Some final considerations: I think that the most important thing we can do for the chorus in preparing them to sing with an orchestra is to help them sing more rhythmically. They will be greatly aided, and the orchestra will find its task easier if the gesture you use in conducting is clear, concise, and free of idiosyncrasies. Because it is often the case that the orchestra has very little time to prepare the work, the more you can do to help them, the better, even if it means leaving the chorus to sing without you from time to time. The orchestra needs to see a clear downbeat in every measure and important cues from you—a first entry, an entrance after several measures of rest, a pitch change in a part after it has played a large number of measures of a repeated ostinato, a cue of encouragement for a solo line, etc.—but they need clear instructions, and they need to know that you have the score firmly in your mind and ear.

It is important to give the players well-marked parts. You have checked ahead of time for rehearsal letters and measure numbers, you know that the chorus has letters and/or numbers that are the same as those in the orchestra parts, and you have paced the rehearsal carefully so that you can begin on time and end on time, having covered all the necessary music. You are confident that you have rehearsed the difficult spots for both the chorus and the orchestra. You have rehearsed the seams in the music so that everyone is comfortable, and you have the tempos clearly in mind. The only thing left is to enjoy the performance!

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From 1984–98, Jones worked with Robert Shaw and the Atlanta Symphony choruses. She was assistant conductor for choruses, sang in the alto section, assisted with the Robert Shaw Chamber Singers, and was one of the organizers of the Robert Shaw Institute. She worked with the Festival Singers both in France and in the U.S. Jones was invited to conduct the Robert Shaw Tribute Singers in performance at the ACDA National Convention in San Antonio in 2002. Choruses at Boston University have been invited to appear at conventions of ACDA in Boston and New York City. In 2004 Jones was awarded the coveted Metcalf Award for Excellence in Teaching from Boston University. She earned the bachelor of music, master of music, and doctor of musical arts degrees from the University of Iowa.

CHAPTER 4

The Conductor's Dream:

Score-Based Imagination, Improvisation, and Inspiration

Jerry Blackstone

What guides the rehearsal process? Why do some performances seem completely natural and inevitable while others feel contrived? What is it that makes rehearsal time seem to fly by? Is it really, after all, only about personality? What is the role of the composer in creating exciting and moving performances? With all the time and energy it takes just to learn the notes, how is it possible to create lasting beauty in the limited time between concerts? Does gesture really matter, given the limited musical sophistication of some of the singers?

Who, on occasion, has not asked at least a few of these questions? The conductor's mission is to create beauty out of raw resources—to take the composer's and the author's limited suggestions and transform them into sounds capable of transforming musical lives for a lifetime. While daunting, this remarkable privilege is ours every time we step onto the podium. Even more important, however, is what happens before we meet with the ensemble. Ask yourself: Have I allowed myself the luxury of being engaged by the poet and the composer? Do I have a strong and valid musical/emotional/intellectual perspective informed by what the composer has given me? Have I chosen repertoire that is challenging and rewarding for everyone?

The process—from repertoire choice to final performance—involves *imagination*, *improvisation*, and *inspiration*. I am firmly convinced that what we do as conductors—how we shape rehearsals, what we stress in rehearsals, the pacing of our rehearsals, the specific tools we use to transform the ensemble from beginners to artists, and the gestural language we use to rapidly communicate this information—emanates from our score-based imagination. Our *dream* guides us through the intricacies of sound, vowel shape, rhythmic vitality, dynamic variation, and the myriad of other choices that come our way. The Book of Proverbs says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs 29:18). Conductors without a *dream* lead choirs in sluggish rehearsals and "democratically informed" performances, where every singer's

vowel color, rhythmic intention or lack thereof, and individualized articulations and dynamics are allowed to flourish.

The successful artistic process, from study through performance, involves *learning* the score, *imagining* the finished artistic product, *showing* the conductor's musical imagination through gestural language, *transforming* the initial sound into the conductor's *dream*, and *en-spiration*—taking the next step toward artistry that makes the music come alive in a personal and communicative manner. This process of imagination, improvisation, and inspiration may conveniently be thought of as LISTEN.

L–earn the score.
I–magine the finished artistic product; formulate the *dream*.
S–how the *dream* through gesture.
T–ransform the initial sound into the *dream*.
EN–spire the performance; take the next step toward artistry.

Learn the Score

Of all the activities in a conductor's life, this step is most often shortchanged. The pressures of e-mail, administration, student interaction, family—in short, life!—tend to get in the way of our spending time with the composer's gift to us. What does "learning the score" really mean? Isn't it enough to play it through at the piano, to listen to a good recording, and to mark where the breaths should be taken? There are as many ways to learn a score as there are scores to be learned and conductors to learn them. There are, however, common elements in every score that deserve our attention if a creative and appropriate *dream* is to be realized.

