CHORTEACH

Volume 12 Issue 1

Practical Teaching Ideas for Today's Music Educator

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welcome

Welcome to ACDA's online magazine for choral director/music educators. The articles in this issue have been gleaned from state and division online and paper ACDA newsletters around the United States and from submissions by seasoned choral directors with topics germane to the profession.

ChorTeach, our name, is derived from the German word for chorus, chor. It is pronounced, as many of you know, like the word *core.* **We hope** *ChorTeach***'s articles will be a breath of fresh air for you, provide you with new ideas or techniques that give you a lift, and help your singers reach the goals you and they have set.** *ChorTeach* **is designed for those who work with amateur singers at all levels.**

If you have written an article and believe it would be of interest to *ChorTeach* **readers, send it to Terry Barham, barhamte@gmail.com, in .doc format. If you have read an article from an ACDA newsletter or website you think would be beneficial to** *ChorTeach* **readers, send it to barhamte@gmail.com or abumgarner@acda.org.**

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How and Why to Incorporate Movement in Choral Rehearsals

by Kathryn E. Briggs

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The use of movement in the choral rehearsal has yielded enthusiastic support from conductors, producing numerous studies, presentations, and articles demonstrating movement's effectiveness as a teaching technique and encouraging conductors to include movement in their rehearsals. A conductor's decision to use movement should be based on a firm pedagogical foundation, not viewed as a trick or gimmick for choirs. It is advantageous if this pedagogical knowledge is shared with students. Movement activities in rehearsal may be perceived as a foolish use of time by singers if directors fail to share the reason movement is being used. When singers are unclear about the purpose of an activity or participate with indifference, movement has little to no effect on the sound of the choir.

Students who understand singing to be a whole-body activity and understand the purpose of movement exercises in the choral rehearsal are more likely to participate in an engaged manner, in turn improving their musical performance. Singers appreciate knowing why they are asked to participate in any activity and will better understand the benefit of a movement exercise if their conductor makes a point of explaining the rationale for it. Studies have shown that when pedagogical theory is shared, students perceive movement exercises in the choral rehearsal to be beneficial to themselves as individuals and to the choir as a whole in the following ways:

- Keeping themselves alert, engaged, and ready to sing.
- Improved breathing technique and increased breath support.
- Improved singing technique (tone, posture, diction).
- Improved accuracy (pitch, rhythm, intonation, and balance).
- Singing more expressively (dynamics, emotion, phrasing, tone, energy, staccato/legato, overall musicality, etc).

While rehearsals incorporating successful movement exercises may produce musical improvement and positive attitudes among singers, ill-prepared attempts to add movement may have the opposite effect. The success of movement ex-

ercises is dependent upon many factors, including:

(1) The singers' understanding of the musical and educational value of the exercise.

(2) The conductor's preparation for, pedagogical understanding of, and comfort level with movement.

(3) Singers' comfort level with and trust in their conductor.

(4) Regularity of the use of movement in rehearsals.

(5) Overall participation by singers in the ensemble.

When movement exercises result in musical improvement, singers' attitudes toward movement exercises are positive, and their perceptions of the movement's educational and musical value are high. Students who feel awkward or uncomfortable at first gradually warm to the use of movement as they see musical results and understand how movement improves their performance. However, when participation, understanding, and leadership are lacking, movement exercises tend to result in little musical improvement, accompanied by less favorable attitudes and value for singers. The following are six criteria for successful use of movement in rehearsal.

1) Conductor understands the pedagogical rationale for what the singers are doing and why.

Movement is not a gimmick. Bodies free of physical tension are more likely to produce a free, vibrant tone. Physical warm-ups preparing students physically and mentally are both necessary and enjoyable for most singers. Group stretches, back rubs, and even simple yoga moves are wonderful ways students can prepare for singing through increased breath support and release of physical tension. They are beneficial as a transition physically and mentally from their other classes or activities. They are focusing on choral singing.

Outside of the physical benefits of preparing the mind and body for singing, one of the most compelling theories regarding the use of movement is the connection with metaphor. Musicians frequently describe musical terms through metaphors of physical movement. "We need to hit that accent." "The descant line should float." "The phrase needs to grow towards m. 93." "Let's have our tone spin as we sustain it."

