



# Rehearsal Break

Jennifer Rodgers, editor <rodgersj@iastate.edu>

## The Conductor Sets Time; Musicians Keep Time

by Stuart Hunt

Keeping good time is a non-negotiable, but in the best choirs, that responsibility is shared between conductor and singers. The conductor sets the time and attends to keeping it when necessary. Their primary focus, however, is the guiding and shaping of each phrase, the conveying of the work as a whole, and interpreting the intent of the composer. Just beating a pattern can fatigue conductors, performers, and actually distract an audience from the beauty, flow, and involvement of the art. Rehearsal time is precious. Giving your musicians the tools for heuristic learning will save time not just for a day but scaffolds future learning. It is how above-average and great musicians are created, and, as a conductor, you are the architect.

### Awareness

Time and tempo hold ensembles together. When the ensemble is aware of and keeps great time, it frees the conductor to focus on artistry. And it's important to realize that trying to keep time and developing awareness of time are notably different. My variation on Master Yoda's adjuration: "Do or do not...there is no try," is this: trying may fail; but awareness cures. Rhythmic

awareness and mindfulness practice can include:

- Training and drilling eyes to recognize patterns
- Training eyes to look ahead, reducing mistakes
- Counting everything in your head, including rests
- Recognizing where and with whom time-keeping resides

When you hear and observe a string quartet play a concert, where is the conductor? There isn't one present because everyone is investing in keeping time. Example 1 on the next page appeared in a 2014 article in *Science News* by Ashley Yeager.<sup>1</sup> She derived the graphic from a study reported in the *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*.<sup>2</sup> "Some ensembles are more autocratic—following one leader—while other musical groups are more democratic, making corrections equally, to stay together while playing (singing) a piece."

Do these models apply to conductor-less vocal ensembles? String quartet models involve only four players, but this symbiotic communication is what choral

conductors assume and hope is happening in their ensembles. Does it work with 65-100 performers? Could we learn and apply observing and “cooperative performing” with conducted choirs? The answers may be a little more complex because they rely on our singers possessing and mastering foundational skills, including:

- Counting and subdivisions
- Interval accuracy
- Basic or advanced intonation skills
- Listening and balance between sections

These skills are often best addressed in the magic month of “September.” Settling and building individual competence in the first six to eight weeks prevents having to revisit and waste rehearsal time in February or March. Building and affirming skill mastery early is key to ensemble cohesion going forward, allowing conducting of other artistic considerations. Going further, the conductor might consider these larger questions:

- Are we conducting singers or the music?
- Is the ensemble responding to our gesture and guidance?
- How do we acknowledge their progress and achievement and help with this skill transfer?

### Strategies for Heuristic Learning

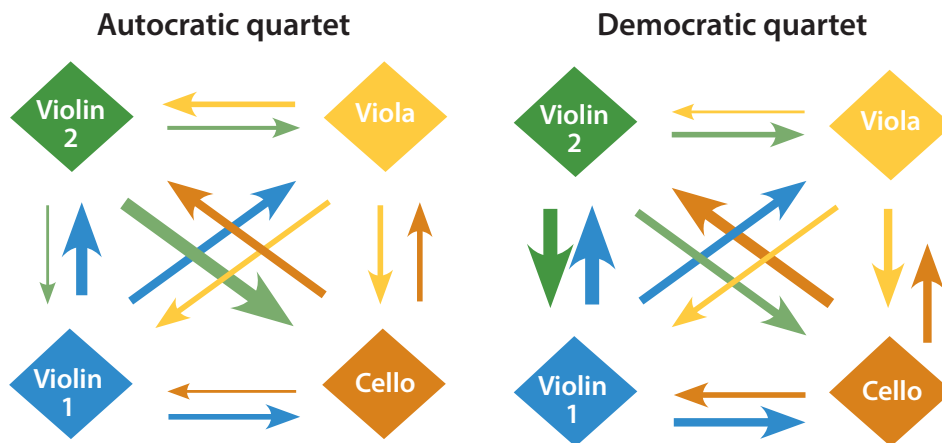
The rest of this article is devoted to seven strategies/exercises for helping your choir develop internal time-keeping skills.

#### Doing Things “Wrong”

When I work with choirs regarding centering pitch, I ask them to do the following:

- 1) Sing the first complete phrase of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” *in tune* (that is usually the norm).
- 2) Sing the phrase a little *flat*. I usually use simple block chords to accompany them, so they are aware of

### Example 1. How String Quartets Stay Together



In a more autocratic quartet (left), violin 1 tended to influence the timing of other players more than she was influenced herself. Arrows show the influence that one player (arrow tail) has over another (arrow head).