From Big to Little

Just as one plans a cross-country road trip by starting with a country map, then a state map, then a city map, then a tour of the residence, and finally finding a spot for your toothbrush, the same is true in approaching a score. The possibilities for "big picture" viewing are many: play the work completely through at the piano, visually/aurally hear it in your head, or listen to several excellent recordings. Whatever it takes, the conductor needs to look at the forest or see the mountain range before beginning the painstaking process of delving into the minutiae. Once the big picture has been experienced, determining the work's overall structure is the next step. Questions to ask include: 1) How does the text influence the structure of the piece? 2) What is the structure of the work? Is it in a standardized form (e.g., ABA), or did the composer feel compelled by the nature of the text and his or her musical reaction to it to devise a nonstandard formal structure?

After determining the overall structural, tonal, and textual components (detailed harmonic analysis may be helpful but is not imperative for the conductor's purposes), it is time to purposefully step into the forest and begin to look at both the trail and the trees along that trail. Questions for this step include: 1) If the first section is rather lengthy, are there subsections of shorter durations? 2) If so, how long are they? 3) Is there a reason for these lengths? Might the lengths of these sections influence my pacing of the composition in performances? 4) In each of these subsections, what is the length of each individual phrase?

It is important to realize that there are few right or wrong answers in making the above determinations. One conductor will see a four-bar phrase where another sees an eight-bar phrase and another a twenty-four bar phrase! The important point is that the conductor has looked deeply enough at the music to make a strong and valid judgment from his or her perspective. Having begun with the big picture and then proceeded to examine the smallest details, make sure to note in each part where mistakes, such as awkward intervals and tricky rhythms or entrances are likely to occur, and begin to devise creative solutions to remedy them.

Marking the Score

There are countless ways to successfully mark a score. It is even possible to successfully prepare and conduct a work with no markings whatsoever, although doing so is dangerous and may, except in the case of the most brilliant conductors, produce slipshod performances. Marking a choral score typically involves 1) numbering the measures, 2) editing each vocal line for consonant and breath placements, 3) reinforcing dynamic markings with colored pencils (it is very hard to ignore a bright red *fortissimo* in the tenor line, for example), 4) marking macro and micro structural elements, from big-picture sections to the smallest phrase, 5) noting the various vocal entrances, 6) marking articulations, 7) underlining stressed syllables, particularly in foreign languages, and 8) writing in translations, both word for word and poetic.

Who? Why? When? Where? How?

An informed *dream* brings with it background information on both the composer of the music and the author of the text. Why was the work composed, and for whom was it written? If the work is from a past era, who sang the first performance, and how many performers were involved? Do the location and date of the first performance provide us with significant information regarding placement of the singers and/or instrumentalists? Understanding this information will certainly influence elements of phrasing, dynamic variation, and articulation. Now that the conductor has studied the score, it is time to develop the *dream*, to *imagine* the ideal performance.

Imagining the Dream

Conductors who approach a rehearsal without a dream realize their level of aspiration immediately. If I just want food, it is pretty easy to find a meal. If, however, I imagine a gourmet meal, including appetizer, main course, and dessert (of course!), that will take a good deal more time to plan and execute. A run-of-the-mill rehearsal and an average performance are not difficult to accomplish, but an artistically compelling performance requires a dream that informs the entire process, from the preparatory beat of the first rehearsal, right through to the release of the final note in the performance.

Building Your Dream Account

Dreams are built on past experiences. Listening to evocative and artistic performances by other ensembles adds principal to one's dream account. If one is to become an artistic conductor, it is important to listen to great choral and instrumental ensembles rehearse and perform great music. Stand in the back of the room during rehearsals of fine orchestras and bands, and analyze why they sound so beautiful or dramatic. Watch other conductors, and analyze why the music sounds the way it does for them. Several years ago, the five living former conductors of the University of Michigan Men's Glee Club were invited back to campus to each lead a piece with the ensemble during one of the concerts. I was immediately struck by the remarkably different sounds the group made for each of the conductors. Not one of them said, "I'd like you to sound _____." They simply rehearsed and conducted their pieces, yet the ensemble sounded different for each conductor.

Sing in a great choir led by a fine conductor, and personally experience what it feels like to be led by someone else. Continually ask yourself, "Why? Why did he or she make that choice of gesture, or tone color, or vowel sound? What effect did it have on my ability to sing freely and communicatively? How would I have done it differently? Why was I inspired to go beyond the notes in that performance?"

