - gam,  
und ver - langt nach dir!

15 *poco rit.*

S  
au - ßer dir soll mir auf Er - den nichts sonst Lie - bers wer - den.

A  
au - ßer dir soll mir auf Er - den nichts sonst Lie - bers wer - den.

T  
au - ßer dir soll mir auf Er - den nichts sonst Lie - bers wer - den.

B  
au - ßer dir soll mir auf Er - den nichts sonst Lie - bers wer - den.

Figure 1



ics, legato, and tenuto and red for crescendo, loud, marcato, and accents. It is assumed the choir will phrase or breathe where there are punctuation marks. Exceptions are written in. Measure numbers, ritardandi, etc., are all written into the score. Difficult passages are circled. Unless you understand German, the conductor and choir should write in a word-for-word translation above the music. Singing translations are not word for word. You would never sing a solo song without knowing the meaning of every word.

Jesu, Meine Freude,  
Meines Herzens Weide,  
Jesu, meine Zier!  
Ach wie lang, ach lange,  
Ist dem Herzen bange  
Und verlangt nach dir!  
Gottes Lamm, mein Bräutigam,  
Ausser dir soll mir auf Erden  
Nichts sonst Liebbers werden.

Jesus, my joy,  
my heart's pasture,  
Jesus, my treasure!  
Ah how long, ah long,  
has the heart suffered  
and longed after you!  
God's lamb, my bridegroom,  
besides you to me on earth  
nothing more dear shall be.

Next, design a minute-by-minute rehearsal plan. Writing “read through the Bach twice” on a sheet is not enough. A sample first rehearsal plan might look like this:

7:30-7:45 Put in markings, including a word-for-word translation and measure numbers.

7:45-7:47 Read up to tempo, men’s parts on da, sopranos singing with the tenors an octave higher, and the altos singing with the basses an octave higher.

7:47-7:49 Read through again, noting problem spots.

7:49-7:57 Tutti sing the tenor line slowly mm.1-6 and 17-19 on bo.

7:57-7:59 Read women’s parts on mu with tenors doubling the sopranos and basses doubling the altos an octave lower.

7:59-8:01 Read through again, noting problem areas, if any.

8:01-8:16 Add the German.

8:16-8:30 Shape the soprano melody, tutti on the soprano line.

8:30-8:32 Sing through the chorale as written.

Remain flexible. Some sections might be a little longer or shorter, but it is important to have a framework. Experience and familiarity with your choir will help you plan more efficiently. You will be able to estimate how long each segment will take and anticipate problem spots. An explanation of the above rehearsal plan will be helpful. See below.

1. Put in markings, including a word-for-word translation and measure numbers.

Make sure everyone has a pencil. Ask the choir to raise pencils in the air at the beginning of the rehearsal. If any are needed, wait patiently until other choir members give those without one a spare. This can be embarrassing. Singers will soon get in the habit of bringing a pencil to every rehearsal.<sup>1</sup>

Before a note is sung, have the choir members put all the markings from your score into their music, including measure numbers. Why practice something only to change it later? For example, if you don’t want breaths at the ends of mm. eight and ten, rehearsing with breaths several times will ultimately take longer to fix. Singing a passage piano for several weeks and then changing it to forte is a waste of time. You must know the music thoroughly and decide what you want before the first rehearsal.

If you are legally photocopying the music, you can

put all the markings in ahead of time in each vocal part. This is time-consuming for the conductor, but it will save valuable rehearsal time. An orchestra will usually have most of the markings in every member's music before the first rehearsal, in particular, bowings for the strings.

After the markings are in place, do not begin with a verbal introduction to the work. Choir members' eyes are guaranteed to glaze over. There is a place for talk but not before the choir has read the music. A good motto is, "Do it first, talk about it later." Our words will hold more meaning once the choir has experienced the music for themselves.

## 2. Read up to tempo....

*Jesu, meine Freude* is not particularly difficult to sing a tempo from the start. With more challenging music, however, singing up to speed the first time can be challenging. If the rhythmic patterns and/or pitches are particularly difficult, and it's impossible to read up to tempo, try singing the melody line in unison.