A.M. WING ET AL, ADAPTED BY M. ATAROD

where “in tune” should reside. Often, I get to say: “I’m sorry, you are singing in tune. I’m asking you to sing a little flat!” We all get a giggle. Not everyone can do it, but there’s usually a volunteer from the ensemble who can.

- 3) Sing a little *sharp*. It is harder than they imagine. Again, the singers default to being in tune. On balance, this is exactly where you want them, but it helps to combine being spot on with humor.

#### *Using a Regular or Smart Metronome*

Using a metronome, ask the choir to subdivide the beats (vary 4/4, 2/4, 6/8, etc.) One of the advantages of using a smartphone metronome is the visual component, as no audible clicks can deepen each singer’s perception of solid time vs. rushing or dragging. Then combine this with the “doing things wrong” strategy from above.

- 1) With the metronome, have the choir demonstrate keeping steady time. Remember, conductor sets time; choir keeps time. Let them do it on their own!
- 2) Ask them to drag a little behind and still stay coordinated.
- 3) Ask them to rush a little.
- 4) Ask: “What do you notice?” (You might be surprised by the responses.)

Again, this may be harder than they might think and good for a giggle while achieving the skill. These exercises take patience, but what is the alternative? Allowing even a few singers to rush or drag can lead to catastrophic results.

#### *Subdividing Rhythm*

As a conductor, have you trained *yourself* to accurately set and keep time at a variety of tempos (60, 72, 84, 92, 100, 108, 116, 120 bpm, etc.?) How did you do that? Very likely, by mastering subdivision and practicing how tempos are related. For example, set a tempo of 120. Get in your groove and subdivide if necessary.

Reset the tempo to 30 (but keep the 120 in your head) and practice hitting beat #1.

This part of your professional preparation could be directly passed along to your singers. Have fun adapting and demonstrating it in your choir rehearsal. Again, it is best to do this as early in the year as possible. Subdivision is the best way to keep the ensemble together and is particularly helpful for slower tempi. Note that when practicing time, we should avoid “click fatigue,” as it will drive you and your singers nuts. Incremental practice of *exactly* what is needed will foster awareness. If it becomes annoying or goes too long, change the focus. Your score study can reveal particular points in a piece where this exercise can be useful.

#### *Count-Singing*

Robert Shaw used and advocated for a method called Count-singing that is worth examining. He explained it as follows to the audience at a conducting seminar in Cleveland, Ohio, in November 1958:

Count-singing is a procedure that teaches pitches and rhythms simultaneously and trains the singers to share a common pulse. The premise is that all beats and subdivisions are chanted on proper pitches, changing pitches



**BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY** | DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

## Master of Music in Choral Conducting

- Extensive Podium Time
- Internationally known faculty
- Competitive Assistantships

Application Deadline: **February 1, 2025**

[wculverh@binghamton.edu](mailto:wculverh@binghamton.edu)

William Culverhouse, Director of Choral Activities





as the rhythm dictates. Numbers are used as follows, “one-and-two-and-tee-and-four-and,” substituting tee for three because the consonant group in the latter takes too long to articulate.

Figure 1 illustrates the notated music on the top staff and what is actually sung on the lower staff.<sup>3</sup> You can see Dr. Shaw using this technique in a live rehearsal.<sup>4</sup> Notice that he is expressively conducting other concepts within a time-felt framework. He is just conducting a figure 8 but encouraging each singer to keep internal time for group unity. Shaw then includes dynamics in the counting, which led to consistent, coherent expression freeing him to conduct phrases, anticipate entrances, and blend choir and accompaniment. He cautions that “Getting louder does not mean getting faster,” and the reverse, “Getting quieter does not

mean getting slower.”

Yes, he is conducting time, but notice the plethora of expressive dimensions solved by internal timekeeping. By his focus, we can tell he is aware of many factors, not the least of which is having to compete with a stronger singer who has their own sense of time or interpretation. How does Shaw’s method and demonstration address metric cohesion? And, more to the point of this article, do *you* have distinct strategies for addressing metric cohesion?

### *Combining Solfège and Tempo*

In my experience, the popular warm-up in Figure 2 is especially helpful for visual and kinesthetic learners. Practice it daily until the ensemble masters it and keeps internal time.

**Figure 1.** Count-singing example

**Figure 2.** Solfège time-keeping exercise



Method:

- 1) Choose an appropriate key for your ensemble to comfortably sing an octave.
- 2) Remember: You set time; they keep time. Give them 4 prep beats at the tempo they can keep accurately and sing on solfège. For example, at 88 bpm, have the choir sing: “do / do re do /do re mi re do...” This exercise also works well as a two- or three-part canon.
- 3) Then start at the top of the scale and reverse it: “do / do ti do /do ti la ti do...”
- 4) Now ask them to sing only the scale notes while keeping the other notes going in their head at the set tempo: **DO** / (do) **RE** (do) / (do re) **MI** (re do) / (do re mi) **FA** (mi re do) / (do re mi fa) **SOL** (fa mi re do) etc. (Hint: The downbeats and upbeats alternate. If you tap quarter notes on your knee with one hand and hold the other above it so that you are then tapping eighth notes in a down/up pattern, your first Do is a downbeat; the Re is an upbeat: Mi is a down, Fa is an up, etc.)
- 5) Finally, do not tap or give any external cues. The choir will have to internalize time to be accurate.