The above phrases are just a few examples of the colorful and descriptive language conductors speak when working with students. When we transfer these verbal metaphors—hit, float, grow, spin—to physical movement, our singers experience these non-visual and non-tangible musical descriptions personally and physically, thus connecting with and understanding the music at a deeper level. The use of physical movement allows us to experience what we hear and feel but cannot see in music. Dr. Therees Hubbard's research on this connection is a fascinating and informative study on the topic. (See details about her book at the conclusion of this article.)

Rudolph Laban created a lexicon of movement descriptors (known as Laban Movement Analysis or LMA) that can help conductors develop a movement vocabulary of their own when working with musicians. LMA descriptors such as float, punch, glide, slash, dab, wring, flick, and press are transferrable to music when describing articulations, tone color, dynamics, and a myriad of other musical elements. Instead of verbally describing music with similar words, choirs who physically move their bodies to demonstrate the musical metaphor will have a stronger connection to the music and the desired outcome.

When all singers move together, physical application of musical terms as metaphors creates cohesive understanding within a choir. Movement while singing creates muscle memory within the choir, and students remember that which is physically experienced and learned much better than what is merely spoken to them by a conductor.

Kinesthetic memory is strong. Conductors may then incorporate the movements experienced in rehearsals into conducting patterns and gestures as a means of communicating and inspiring others while performing. The less talk and more movement a conductor encourages in rehearsal, the more retention will take place with singers. Once movement has been used to establish a connection with a certain sound or musical concept, a simple gesture from the conductor can be used to remind students of the work of previous rehearsals instead of explaining repeatedly what needs to be improved.

Physical movement also provides teachers with an instant visual assessment of singers' understanding of concepts. For example, if singers cannot all snap at the precise moment of a cut-off, they most likely do not know when to stop singing or apply their ending diction together.

2) Singers understand the value and purpose of the activity.

The connection between metaphor, music, and movement is relatively simple. We use movement terminology in music to describe what we hear but cannot see. This rationale is a concept that is understandable by singers in most choirs, from elementary through collegiate levels. When teachers share this pedagogy with their students, singers feel respected and empowered with the knowledge.

The movements are perceived as a worthwhile educational and musical activity with the purpose of improving the sound and not merely as a random goofy exercise. When students understand the reason behind an activity, along with the research showing why and how it works, they will be more invested in the activity, thus enhancing the musical outcome.

3) Conductor is confident and comfortable with the activity.

Be brave. Being human makes teachers relatable, and if you make a mistake while moving, it shows students it is okay for them to make mistakes too. Do all of the movements with your choir. Teachers who demonstrate movement in rehearsal will be more successful in leading their students to do the same.

Conductors new to incorporating movement in a rehearsal can start small—hand and arm gestures to demonstrate the shape of a phrase, for example. By choosing a 4- or 8-measure phrase and focusing on just one musical element (e.g., dynamics, articulations, phrasing), a teacher can choose a few physical movements or gestures to enhance the element and then practice the movements on her or his own time to build confidence. As one does this more frequently with students, the variety of movements and ideas will increase along with confidence.

4) Singers trust the conductor and are comfortable.

Trust and rapport between a conductor and a choir are a rich topic, but with regards to movement, a conductor who employs the previously mentioned criteria can establish the use of movement as a worthwhile endeavor. As a teacher leads students toward a deeper understanding of how and why the movement is used, students trust that the activity has been thoughtfully developed for the choir's success. Explain to students that movement is employed in order to incorporate the different learning styles of students (visual, aural, kinesthetic, and tactile). The connection between metaphor, movement, and kinesthetic memory builds confidence in the conductor's knowledge and ability to lead the ensemble.

Trust is developed between a conductor and the singers when students feel that their input is valued. After the use of movement is introduced, along with the rationale for the activity, it is highly engaging and beneficial to ask singers to come up with their own physical movements to achieve a musical goal. This often results in high levels of engagement and participation since ideas, discussion, and movements are student-generated, thus creating a sense of ownership and investment in the performance among the singers.

Students who witness their teacher fully participating in movement feel less risk in moving themselves. If a conductor feels awkward or uncomfortable with a particular movement, it may be a good indicator that the singers will feel the same way. If this is the case, being able to laugh at one's self can create a sense of relatability and good-natured humor within the choir. Perhaps a different movement should be used.

