

NMSC newbie hints

John W. Shipman

August 15, 2013

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 correctly understand what Maestro Roger Melone defines as good practice, or that I'm explaining it right.

Although Roger has reviewed this document, if anything here differs from what Roger says, do what he says, not what I say. I'm only a private in this army. Also, there may be exceptions to some of these general rules for specific pieces.

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 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 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.

On the other hand, it's possible to be too careful about entrances. Count carefully, pay attention, trust yourself, and enter with confidence.

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), the one aspect of singing where 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 sub-

ject 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 I’ve seen some singers furrow their brows at this instruction. If exaggerated in solo singing, it can sound quite artificial. But we all do it together, and the audience perceives only that we all ended the word at the same time. This is one of Roger’s most common instructions 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, Slavonic, and even French, native speakers have said that they could actually understand the words!

4 Timing of vowels and consonants

Another important diction issue: exactly when should vowels start and end? Most consonants are short, almost instantaneous, and vowels fill the balance of the note's time value. So where do the transitions come?

In 2010, as the NMSO Chorus we performed Rachmaninoff's *Vespers*. It's a terrific piece. However, when the score has a cluster of consonants like "shchv" all together between two vowels, it is imperative that we agree when to sing them.

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 state them.

1. Initial consonants, and groups of consonants in the middle of a word, terminate exactly on the beat, so that the following 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.

Here's a concrete example of both rules. Suppose you are to sing the word "re-peat" on two quarter notes followed by a rest. The vertical lines mark where the beats fall. The first quarter starts at the transition between the R and the E; the second quarter starts at the transition between the P and the second E; and the long E of the second syllable continues until the next beat, when you pronounce the T.

re|pe|at

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*, where you are to break the vocal line without actually inhaling.

Roger often says that you mark the part for your worst days. For example, if I ever miss a repeat, I go back with a pencil and exaggerate the repeat symbol. Sometimes the result is a huge scrawl several inches tall, especially if I ever miss it twice.

6 Avoiding the glottal stroke

When a phrase starts with a vowel, there is a natural tendency to start with a glottal stroke, but that's almost always wrong. Roger teaches a very simple method for avoiding it: breathe in through the vowel. If the word is "amen," for example, form your mouth as if you were singing an "ah" vowel as you inhale. Then, when you start to sing, you simply change from inhaling to exhaling without any disturbance in the shape of your vocal apparatus. It makes for a smooth, musical entrance.

7 Hissing, we do not likes it

Especially with larger forces, terminal sibilants can sound like the St. Santa Claus Sibilant Snakes Chorussssss. In addition to the rule above about the timing of terminal consonants, Roger's advice is to sound the "s" very briefly and then let your jaws fly apart immediately. Works like a charm.

8 Professional standards

I forget where I stole this quote, but I like it a lot:

Amateurs practice until they don't make mistakes.
Professionals practice until they can't make mistakes.

The famous piano teacher Theodor Leschetizky gave this algorithm for learning a piece.

1. When you want to practice a piece, sit at the piano with a little box containing ten buttons.
2. Play the piece.
3. If you play it right, remove one button from the box, else put them **all** back.
4. Continue until the box is empty.

507 Fitch St. NW
Socorro, NM 87801
<http://www.nmt.edu/~shipman/>