Once the choir is fluent, set different tempos and have fun with it! It might be interesting to demonstrate to parents or an audience the ensemble’s acquisition of such a challenge. Do it as a warmup in front of an audience. It’s magic!

*Building Groove Using Rhythmic Canons*

Keeping great time is primary. Percussionist Mac Santiago says: “A poorly played note well placed [sung] is better than a well-played [sung] note placed poorly.” The following exercise uses a sense of groove to develop metric cohesion.

- 1) Choose a one-measure pattern and write it on the board. See Figure 3 for some examples.
- 2) Have the choir groove it in time, singing on a syllable or clapping or tapping.
- 3) Split the choir in half and start one group one measure later.
- 4) Next, start one group two beats later, then three beats later.
- 5) Divide the choir into three parts and repeat the pattern of starting the groups at different points.
- 6) Add dynamics.
- 7) *Build on the exercise by choosing multi-measure patterns and repeat the process.*

*Make It Fun*

Turning work into fun is a win-win. Turning fun into work is a lose-lose. As you observe your ensemble in rehearsal—mentally assessing progress, correction, cohesion, and skill transfer—don’t forget to include FUN in your checklist.

Labster, a company that helps science educators use immersive learning, online simulations, and virtual labs, cites research that shows students learn more



Figure 3. Four single-measure groove examples

when they have fun.<sup>5</sup> Sustaining students' memory, motivation, and attention is challenging, but having fun can make all the difference.

- Memory—Dopamine, a feel-good neurotransmitter, is released when having fun. Did you know that dopamine release leads to memory stimulation?
- Motivation—Games can motivate students to take risks. Students who have fun are more motivated to engage with teachings.
- Attention—It's easier to pay attention when students are having fun! Give them a reason to be present.<sup>6</sup>

The trick is to be inventive and to make educational work fun during rehearsal. If you are a little short of creativity one day, ask the choir to come up with an idea. It's likely they will create something interesting and see it as a "game"!

### Conclusion

Imagine solving the time challenge. How would training the ensemble's internal timekeeping change your conducting? What would it feel like to experience the freedom of expressively conducting as you have imagined? How would it change your ensemble's performance?

Keeping good time is a non-negotiable, but let's make it a cooperative effort: the conductor sets time; the ensemble keeps time. This approach frees you to artistically and expressively interpret great art. It empowers your choirs to embody that art. Your audiences will recognize and applaud the outcome.

Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives—choice, not chance, determines your destiny.

—Aristotle 

**Stuart Hunt** is in his fifty-fourth year conducting choirs K-University in Washington State. His company, [www.toolsforconductors.com](http://www.toolsforconductors.com), writes sight-reading and counting books K-University, and online assessments for choir (vocal), band, and elementary. [Stuart@northernsoundpress.com](mailto:Stuart@northernsoundpress.com)

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ashley Yeager, "How String Quartets Stay Together," *Science News*, March 17, 2014, <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/how-string-quartets-stay-together>.
- <sup>2</sup> Alan M. Wing, Satoshi Endo, Adrian Bradbury, Dirk Vorberg, "Optimal feedback correction in string quartet synchronization," *Journal of The Royal Society Interface*, April 6, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsif.2013.1125>.
- <sup>3</sup> Pamela Elrod Huffman, "Essential Building Blocks: The Rehearsal Techniques of Robert Shaw," *Southwestern Musician*, February 2013. Accessed through [robertshaw.website/preparation-rehearsal](http://robertshaw.website/preparation-rehearsal)
- <sup>4</sup> Carnegie Hall, "Robert Shaw: Preparing a Masterpiece, Volume 1—Part 1: Brahms 'A German Requiem,'" YouTube video, 1:54:44, April 25, 2016, [youtube.com/watch?v=42diMGHG\\_Z0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42diMGHG_Z0)
- <sup>5</sup> Jan L. Plass, Bruce D. Homes, Charles K. Kinzer, "Foundations of Game-Based Learning," *Educational Psychologist* 50, no. 4 (2015): 258-283.
- <sup>6</sup> For suggestions related to engagement activities, see: "Ask a Conductor Question 1," *ChorTeach* Vol 14 no. 2 (Winter 2022): 8-10.