A conductor's willingness to move to student-generated movements will, in turn, increase the likelihood of students moving to teacher-generated movements. If students are hearing or feeling results, they will continue with an activity, especially if it takes place in an environment where it is okay to laugh at one's self. Students will feel safe and comfortable.

5) Movement is employed regularly in rehearsal.

Students' inhibitions decrease as movement becomes a regular part of the rehearsal process, and connections between movement and music begin to feel genuine with regular use. If movement is employed only sporadically, the focus tends to be solely on the movement because it is novel. The more frequently movement is used in rehearsal, the more successful it becomes in eliciting musical improvement.

Monotony in any rehearsal causes even the best activities to lose their effectiveness. Some regularly used movements to reinforce concepts in warm-ups, (for example, various hand shapes in front of the face to help form vowels) are excellent, but movements should evolve and adapt to the specific music or concepts being learned.

6) Overall participation of students is high. They are actively engaged.

If students are instructed to step or walk on the beat and they merely shuffle along, musical improvement is not happening. If singers are reluctant to engage, then start small. Incorporate a few small movements in warm-ups, a few gestures while singing songs. Do so on a regular basis. In time, gradually increase the use of movement or incorporate larger physical movements. Ask students for verbal metaphors to describe what the music or lyrics are expressing and how they might add a movement to communicate this in their sound. As students begin to hear improvement in their sound and feel more comfortable, engagement increases, and you will see an improvement in results.

In conclusion, movement, when presented well, is a powerful pedagogical and musical tool for rehearsals that singers find highly beneficial, even enjoyable. A list of resources (non-exhaustive) for conductors interested in learning more is offered below.

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Incorporating Mindfulness into the Choral Rehearsal

by Lawrence E. Fisher

(Used with permission of *Illinois' Podium*, Spring 2019)

As music teachers, we often have the advantage of being able to build relationships over several years with our students. We often see warning signs before others. We teachers are the individuals a student may confide in when he or she is struggling with anxiety or depression. We foster a sense of community and family in our ensembles that perhaps offers a safe space or a support network that our students might not have in other places in their lives.

Based on the programming I am seeing at other directors' concerts, as a choral community we are doing our best to show our students that there is hope. We choose themes for our concerts such as light, dreams, social justice, and equality. The frequency with which we program works such as Andrea Ramsey's *A Letter from a Girl to the World* or Jake Runestad's *Please Stay* says to me that we are addressing some important issues head on in our rehearsals.[1] This led me to wonder whether I could do more to explicitly give my students tools to help with challenging situations or feelings.

Studies show that meditation can be just as effective at relieving anxiety in teenagers as antidepressants.[2] I decided that I wanted to try to incorporate mindfulness into my rehearsals. Of course, I was faced with many questions: How do I implement this? Would my students hate it? Am I taking too much time out of each rehearsal when that next performance is around the corner? I decided the best way was to start exploring. What better way than to use what I know.

As a high school student, I participated in workshops on Creative Motion. A Dalcroze-related school of thought, it explores getting in tune with your body and deep breathing. After week-long camps in these activities, I always felt at peace. Only recently did I make the connection that much of what I had learned there were mindfulness practices. I decided to start with some of the tools I had learned as a high school student. I decided to begin incorporating mindfulness into my rehearsals using a centering exercise that has students focus on the breath and deep breathing. The following exercise takes about ten minutes:

Have students lie on the floor. Dim the lights or play quiet music in the background if you like. Have the students focus on their breath, taking long, deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth. Then ask students to place one hand on the stomach with their pinky on their belly but-

ton with their thumb pointing to their chin. Have them focus just on breathing into the space created by their hand, wrist to fingertips.

Ask the singers to fill up their hands like water in a water balloon, bottom to the top. Once they feel that sensation, ask them to remove their hands and concentrate on breathing into that same area without the hands. Repeat the exercise with the palm of the hand placed over the belly button and finally with the thumb over the belly button to feel a low breath.

Have them connect all three areas, bottom to top without hands. If time allows, you can also have students sit on the floor and pull their knees up to feel the sensation of breathing into their backs since they will feel the resistance of the floor.

