

Critical Thinking in Rehearsals

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Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” When in-service teachers are encouraged to learn and implement some new and innovative pedagogical tool or strategy, some may see it with strong disapproval or mistrust. It’s in human nature to find comfort with that which is known or familiar. Too often, the inclusion of critical thinking in choral rehearsals is seen as something that would require the rehearsal to cease and slow down concert preparation.

Emerson’s quote speaks to this author as to living a life of intention, to test the waters of the unknown, and to actively search and know that the path you are on is truly the best path for you at this time in your life. In choral teaching, critical thinking can be used as a pedagogical tool to speed up the learning process that leads to inspired and meaningful musical performances. It is the purpose of this article to show how critical thinking can be achieved quickly in rehearsal, often throughout the learning cycle, and can be used in both the warm-up period and during the rehearsal of repertoire.

In order to grasp what critical thinking is, it might be best to start with what it is not. According to the revised Bloom’s taxonomy¹ remembering the lines and spaces of a clef, understanding the difference between *staccato* and *legato*, and applying the differences between dynamics do not indicate the use of critical thinking skills. As Matthew Garrett explains, where these are ways that students can demonstrate an understanding of musical content, they do not constitute critical thinking. Critical thinking involves actively using a base of knowledge for a specific purpose.²

Critical thinking is, on the other hand, analyzing the score for musical form and structure, evaluating performances,

and creating a future rehearsal plan. These brief and limited examples illustrate a key component that is consistent with critical thinking: students use past experiences or other learned content and use them to make reasoned decisions about current or new musical challenges. This concept of using knowledge in new and unprescribed situations is called transfer.

Critical Thinking in the Warm-Up and Teaching for Transfer

Besides the task of preparing students for a rigorous rehearsal, the warm-up can develop and reinforce critical thinking skills through the use of transfer, a learned behavior in which basic skills and knowledge, previously taught by the director, can then purposely be used without prompting by the students to overcome challenges within new repertoire. As with so many skills and behaviors taught to adolescent musicians, the principal of transfer will require some degree of planning, creativity, and assessment on the part of the director and many repetitions by the students. A single “lesson” on transfer taught to the students in September will simply not suffice if transfer behaviors are to be used on a daily basis. The warm-up then becomes an excellent opportunity to develop and reinforce transfer prior to the rehearsal of performance repertoire.

Nearly all of the choral techniques that are required by the repertoire can be introduced and developed in the warm-up. The more successful and consistent students are with their transfer habits, the quicker the repertoire can be learned. Take the opening measures of Haydn’s *Gloria* from

his *Heiligmesse*, for example (Figure 1).³ The choir sings in unison, a fast and rhythmic introduction of the text, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, which is capped by *Deo* as the highest note of the phase. For the novice singer, singing a phrase that begins in the middle of the voice that then climaxes in the singers' passaggio can introduce some severe challenges for good tone and intonation.

Rather than only addressing this technique during the rehearsal, this is an excellent skill to develop in the warm-up. In this case, the director could design a vocalise that resembles the repertoire: a triadic melody that begins on the tonic, rises to the dominant, and settles on the mediant. This type of warm-up would allow the students to develop the technique required to sing this passage in tune and with a healthy tone.

Warm-ups are not only for the development and transfer of vocal technique; many elements of phrasing can also be addressed. Take measure 17-20, for example (Figure 2). Here, Haydn writes two consecutive two-measure phrases as the choir homophonically sings the text, *Et in terra pax, pax hominibus*. In this setting, most directors will indicate to their choirs to sing these two-measure phrases with a slight *crescendo* followed

by a *decrescendo*. As before, this skill could also be developed during the warm-up. By singing homophonic four-part triads on neutral syllables or on the text in this excerpt, the singers could once again have the opportunity to perform multiple repetitions of the skill of singing two-measure phrases that can then be transferred to the repertoire. Obviously, any musical element found in the repertoire can be introduced,

Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) with the lyrics "Et in terra pax, pax hominibus". Each staff begins with a piano (*p*) marking. The music consists of two consecutive two-measure phrases. The first phrase is "Et in terra pax," and the second phrase is "pax hominibus". The notes are: Soprano (E4, G4, B4, A4), Alto (D4, F4, A4, G4), Tenor (C4, E4, G4, F4), Bass (B3, D4, F4, E4).