Rehearsing up to tempo the first time through the music provides a goal and serves as great motivation for the singers. When you rehearse slowly on the initial reading, you may be sending the message, "You aren't good enough to sing this a tempo. We have to take it slowly." Give it a try, even if things fall apart. Then, rehearse at a slower tempo if necessary.

## 3. Sing men's parts on da....

Singing without words is a much easier task. Save the text for later. One caveat—Choristers who do not read music find it much easier to follow along with the words. Count-singing (e.g., one-and-two-and-three) is a wonderful substitute for use of the text, but it is difficult for inexperienced singers to count-sing in the early stages of learning a work.

## 4. Sopranos sing with the tenors an octave higher and altos sing with the basses an octave higher.

When learning the notes, rehearse two vocal parts at a time. Conductors can hear mistakes just as easily

rehearsing two parts as one.<sup>2</sup> You save time and engage the entire choir. Letting half of the choir sit around, while not singing, achieves nothing and encourages inattention and chatting. Singing other voice parts improves sight-reading, heightens awareness of how voice parts interrelate, and extends vocal ranges. It may seem obvious, but we need to remind ourselves that our choir is there to sing, not listen to other parts rehearse. Single-part sectional rehearsals are a waste of time, create scheduling difficulties, and are often boring.

Alternatively, if you want to rehearse only the soprano and tenor lines, have the basses sing with the sopranos an octave apart and the altos with the tenors at the same pitch. When rehearsing soprano and bass only, tenors can sing the soprano part and altos the bass line, everyone an octave apart. Then, everyone sings all the time.

## 5. Read through again, noting problem spots.

Since you know the score well, it is tempting to start taking things apart right away. Nitpicking the first or second time through, though, can prove to be counterproductive. Often mistakes will fix themselves during the second read-through.

## 6. Tutti, sing the tenor line slowly, mm.1-6 and 17-19, on "bo."

The tenors have awkward intervals and may have trouble at the locations circled ahead of time. Do note that the rehearsal plan calls for everyone to sing on "bo." It becomes vocally tiresome to keep singing on the same nonsense syllable and may cause vocal tension and affect the tone. Even better, use da-ba or du-bi, as notated in Figure 2.



Figure 2

Dabada da ba da  
Dubidu du bi du

7. Read women's parts on "mu." Read through the work again.

Proceed as before, this time with men doubling the women's vocal lines and singing on a different nonsense syllable, mu.

8. Sing in German.

At this point, you might move on to a different work, but since the chorale is easy and learning it should go quickly, you could now add the German text. The choir will have already written in an exact word-for-word translation.

When you are not comfortable with diction in a particular foreign language, it is tempting to ask a choir member who speaks the language well to speak it for the other singers. In my view, this is usually a mistake. We don't speak the same way we sing, and it is nearly impossible to hear exactly what vowel is spoken on every syllable. Choral conductors must make every effort to teach themselves good singing diction so they are able to teach their choir members. Many excellent diction books are available. Learning the essentials of singing diction is not that difficult.

A pronouncing dictionary with IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols is also very useful, e.g., *Siebs Deutsche Hochsprache*. When performing in unusual languages, meet with a native speaker privately and go over the text, writing notes in your score.

Once you know exactly how the language should be sung, divorce the text from the music. Ask the choir to repeat after you as you sing the German, slowly, one

phrase at a time, on one pitch, a quarter-note for each syllable. When you sing the rhythms written in the music, it is sometimes difficult to tell if the choir is singing the proper pronunciation on shorter notes. I believe singing on a single pitch is more musical than having the choir speak the words (Figure 3).

Repeat—still on one pitch—with the rhythm of the music. In *Jesu, Meine Freude*, this technique appears elementary, but it allows the conductor to listen carefully to the choir's pronunciation of each syllable and is invaluable with more difficult works. Unified diction produces beautiful blend. If the music is photocopied (be sure it is legal), diction markings can be inserted into individual lines of music. Use IPA. It is not necessary to indicate every sound, but, for example, notes occurring on the first *e* of the word, *Herzens*, are open [E] (see m.3) and the first consonant of *Zier* is [ts] (see m.6) would be good reminders.