The Score-Based Dream

Artistic dreams are often the result of careful analysis of the interplay of text and music. How does the music amplify the words? What do I think the author is saying, and how does the music paint it, clarify it, or, perhaps, distort it? Nearly every phrase of text has a "color" word or thought, such as "*deep* peace," "*crying*," "*amazing* day," or "*sweetly* sang." It would be hard to imagine performing Haydn's *Creation* without consciously attempting to paint the "*ponderous* beast" or the "*light* and *flaky* snow." To avoid the obvious opportunity to vocally embody these ideas is to accept black and white instead of full color.

The musical score often includes dynamic, tempo, and articulation indications. These "givens" should most often be just that—the starting points

from which the dream is developed. To change a composer's specific markings is dangerous and can be presumptuous. We are all aware of exceptions in which a slightly different tempo can make the difference between success and disaster, but by and large we must adhere to the composer's specific suggestions. Merely aurally reproducing the printed score, however, is not enough. The compelling *dream*, one that is convincing and deeply felt, will have a conductor's well-reasoned and intuitive perspective. "I can't imagine it any other way" is most often the guiding principle behind an artistic conductor's rehearsal process. Coming to the first rehearsal with a specific musical dream allows the conductor to proceed with energy, engagement, confidence, and forward vision.

Will the dream change during the rehearsal process? Absolutely! Every ensemble is unique, bringing with it its own individual singers' strengths and weaknesses. Each singer's artistic abilities will also influence the possibilities available to the conductor. It is, for example, artistically valid and exciting to conduct *Messiah* with either 180 singers or with 20, and each ensemble will affect the conductor's dream to a remarkable extent.

A score-based dream enables the conductor to energetically lead rehearsals from a big-picture perspective. "I've been there, and you are going to love it" is quite different from "I'm riding the bus with you and am wondering where we're headed." This is particularly important when rehearsing new and stylistically unfamiliar repertoire with singers.

Show the Choir Your Dream

Don't tell them—*show them*! When the dream has been deeply informed and shaped by the score, it is possible for every gesture to flow from that perspective. If the conductor imagines a passage to be *gently piano*, then an appropriate *gently piano* gesture will more naturally occur. If the ensemble is to efficiently realize the conductor's dream, then every gesture must reflect that dream. Problems occur when conductors 1) mirror what is coming back to them instead of providing the visual solution, 2) think no one is watching and thus provide very little gestural information for those who *are* watching, or 3) work too hard, thus clothing the gestural dream in static and irrelevancies.

If we reflect what we hear instead of what we dream, we allow the ensemble to get in the way of the efficient realization of the dream. "It's too loud!" spoken or yelled while conducting in a large or generic manner *sounds* ridiculous, but, in point of fact, this is often done. Extra loops, jerks, swoops, sweeps, and hitches are more often the conductor's reaction to a lethargic or musically untrained ensemble than a direct visual interpretation of his or her dream. If a dish has too much salt in it, will the chef add more? Conductors, however, often overconduct in an effort to instill overt musical ideas in a seemingly

less-than-responsive ensemble. The conductor is the keeper/sharer of the dream, which means sharing it in a gesturally viable manner, beginning with the preparation for the first note of the warm-up of the first rehearsal. If, as Paul Vermel used to remind us, "conducting is the communication of music information through pantomime," then the pantomime needs to match the dream as much of the time as possible.

"But no one is watching! They're only reading, you know." While few may be looking directly at the conductor, they are *all* watching. The conductor influences the ensemble simply by how he or she says "good morning," by his or her personal appearance, and by how tidy the room is. Every gesture, every facial movement, every spoken and sung sound made by the conductor influences the ensemble. While the singers may not observe 100 percent of the conductor's gestures during the reading stages of a new piece, they are observing and storing artistic ideas.

It is crucial, therefore, that the conductor's gestures match his or her dream from the very beginning. It is even more crucial that *musical expression* and *shape* be expected from the ensemble beginning with the first note of the learning process. If the conductor waits until all of the notes are learned and all of the text is immaculate, then blandness becomes the ingrained norm. There should never be "note banging" sessions. If the music is worth singing, then it is worth our musical souls from the moment we start the process. Why allow ourselves and our singers to be less than spectacularly musical in every rehearsal? Our colleagues who teach voice expect vocal and musical excellence at all times, and so should choral conductors.