Figure 1.

Figure 1 is a musical score for "Haydn - Heiligmesse - Gloria". It features a choir and piano accompaniment. The title "2. Gloria" is prominently displayed. The score includes the following markings: *Vivace* for the piano accompaniment and *Tutti f* for the choir. The lyrics are: "Glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis De-o, glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis, Glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis De-o, glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis, Glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis De-o, glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis, Glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis De-o, glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis." The piano accompaniment is in the right hand, and the choir parts are in the left hand.

developed, and mastered through isolated repetitions during the warm-up.

Simply following directions and performing repetitions during the warm-up does not indicate critical thinking, however. Critical thinking happens when students can make the transfers on their own without being prompted to do so. This is where directors must be patient and intentional. Transfer is a learned behavior, and just like any musical habit, it can only be developed through multiple repetitions over time. This means that the director must make many of the early transfers for the students.

Show them in the repertoire how a particular warm-up relates to the music. Teach them to analyze the problematic passages and how to apply the correct knowledge and/or skill to solve it on their own. If even half of the choir can successfully problem solve a difficult section of music on their own, fewer repetitions would be needed, and the director could move on to other musical priorities sooner.

Critical Thinking during the Rehearsal— Repertoire Rehearsal Dialogue

Whereas the concept of transfer can be developed during the warm-up and used throughout the rehearsal, dialogue that is specific to the repertoire and done quickly can have valuable impact on the students' understanding of the music. This is an area where many directors become leery of critical thinking in the rehearsal.

It is common for undergraduate programs of music education to teach their students to use as little teacher talk as possible. The use of and length of teacher talk must, however, be a site-based decision by the director. Ensembles that are quick to go off-task could benefit from more singing and less teacher talk. Conversely, research has indicated that ensemble performance ratings are not adversely affected by lots of teacher talk conditions.⁴ Depending on the behavioral situation of the choral ensemble, meaningful dialogue about the repertoire can quickly lead the students toward the critical thinking levels of analysis, evaluation, and creativity.

To engage your singers in brief dialogue about the repertoire, beginning questions with “why” or “how” can quickly lead your students toward analysis and evaluation. For example, “How is the textual meaning in mm. four similar (or different) to the textual meaning in mm. 24?” This is critical thinking because differentiating the meaning of text is a form of analysis. “Why did the composer repeat the text three times in this section but only once in this other sec-

tion?” is another form of analysis by means of deconstructing a composer's particular point of view.

Although it would initially be much faster for the director to lecture about the aforementioned analyses, taking one or two minutes occasionally from rehearsal to analyze various aspects of the music leads to the students having a deeper understanding of the music, which in turn leads to a more inspired performance.

Brief repertoire dialogue in terms of evaluation is another means of allowing choral students to engage in critical thinking. Traditionally, the director is primarily responsible for evaluating and adjusting the sound of the choir. Students should be taught to share in this responsibility. Not only does this improve the ability of the students to evaluate choral ensembles, but it also provides the students with insight into the musical priorities of their director. Knowing or anticipating what the director expects also helps speed up the learning process. Of course, any musical element can be checked or monitored during the rehearsal. There are countless ways to creatively and quickly engage the students in evaluation.

Such means of student engagement with evaluation can be done with individuals, in small groups, or with the entire ensemble. Inviting individuals to the front of the ensemble as the stand-in director has many benefits, but it must be structured so that it is a successful and affirming experience. Directors should focus the attention of the individual student on a specific and observable musical behavior that is also familiar and relatively recognizable. This activity has the potential to build confidence in a student plus building pride and trust within the choral ensemble.

Evaluation in small groups or sections of your ensemble allows students to develop their evaluative skills within a small group social dynamic. This has many other social and community benefits. Similar to the previous example, this experience should be structured in a way that allows all members of the group or section to have equal opportunity to share their evaluation in an environment of trust and compassion. Once the group discussion is complete, the director could have the groups offer their suggestions to the ensemble as a whole to move the rehearsal forward.