Adjacent words in German are not elided as frequently as in English or Italian, therefore, mark spaces before most words beginning with a vowel, *Lange/ist*, *bange/und*, *mir/auf*, and *auf/Erden*.

9. Shape the soprano melody, tutti.

If the choir has not grown tired of rehearsing the music, shape the melody. Have the entire choir sing the soprano line all the way through with the dynamics you have added. Shaping individual lines is particularly valuable in imitative music (e.g., fugues). Pay special attention to expressive words or phrases such as *Ach wie lang*, *ach lange* in m.7. Sing the meaning of words. Ask the choir to express a sense of weariness when they sing the phrase just mentioned.

In m. 10, the word *verlangt* should convey longing. Sing the first syllable lightly and stress the second. Sing the "l" a bit early. Urge the singers to use their imagination and communicate the emotion in their voices. The singers must become the music.

Good rehearsal technique includes trying to rehearse at least some of the same music at the next rehearsal. Repetition will help cement what the choir has learned. Anyone absent from the first rehearsal of a work will not be left unexposed to new music.

Always start and end rehearsals on time. Even if




Figure 3

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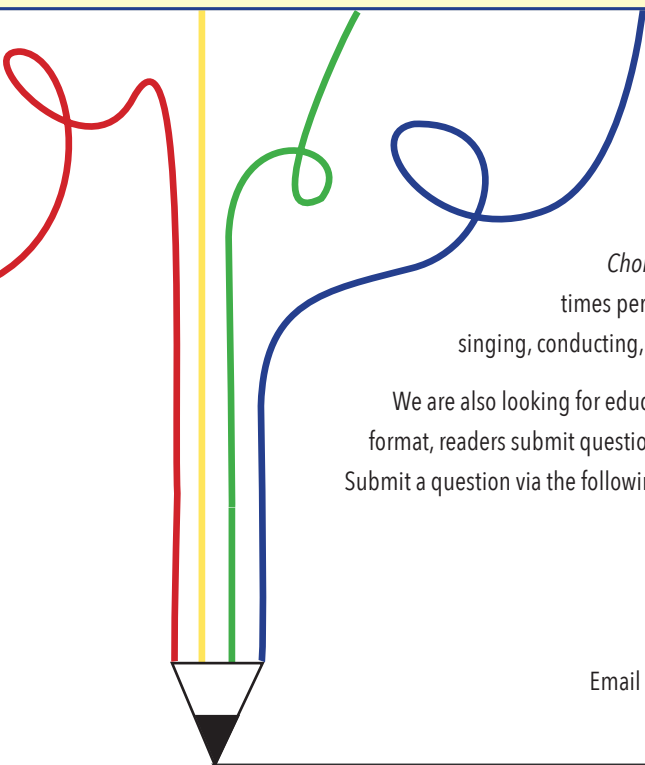
half of the choir is missing, start the rehearsal. Follow the Golden Rule and always end on time. The Golden Rule applies to many facets of the first rehearsal. For example, if you want the choir to watch you, watch them. If you do not want them to talk, limit your talking. For the advanced choir, another option is to read through all the repertoire at the first rehearsal. There will not be time to put in all markings, rehearse diction, or fix wrong notes. However, like rehearsing up to tempo while reading the music the first time, singing all of the music in the folder creates a robust, motivational goal. Even the best musicians will realize how much work lies ahead and may be inspired to work harder outside of rehearsal.

Finally, start thinking about the next rehearsal. Make notes immediately following the rehearsal, if possible, while it is still fresh in your mind. With careful preparation and a detailed rehearsal plan, you will not have to extend or add rehearsals at the last minute as you draw

closer to a performance. The techniques discussed in this article should create efficient, energized rehearsals. 

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> One of the singers on the Robert Shaw Chorale 1962 Soviet tour told the author an amusing anecdote. At a rehearsal in Russia, Shaw told the choir to make some markings. When it was apparent numerous singers did not have pencils, he told them he was leaving the room. When he returned five minutes later, anyone without something to write with would be sent home. There was a mad scramble, but everyone had a writing utensil when Shaw returned, including fragments of eyeliner pencils.
- <sup>2</sup> Timothy Mount, "Sectional Rehearsals," *Choral Journal* 21, no. 2 (1980): 15-17.



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