

Shipman's NMSOC newbie hints

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1 Disclaimer

This material has no official status whatsoever. It is just a collection of things I wish I'd known when I joined the NMSO Chorus in 1995. There is no guarantee that I'm correctly perceiving what is good practice, or that I'm explaining it right.

If you hear anything different from Roger Melone, do what he says, not what I say. I'm only a private in this army.

2 Ensemble: ninety bodies, one brain

In my secondary school musical education, I was taught to follow the conductor, regardless of what the other students were doing. Those reflexes were so deeply programmed that they gave me a lot of trouble in my first NMSO season.

Here, it's the other way around. Roger often says that if you are with the conductor but not with your ensemble, you are wrong. For him, one of the highest virtues of a group is that they will not leave each other.

Many of us were fortunate to work with the Philadelphia Orchestra in the Vail festivals of 2007 and 2008. I watched Rossen Milanov, the Philly's conductor, extremely carefully, comparing the ictus (the exact moment of the downbeat) of his stick to what I was hearing from the players. There was only a rather approximate relation between the two, but the players were absolutely together. The double bass section did not sound like eight double bass players; it sounded like one very large double bass. I think our own orchestra does this very well.

I live in constant fear of "biffing in," Roger's term for those lovely occasions where you start singing at the wrong spot, also known as the unintentional solo. What helps me most to avoid this is to be acutely aware of the behavior of those right around me. If you don't sense that most of those around you are about to start singing, be careful.

For this problem, probably the hardest piece I've sung here is William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*. It's very choppy, lots of rests punctuated by brief shouts. I've been fortunate to do this piece twice with the NMSO, and although I was in stark terror the whole time, I heard negligible amounts of singing on rests in the actual performances.

3 The neutral schwa

Although the group I was in before was quite good (Baroque Choral Guild of Palo Alto and Berkeley, since renamed Cantabile Choral Guild), the one aspect of singing I had the most to relearn was diction.

One year Roger read us a section out of a book of Robert Shaw's on the subject of choral diction. Shaw recommends the insertion of a schwa (neutral syllable, as in the word "the" used before a consonant) in specific places to give a cleaner shape to the diction perceived by the audience, especially in larger halls and with larger instrumental forces.

Here's an example from *Messiah*: "And the glory of the Lord."

And-uh the guh-lory, the guh-lory of the Lor-duh.

The rules that apply here:

1. When a word ends with a consonant and the next word starts with a consonant, and they tend to run together, insert a schwa between them. Without this rule, the first two words sound like "an-thuh".
2. For words like "glory," insert a schwa between the first two consonants. Without this rule, the tone may stop, and stopping the tone is usually to be avoided (although there are certainly exceptions to that rule too, such as "football," which is not to be pronounced "foot-uh-ball").
3. When a consonant occurs before a rest, add a schwa after it. This is the rule that seemed the most counterintuitive to me, and if exaggerated in solo singing, it can sound quite artificial. But we all do it together, and the audience can perceive that we all ended the word at the same time. This is probably Roger's most common instruction to us early in the season. "Sing a-men-nuh, not a-mennnn!"

Because we are all on the same page with this rule, we get a lot of audience compliments on our diction. After several concerts in German and even French, native speakers have said that they could actually understand the words!

4 Timing of vowels and consonants

Another important diction issue is exactly where in time to start and end vowels. With a few exceptions, I've been taught that consonants are short,

almost instantaneous, and only a vowel can be sustained. So where do the transitions come?

These rules are not universal, but most of the good choruses I've sung with seem to conform to them, if the conductor does not actually come right out and say them.

1. Initial consonants, and groups of consonants in the middle of a word, terminate exactly on the beat, so that the vowel starts exactly on the beat.
2. All consonants after the last vowel occur just after the beat, so the last vowel extends right up to the beat.

At this writing, I'm looking forward to performing Rachmaninoff's *Vespers* in full. We performed part of this back when I was in Baroque Choral Guild, and it's a terrific piece. However, when you see a cluster of consonants like "shchv" all together between two vowels, it is imperative that we agree when to sing them.

5 Marking

Roger gives marks very quickly. I had to simplify my system of marking breaths just so I could keep up. I use two different symbols, one for real breaths and one that means a catch breath or *Luftpause*.

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