Finally, the entire ensemble can participate in the evaluation process together through written evaluation forms or through non-verbal hand signals. Written evaluation, both in terms of self-assessment and of the ensemble as a whole, can be a valuable way for students to organize their thoughts and suggestions more completely than if they were put on the spot in front of their peers. As with all three examples above,

try to focus student attention on specific observable behaviors to make the evaluation more valuable for that phase of the learning process. Written performance evaluation can be done most efficiently if multiple copies of the form are already in the students' folder and ready to use.

Non-verbal hand signals are another quick means of evaluation. Directors have frequently used five-finger scales and thumb scales to have students evaluate their performance or their mastery of content and skills. As with any formative assessment or evaluation process, the director could use this information to guide the rehearsal moving forward.

According to the revised Bloom's taxonomy, creativity is the highest form of critical thinking. Frequently, directors look to composition and/or improvisation when attempting to include the creative form of critical thinking. These are more advanced activities and require specific knowledge and skills to produce successfully. Because of this, many directors may shy away from creativity as a whole. Fortunately, there are many forms of creativity that trigger critical thinking in our singers.

Have the singers hypothesize why the director is using a particular conducting gesture. Again, this is another example of when the director would traditionally tell the singers outright what the gesture means and for them to follow it. It's an excellent opportunity for creativity. In this conducting example, the students would analyze the gesture by the conductor and then create a hypothesis as to its purpose. This activity could take less than two minutes but could reinforce the importance of singers watching their director. For the director, this could also be very useful as to the effectiveness of his or her gesture.

Planning is another aspect of choral teaching that is traditionally left solely to the director but could be an opportunity for students to create. As the director is going through the process of preparing the choir for a concert, certain priorities are put in place based upon various diagnostic and formative rehearsal assessments. Students could be given the opportunity to be included in this planning process. If the director routinely gives feedback to the choir as to their progress toward the concert and if students are involved in the evaluation of the ensemble, then certain logical plans could be generated. Tell the students, "Based on our work in this song this week, how should we go about rehearsing it today?" If the director followed up this brief discussion with a "why" question, that would be evidence of even more critical thinking.

Rewriting the text of a poem that is set to music is a pow-

erful and meaningful way to engage choral singers in the creative process. Have the students analyze the text of one of the songs for the concert, then based upon an agreed theme or subject, have the students re-write a portion of the text to create a more individualized meaning for students in the ensemble. They could work in groups or as individuals as they create within the confines of the rhythm and rhyme scheme. This project will take a few minutes a week for up to six weeks to complete, and in the end the choir could vote on and select the particular version that best represents their community. Experiences in which the repertoire can be directly representative of the group's identity help make the repertoire and, by extension, the learning process more relevant and concrete for the singers.⁵

Conclusion

Developing a choral classroom that includes daily doses of transfer, analysis, evaluation, and creativity is an intentional process that can have a truly positive impact on a choral program. Critical thinking can include a variety of activities that can be done quickly within the rehearsal and often throughout the learning cycle. If done well and often, both the singers and the director will reap the benefits of a faster learning process and a stronger choral program. ■

NOTES

- ¹ Lorin W. Anderson et al., eds., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001).
- ² Matthew Garrett, "Teaching for Transfer: Developing Critical Thinking Skills with Adolescent Singers," *Choral Journal* 54, no. 10 (2014): 27.
- ³ Joseph Haydn, "Gloria, from Heiligmesse," ed. by Michael Gibson, CPDL.org, accessed December 18, 2019, <http://www1.cpd.org/wiki/images/1/14/Hayd-102.pdf>.
- ⁴ Jessica Napoles, "The Effect of Duration of Teacher Talk on the Attitude, Attention, and Performance Achievement of High School Choral Students" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2006) Dissertation Abstracts International, A 67, no. 10 (2007).
- ⁵ Ryan Shaw, "How Critical Is Critical Thinking?" *Music Educators Journal* 101, no. 2 (December 2014): 65-70.