"But I need to work really hard to get them to sing a pulled, legato line. I'm earning all of this money; I really should look like I'm working hard." Conductors who work too hard by clothing their gestures in extra loops, hooks, swoops, and hiccups engender singers who routinely think, "He/she doesn't really mean I'm supposed to sing that phrase with jerks and hiccups; he really means I should sing it in a legato manner." The more we gesturally say exactly what we mean, the more quickly the rehearsal process will proceed and the more we will hear from ensemble members, "He/she is easy to sing for. I feel vocally free when I sing in that ensemble."

Transform What Comes Back

It would be wonderful—and extraordinary—if the conductor's dream-based gestures automatically corrected all vocal faults and instantly connected with every singer in the ensemble. If that were the case, conductors' gestures would improve quite dramatically! But since there will always be issues of pitch, timbre, vocal color, articulation, dynamics, etc. that must be corrected, we are forced to be creative in the manner in which we address them. We must

transform what we *hear* into what we would *like to hear*; in other words, we must make it into our dream.

Almost anything is fair game during rehearsals. This may include jumping, standing, sitting, using falsetto, running, dancing, snapping, counting, touching, poking, throwing, and imagining. Whatever it takes to match the dream is fair game. Settling for *normal* or *okay* is not an option. Waiting until the notes are learned before heading for the dream is not an option. Confusing mediocrity with lack of skill is not an option. Selling the ensemble short is not an option. If the conductor can imagine it and can teach it, the ensemble will, in nearly all cases, be able to accomplish it.

Great, transforming rehearsals are improvisational and based on a deep and passionate knowledge of the score. They are not solely based on a conductor's personality, although personality shapes everything conductors do. We are, most often, true to ourselves, and we seldom act in ways contrary to our personalities. Great, transforming rehearsals are successful, however, when the conductor is constantly thinking ahead of the ensemble, analyzing what is working and what is not, and coming up with three or four possible solutions for each problem. Boring and unproductive rehearsals are often based on a logical, prearranged plan. "Plan-less" rehearsals can be just as pointless, but improvisational rehearsals, where the score-based dream infuses every engaging gesture and rehearsal device, are exciting, invigorating, and often mentally and physically exhausting for the conductor and singers alike.

Transforming rehearsals, while seemingly spontaneous, are the result of thoughtful planning. Warm-ups that focus the choir, address the ensemble's vocal and musical issues, and build the ensemble's musicianship skills, help set the vocal stage for a stimulating and productive rehearsal. The alternation of fast and slow tempi, new and familiar pieces, and vocally demanding and vocally restful pieces will help keep the ensemble engaged. Rehearsals tend to be most productive and inspiring when they are viewed as performances, in the best sense of that word.

Great improvisers do not become proficient simply by improvising. They begin by listening and by observing, then by practicing, by trying. Great jazz musicians practice scales, transcribe recordings, sit next to master improvisers, listen to a wide variety of recordings, and take chances. They go for it! Their remarkable ability to make performances new and engaging every time is based on their past experiences, both personal and observed.

The same is true for conductors who lead exciting, improvisational rehearsals. They simply cannot imagine the music being less than spectacular, so they wrack their brains to come up with several possible ideas to make things work better. They adjust their game plan on the fly by carefully watching the ensemble and intently listening to what is coming back. They think: If the pitch is awry, what can I do—or better yet, what can *they* do—to

improve it? Will my verbal instructions correct it? Is my gesture enough? Could a gesture or movement from the ensemble correct what I've been talking about for far too long? If I lifted my hand or had the singers lift one of their hands, would this improve intonation? Would a more horizontal gesture improve the linear quality of that phrase? Conductors who approach the rehearsal process with a dream and a bank account full of seemingly spontaneous, corrective ideas will encounter willing, engaged, creative, and artistic ensembles. A compelling performance is but a short step away.

En (In)-Spiration

Defining inspiration in the choral rehearsal and performance process is nearly impossible. A compelling performance causes us to hear the music in a new way, as if for the first time. Compelling performances often appear to be effortless, natural, and inevitable, as if someone were telling a deep and heartfelt story and we were the privileged listeners. We also know that one's perspective dramatically affects how a performance is perceived. For example, the experience of *singing* the Duruflé Requiem may be quite different from *hearing* the Duruflé as an audience member. Conducting the Requiem will provide a third perspective. We also know that the very same performance may be completely compelling for one listener and a dreadful bore for the listener's friend. How, then, is it possible for the conductor, with a score-informed dream, to inspire the singers toward a compelling performance? While there are myriad possibilities, let me suggest a few key ideas.