Once this exercise is completed, have students slowly come to a standing position very carefully since they might be light headed. After they are standing, I have them repeat this exercise in a standing position at their own pace. This allows them to feel the deep breath in a standing position since they will need to be able to do this while singing. Initially, I find that it is easier to feel the breath while lying down, but you could start this exercise in a standing position. I like to debrief students after this exercise to see what they have noticed. Then we share with others. Students usually connect deep breathing with singing before I do.

The next day, I take a minute or two to ask students to review these steps at their own pace while in a standing position. Eventually we pair this down to a fifteen- to thirty-second centering exercise. Once they are comfortable with this activity, I expand the exercise to give them other activities on which they may focus.

Here is what this exercise looks like in my rehearsal currently:

As soon as the rehearsal begins, I ask students to close their eyes. This automatically focuses the ensemble. Once the room is quiet and the singers have taken a few breaths, I ask them to focus on something specific, saying things such as the following:

- Focus on your ribs expanding.
- Feel the breath expansion in your back.
- Breathe into your shoulders and release any tension you feel.
- Yawn and lift your soft palate.
- Yawn and feel expansion in your throat.
- Think about what kind of rehearsal you would like to have today (or this week).
- Set a goal for yourself. What would you like to accomplish today (or this week)?

I ask one or two questions like those above each day based on what I think that particular ensemble might need. The students know it is time to open their eyes when I begin playing the first warm up. Since they have already made a connection to the breath, I find that they are more focused on a good breath from the start.

I surveyed my students to see their responses to this exercise. This survey occurred after only one week of starting class with the shortened exercise.

- 80% of the singers said that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they enjoyed this exercise. Only 3% did not.
- 83% said that this exercise helped them be more focused during rehearsal. 5% said that it did not.
- Several students said it helped them think about breathing to sing better.
- Several students said it helped them feel more connected with the entire group.
- "At first I thought it was ridiculous, but later I didn't have those thoughts about it anymore."
- "I love this exercise and feel that I can use it in ways other than in choir to help with anxiety and to really think hard about my actions."
- "It's a nice way to get everyone on the same page before we start rehearsal. I feel it helps everyone be better prepared to be productive."

• 60% of students said this was a technique they could see themselves using outside of choir.

I have also found many benefits from a conductor's perspective. Instead of having to explicitly ask my students to focus at the beginning of rehearsal, I just ask them to close their eyes. It puts me in a better mind-set encouraging a positive behavior rather than trying to stop a negative one. Since the students are present in the moment, they are able to let go of what might have happened earlier that day more easily. Focus during the entire rehearsal is much improved.

During the first week when passing out music for a recent concert, the students were able to get through what I had initially planned for the first two weeks. I've also used these techniques to get students prepared for performances. When they arrive for a concert, I can now say in a speaking voice, "close your eyes," and the room falls silent and focused.

I have more exploration to do when it comes to incorporating mindfulness into my rehearsals, but it's been an encouraging start. I know some directors are using yoga at the beginning of rehearsals, so maybe that is my next step. I have always said that if I can have a positive impact on even one student's life in a year, then it was a successful year for me. If I can give my singers one more way to cope, another way to be present in the moment, or another tool to help them when they are struggling, maybe I will have done my part to help a student I didn't realize was hurting. ct

NOTES

[1] Major Depression: The Impact of Overall Health. (May 10, 2018). Retrieved from http://www.bcbs.com/the-health-of-america

[2] Jamison Monroe, *The Adolescent Brain on Meditation.* (August 18, 2015). Retrieved from www.psychologytoday.com

