

# STUDENT TIMES

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## **The Informed Conductor: Score Study Considerations for the Beginning Conductor**

by Jordan D. Boyd

As one makes their way through the traditional training model of a choral conductor, they amass an arsenal of skills that prepare them to tackle any choral conundrum they may encounter. Conductors are equipped to correct any imperfections in intonation, rhythm, vocal production, diction, and a multitude of other components of the choral art. These tools allow the conductor to receive the sound from the ensemble and react in a way that improves the overall quality of the artistic product.

One set of tools that allows conductors to maximize their rehearsal time is a solid process for score study. Of course, every good conducting teacher encourages their students to spend a significant amount of time studying scores. These teachers usually teach a specific method of analysis. Regardless of the methodology, spending more time studying scores before the conductor steps

onto the podium can streamline many parts of the rehearsal process. As Kenneth Woods notes on his blog, one of his first teachers said, “Conductors study scores for a living. Actual conducting is just something you get to do for fun as a reward for the studying.”<sup>1</sup>

### **The Purpose of Score Study**

Time spent alone with a score allows the conductor to get to know a piece of music inside and out. This is the opportunity to grapple with what the composer intended. This is the time to ask questions like, “Why did they choose to crescendo there?”, “How is this triplet figure related to the text?”, or “Why on earth would they ask the tenors to sing above the altos?” Here we try our best to get inside the mind of the composer, to find the ultimate “Why” of a composition.

Practically speaking, score study

can elucidate how the conductor should approach the rehearsal process. Can they identify repeated sections in the score that could be rehearsed together? Is there an extended treble passage that the conductor could rehearse while sending the tenors and basses to sectionals? Even getting a sense of the difficulty of a work can give one an inclination of how much rehearsal time is needed to prepare it for performance.

### **Where Do I Start?**

The very first thing a conductor should do when studying the score is to number every single measure. This will make everything easier. Tedious as it may be, it’s a huge help, especially when looking at form and structure. Numbers should be clear, but not so large that they impede other markings that may come later. Often it could be more helpful

to place numbers just under each measure, as most marking will be done above the staff.

Next, start looking at everything provided by the composer. This includes voicing and orchestration, tempi, dynamics, expressive markings, meters and meter changes, text, structural roadmaps (repeats, endings, codas, etc.). It is recommended that each concept be marked with a specific color. Some conductors prefer not to have colors in their scores. In that case, find another way to visually differentiate between various aspects of the music. This author recommends using colored pencils with each color representing something different. For example, red is for dynamics *mf* and above including all crescendos, blue for dynamics *mp* and below including all diminuendos, green for tempo and tempo fluctuations, purple for expressive markings, yellow for meter changes, and a regular pencil is used for any additional markings.

Reinforcing provided markings could be considered the primary phase of analysis and be called the “Identifying Phase.” Here, one is simply identifying the markings already provided by the composer. Most of the conductor’s time is spent in what could be called the “Interpretive Phase.” The concepts one might consider during this phase are innumerable. Here, just three concepts are discussed: structural analysis, vocal analysis, and gestural analysis.

#### *Structural Analysis*

Arguably the most important analysis concerns the structure and

form of the piece. This is the process by which the conductor gets a sense of how the piece was constructed. Understanding the major sections of a work can greatly influence the rehearsal process and increase rehearsal efficiency.

There are many methodologies in studying the structure of a piece. One of the most prominent methods of analysis was created by prominent choral conductor Julius Herford.

The goal of a Herford-style analysis is to create visible signposts for the conductor to know when a section or phrase is ending. This is accomplished by placing bar lines across multiple staves at major seams in the music. The following steps detail the basic process for completing this analysis:

- Read through the piece and place small check marks above the bar line where there appear to be key endpoints. This could be the ends of long phrases, obvious section changes, major harmonic shifts, caesuras, etc.
- Go back to each check mark and determine if it is a major section division (like those listed in step one) or a minor section division, such as the end of an antecedent phrase.
- Place long, dark bar lines through all staves at those check marks determined to be major seams in the work.
- Place shorter bar lines through just the vocal lines of smaller sections. (Note: this mark may

change based on instrumentation. For choral/keyboard scores, a line through the vocal parts will suffice. For a cappella works without reduction, the line can go through just half of the vocal parts.)

- At the beginning of each major section (after the full bar line) include a parenthetical equation beneath the staff to indicate the full length of the section as well as the length of the section’s component part. (For example, a 12-bar major section with 3 smaller sections may appear “12(3+3+6)”.) These equations help greatly in memorizing works.

Completing this analysis will give the conductor a more in-depth understanding of the overall structure of the work. With this information, one can decide which sections to rehearse on a given day, particularly if similar material is present in multiple sections.

#### *Vocal Analysis*

In teaching a piece of music, it is important for the conductor to know where the potential vocal pitfalls are for the singers. To predict these difficulties, it is recommended that the conductor sing through every line of the work. Experiencing these tricky passages makes the conductor more equipped to address them with their singers. Some trouble spots may be more obvious than others. These are usually large leaps or disjunct melodic lines. For example, measures 10–14 of Morten Lauridsen’s *Sure on this Shining Night* is clearly a challenge, particularly for less advanced


singers. Typically, the basses will approach the D<sup>b</sup> with some trepidation, which can affect the vocal quality of the line. Knowing this ahead of time allows the conductor to plan solutions to help the singers through the passage. Other considerations may be challenging intervals (augmented fourths, minor sevenths, descending sixths, etc.), cluster chords, or long phrases with no place to breathe. Only by taking the time to sing through each line can the conductor be prepared to best serve the members of the ensemble.

#### *Gestural Analysis*

Equally important to understanding the challenges for the singers, score study can help the conductor find those moments that are difficult from a gestural standpoint. Where are the moments when the singers need the hands to be absolutely clear? What passages present issues for the conductor themselves? Generally, these moments lie in transitional points where there is a fermata, change in tempo or transition between movements. Allen Hightower once said, “Conductors make their money in the seams.” Much of the time, once a piece has started, the ensemble can continue on their own. This often contributes to singers not watching the conductor. However, there are moments within each piece where the conductor is responsible for keeping everything. The singers need to know what to expect in these places, so practicing the gesture is key.

#### **Conclusion**

Taking the time to fully understand a piece of music before stepping in front of the ensemble allows the conductor to prepare a solution for most problems that may arise in rehearsal. This not only saves time in the rehearsal process but builds the ensemble’s trust in the conductor. When the singers feel that the conductor is well prepared, they are more likely to trust their abilities to lead them toward the final artistic product. It is this thankless and, at times, tedious work that can enable our ensembles to reach their ultimate level of success. As Helmuth Rilling said, “If you want to be a

good conductor, score preparation will require much work ahead of time—much *solitary* work.” 

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Woods, “Score studying or...” blog post (November 29, 2006) <https://kennethwoods.net/blog1/2006/11/29/score-studying-or/>.

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