Internalizing the Text

Has rehearsal time been allotted for not only pronouncing and enunciating the text clearly and evocatively by the ensemble, but also for ingesting the meaning behind the words? It is one thing to sing a requiem text and another to sing the same text having recently lost a loved one. While a death in the family is not necessary for a singer to project a profoundly moving requiem movement, it is exceedingly important for singers to "make the text their own," to sing thoughts rather than syllables. Is it necessary to actually believe a text before one can present a compelling performance? Of course not. Similarly, one need not be a thief to portray a thief on stage. One has to, however, *imagine* how the thief might feel and act, in short, develop a motivation for the action. The same is true when singing. "Why?" and "How?" are viable questions for every singer to ask, particularly in the final stages of preparation for a performance.

In addition to creating, understanding, and owning the story behind the words, it is important for the singers to understand the interplay between words and music. While it is helpful, on occasion, verbally to point this out to

the singers in the ensemble, it is often just as effective to allow the music to make its own case.

Composers begin with the text, which most often generates the musical impulse. Looking backwards, then, can be very informative and inspirational. "Why was the music written as it was?" is a question that can have a great impact on the performance. There are as many possible answers to this question as there are personalities and abilities in the ensemble. Allowing the performers to come to their own conclusions can be helpful. But it may also be advantageous, and perhaps even imperative, to unify a group's image of certain passages. Each great work presents different opportunities for textual/musical relationships, and it is up to the conductor and the ensemble to decipher how these relationships will influence, even infect, the performance. It is not good enough to just sing beautifully. We must sing and conduct from a perspective of intimate familiarity with both text and music.

Is It Fabulous?

Normal is boring. Beige is bland. Good is only okay. While there is a time and place for everything (having one's body temperature noted to be "normal" is preferable to the alternative), normal, beige, or good choral singing is less than optimal. Many times, a simple reminder to be as "beautiful" or "terrific" or "expressive" or "elegant" as possible (the list is endless) will aid in achieving a compelling performance.

I remember a vocal master class I attended that left a lasting impression on me. A young singer had just given a lovely performance, and it was time for the master teacher, the late Arlene Auger, one of America's great singers, to share her wisdom. Expectations in the room were high because Ms. Auger had presented a magnificent recital the evening before, and we were, of course, hopeful that she would share insights into how she sang so elegantly and expressively. Ms. Auger responded to the performer with a gentle, "Would you sing that again even more beautifully?" The singer responded with an even lovelier performance than the first. This time, Ms. Auger responded to the singer, whose name was Barbara, with "Is that the most beautifully Barbara can sing it?" The third time Barbara sang the song, it was absolutely magical. Everyone in the room knew immediately that we had witnessed something very special. Ms. Auger could have offered hints about dynamic variation, vowel color, textual/musical relationships, physical gestures, eye contact, or dramatic intent. Instead, she simply encouraged Barbara to perform as only Barbara could, expecting her to project her deepest emotions through her very beautiful voice.

I have often stood in the back of the rehearsal hall of the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre, and Dance and listened to H. Robert Reynolds rehearse the symphony band. In sustained, elegant passages the

sound was absolutely golden and burnished. I would leave those rehearsals imagining how I could engender that same lushness in the choirs I was conducting. I finally asked one of the players why the symphony band always sounded so beautiful when Professor Reynolds was conducting. He replied, "He simply expects us to play our very best all the time."

Inspiring and compelling performances will not be far away if singers are expected to sing their very best at every minute of every rehearsal. Every aspect of the process will be affected, from the gesture to the sound, from the first note of the first rehearsal right through to the final release of the performance. Compelling performances stem from a deep and profound knowledge of the score that influences every aspect of the rehearsal and performance process. Every gesture, every rehearsal device, every vowel color, every articulation, every dynamic nuance, every communicative phrase is informed by the conductor's score-based dream.

Dream in full color!

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Jerry Blackstone is director of choirs and chair of the Conducting Department at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre, and Dance, where he conducts the Chamber Choir, teaches conducting at the graduate and undergraduate levels, and administers a choral program of eleven choirs. In February 2006 he won two Grammy Awards (Best Choral Performance and Best Classical Album) as chorus master for the critically acclaimed Naxos recording of William Bolcom's monumental *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Professor Blackstone is considered one of the country's leading conducting teachers, and his students have received first place awards and been finalists in both the graduate and undergraduate divisions of the ACDA Biennial National Choral Conducting Awards competition. *U.S. News and World Report* ranks the graduate conducting programs at the University of Michigan first in the nation.

Professor Blackstone has appeared as festival guest conductor and workshop presenter in twenty-eight states as well as Hong Kong and Australia. Choirs prepared by Blackstone have appeared under the batons of Neeme Järvi, Nicholas McGegan, Raphael Frübeck de Burgos, James Conlon, and Yitzak Perlman. As a strong advocate for the training of young musicians, Professor