The Brain and Music

by Larry Swingen

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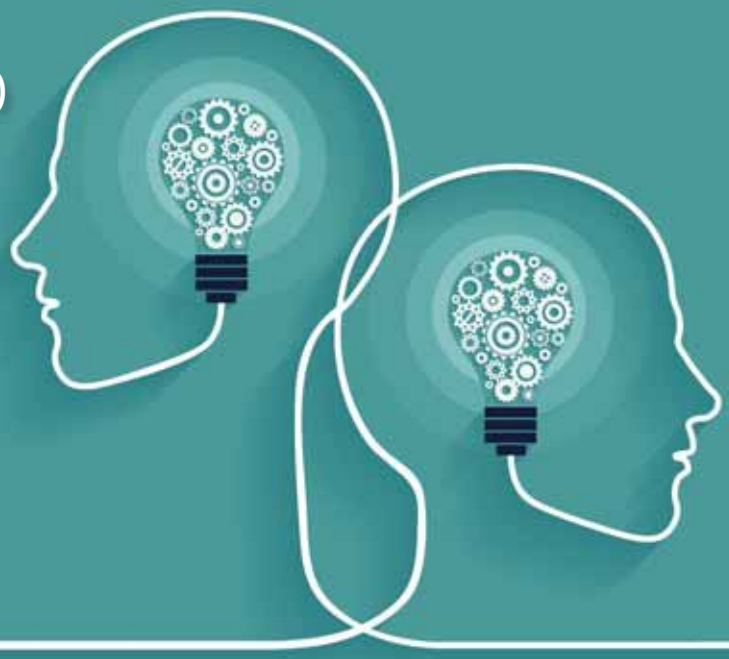

Because of all the recent research on the human brain and how music and the brain relate, let us ponder what actually happens in our brain when we perform, listen to, or compose music.

Howard Gardner states that music is one of eight intelligences or capabilities of our brain. We have an innate musical ability. It is remarkable to consider all the areas of the brain that are activated during musical pursuits. Music is involved in various levels of our brain from the early reptilian brain to the more recently developed frontal lobe. Different parts of music are tied to many different areas in the brain. For example, when we are sight-singing, our brain is more active than it is for most other activities. The amount of information available is staggering.

The larger picture involves how we take in this information and apply it to our day-to-day teaching and our own learning. In the book "The Owner's Manual for The Brain" by Pierce Howard, music is historically used for entertainment and communication. Dr. Howard claims there are three newly evolved roles for music that include medicinal, facilitative, and mood altering.

Howard cites studies in which epileptic patients show a decrease in spiking after listening to Mozart. He cites studies that show Alzheimer's patients improve paper folding tasks after listening to Mozart.

He believes that music does not have a specific location in the brain but is a by-product of other evolved areas. Play a variety of music as your students enter your room, while they are working on a theory assignment, or while they are stretching during warm-ups. Experiment with them. Play Mozart.

As musicians, we know about other important roles music plays for us and our students. Singing in a choir allows us the opportunity to create beauty, to connect our heart and brain to express emotions through interesting and complex music. These are very valuable reasons to be involved in music.

As we prepare for concerts and music festivals, we can get lost in the pitches and rhythms of the music. Continue your efforts to get to the heart and soul of the music with your students. Ask them what they think the music is about or how it makes them feel. Ask them what personal experiences they have had that relate to the music they are rehearsing.

For teachers with young children or grandchildren, Howard suggests encouraging young children to sing by themselves, sing with you, and sing with others. This is no surprise. We've been preaching and doing this for a long time.

If your child shows an interest in piano or violin, get him/her going on those instruments around age three. The optimum window for learning an instrument is from age three to ten. Children have the best chance of developing perfect pitch with early exposure to music.

Know that repetition is crucial in establishing musical building blocks. Children love repetition. Use repetition with your high school students. Let them know it is good for them.

Many of your musically inclined high school students have been exposed to music from an early age and have been learning piano. It is fun to see what they can do and how much that background has changed them for the better. They are our best all-around musicians. They are good sight-readers and have good intonation, rhythmic sense, etc.

With regard to the "Mozart effect," spatial and abstract intelligence is boosted along with IQs. Even rats improve their maze completion times after listening to Mozart for certain periods of time. This effect is more temporary for older brains. Young brains are able, because of a more plastic neural circuitry and changeability, to show significant longer-lasting effects.

Have your students listen to Mozart as a brain organizer. Interestingly, Fran Rauscher and her colleagues at the University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh reason that Mozart is most often used as "the" music source because his music exhibits three unique characteristics:

- Everyone seems to like his music.
- He began composing at an early age.
- He doesn't seem to have composed a single "bad" piece of music.

So, Mozart's brain was, likely, perfectly suited to music composition. In my opinion, he is the most successful composer of satisfying music.

My high school choir meets during first period. I love the fact that the students start their day with music. I firmly believe that they are better off for the rest of their day because of that musical start during the first period. Sometimes I even play a bit of Mozart for them on the piano.

