



Rehearsal Break

The Piano in Rehearsal: A Tool or a Crutch?

By Richard Sparks

Editor's Note: The following column is a selection that has been adapted from the author's weekly series of blogs for the young conductor. The full series can be found online at <www.choralnet.org> under the "Choral Blog" section.

One of the critical areas for a young conductor—both the undergraduate planning for a career in music education and the graduate conducting student with a fair amount of experience already—is to develop and then improve rehearsal skills.

There is, of course, the issue of whether or not to have a rehearsal accompanist (and how skilled that accompanist is). If you do not have an accompanist, then you are left with the level of your own keyboard skills. But whether you have an accompanist or are your own, it is important to consider how to use the keyboard most

effectively in rehearsal. Having excellent keyboard skills (or having an expert accompanist) can be a temptation as well as an aide—a temptation to play too much or too often.

In Eric Ericson's conducting book¹, he writes a chapter on rehearsing and compares the use of the piano in the rehearsal of unaccompanied music to helping a baby learn to walk. First, you give lots of support; then as the baby becomes more confident, you use less and less support. Finally, take away your hands and let the baby walk on its own.

I often see young conductors continue to play or let the accompanist play when accompaniment is no longer necessary. The basic rule should be to *take away the keyboard as early as possible*. There are several reasons for this. One is exactly as in Ericson's example: use only the minimal amount of support the choir needs to build independence. But there is an equally important reason—when the piano is playing, you simply cannot hear as much of what the choir is doing. You as the conductor need to know... Does the choir *really* know it? Can they find the pitches for the next section on their own? Is that chord really in tune? The sound of the piano can blur

what is happening and your ability to hear it correctly. If I am striving for "just" intonation and purer thirds,² I want to avoid playing the piano's tempered thirds, so I will play roots or fifths.

I mentioned unaccompanied singing above, but even with accompanied music (whether with keyboard or orchestra), it's valuable to take the accompaniment away and let the choir sing alone. Not only can you hear them better, but if they are secure *without* the accompaniment, it will be much easier when singing with keyboard or orchestra. You can play the interludes then drop out when the choir comes in.

If I use an accompanist, I do not want the piano between the choir and me. Typically I will set up the space with the choir in an arc and me in the center. The piano (a grand—this cannot work as easily with an upright) is to my right and slightly behind me. It is to my right (not left) so that the accompanist can easily see my right hand. It is behind me and farther to the right because I do not want the bulk of the piano and its sound coming directly in front of me and *more* directly than the sound of the choir.

Following are some observations from Eric Ericson's practice:

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First, Eric was a superb pianist with a marvelous, light, and “vocal” touch. He almost always played with the *una corda* (“soft”) pedal down and created a transparent, non-percussive sound. He rarely, if ever, played along with the choir, doubling what they did. More typically:

- To model for the ensemble, he would simply play (normally from memory) the music (Bach’s *Der Geisthilft*, for example, demonstrating all important parts), saying, “I think it might go like this,” giving a very complete idea of rhythm, phrasing, and shape. The piano can demonstrate beautifully but only with the right player!
- Ericson would often play a pedal (usually in the treble, above the

soprano, but also bass lines) to help keep pitch (but without implying tempered intonation)—often “rocking” an octave back and forth to keep the sound going.

- In slow-moving music, he might improvise a melody above the choir in shorter notes, so the choir could hear and feel the pulse.
- If the music was harmonically complicated, he might play something for the choir but almost never exactly what the choir sang. It would be a reduction of the harmonic content and shifts from chord to chord so the choir could easily hear it.

• He would also help the choir hear the harmony when it was complicated by playing while they were singing *below* and *above* the choir (bass line and treble chords) but never in the choir’s pitch area.

• Finally, of course, much of the time the choir sang unaccompanied. He played *only* when it was necessary to help stay in tune or to help with one of the musical issues listed above.

The piano is a notably “unvocal” instrument, and my comments about Eric’s beautiful and non-percussive approach to the instrument are incredibly important. Too often I have heard a conductor or accompanist give pitches to the choir with a hard, loud, and percussive sound. Then the conductor wonders why the choir doesn’t sing beautifully! How you or your accompanist plays is vital to creating a beautiful sound...or a poor one.

The keyboard in rehearsal is an incredibly helpful tool. Like all tools, however, it has its place. Make sure you find ways to use it that help the choir (and even more importantly, remember when *not* to use it!), but neither work against the sound you want to create nor become an unnecessary crutch for your choir. ☐

NOTES

¹ Eric Ericson, Lennart Spongberg, and Gösta Ohlin, *Choral Conducting* (Walton Music: Hal Leonard Music Publishing, 1983).

² Refer to the author’s blog series for more on intonation: <http://richardsparks1.blogspot.com/search/label/Intonation>.

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