Eric Jensen, in his book, *Brain-based Learning: the New Paradigm of Teaching,* lists three models for teaching. In his model labeled "Survival of the Fittest," teachers can "lead a horse to water, but can't make it drink." This teaching method places responsibility on the student to learn from a standard program. There is less accountability resting on the teacher.

The second model Jensen titles "Determined Behaviorist." Here the molding of students is achieved by use of rewards and punishment. Students are manipulated with little student input or choice.

The third model is termed "Brain-based Naturalist." In this model, the goal is to see what can be done to "make the horse thirsty" so that it will want to drink. The teacher values each student and works with the students' motivators so that learning occurs more as a natural consequence.

I can think back through the teachers I've had in the past and am able to fit them into the teaching styles noted above. As we teach year after year, we continually improve our methods and motivations. I would say that we rework our teaching style, gravitating toward the "Brain-based Naturalist" model because we see that it works best. Our subject is human-based. This fits right in with this teaching style.

Jensen states that people who teach and train others make a vital contribution to the preservation of humanity. We must become a world of learners and begin to value learning as much as freedom, liberty, justice, shelter, and good health. We are obliged to take this assignment seriously. Our collective future, in fact, depends on it. What a calling we have chosen!

As one of the lifelong learners working to instill the desire for lifelong learning in our students, I encourage all in our profession to read recent information readily available about the brain and teaching, the brain and learning, and the brain and music.

Realistically, after music festivals, final concerts, and inventories, set aside time to dive in and see how you can improve your teaching based on what you learn about the brain.

Have a great time this year. Enjoy all the fruits of your labors as you see and hear your students improve and perform. Encourage your singers not only to make lovely sounds but to get to the soul of the music they are rehearsing. Amazingly, we get to witness quite a transformation. Our students becoming expressive human beings! CT

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A Curious Thing, This Recurring Dream…

by Howard Meharg

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A curious thing, this recurring dream that a good many choral directors admit to having. Yep, it's that one where you're standing in front of your choir clad in nothing but your underwear—or less. I've had that dream. So, in my curiosity I asked a psychologist about it. He said, "Dad, I have to tell you that what it means is that you think you've been 'faking it' all these years." (Yes, my son is a psychologist in private practice.)

Hmm, I thought. Faking it! It does make sense, I thought. In fact, I thought, it's true that virtually every time I handle a rehearsal, I run the risk of being exposed, if not as a charlatan but always with the possibility that my technique and tricks to get the choir sounding better will fail, that the singers will see such attempts as inept and a waste of time!

Here's the odd part. In my dream, no one in the choir seemed to notice my lack of clothing! I feel certain that there are a good many interpretations for such a dream, but very often, the underlying truth is a simple fear that we're inadequate for the task. So, yes, faking it happens. I'm choosing to believe that this is not only a good thing but holds the possibility of being a great thing.

Turn a skilled jazz musician loose with a familiar tune or a twelve-bar blues sequence and, most often, wonderful things can happen. He or she may have little more than a clue where it will lead, since he or she fake it—improvise. Sometimes it's glorious, even exhilarating. Sometimes it's out there on the cutting edge in excitement and invention. Interacting with percussion, bass, piano, or other players becomes a kind of conversation and a virtual unfolding of new and imaginative music, never-to-be-repeated music, for this is true improvisation. I'm betting there are times when the result thrills or may even seem a bit trite. So, yep, there is risk.

No great jazz artist gets to these heights without practice, training, tips, lessons, reading about and listening to others. And it goes without saying that it's the same for anyone aspiring to be a successful choral director or one who wants to continue growing in skills and understanding. Trust me: age has nothing to do with it. There is plenty to learn!

It's a good idea to remember that every rehearsal, no matter how well planned it might be, offers an opportunity to fake it. I don't mean in the charlatan sense but rather in trusting yourself to respond to what you hear, see, and sense with creative ideas, effective conducting gestures, descriptive and imaginative words. Sure, the more you practice, the better your chances for great things happening. The odds are good that those rehearsals and performances will be glorious

and exhilarating! Embrace the risk!

P. S. I read once where two of the world's greatest conductors of choral music, Paul Salamunovich and Robert Shaw, discovered, during a conversation, that they had had this same dream. Others have called it the "imposter" dream. Can you imagine that being true about those two revered individuals? Those two masters of the choral art having a dream in which they worried, subconsciously, that they were inadequate? CT