

Before the First Rehearsal: Strategies to Ensure Ensemble Success

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Conductor's goals for their ensemble:

- (1) Give effective and expressive performances
- (2) Run effective and efficient rehearsals

For musicians (students), the goals are simpler:

- (1) Have fun making great music with friends and colleagues

How do we bring these goals into alignment? Rehearsals must involve as much playing as possible and as little talking (on the conductor's part!) as is absolutely necessary.

Strategies to maximize time spent in rehearsal making music and minimize time spent talking:

- Develop effective, communicative conducting gestures
- Part preparation: Conductor as editor

"Where the REAL difficulty arises is when the dear, talented conductor, armed with his precious, marked score hasn't grasped the style. If he has, OK, it takes a few seconds to mark a cresc., or a p or a gliss. or a spicc. in a part; **but it takes minutes to ask for such things in a rehearsal.** The conductor has to talk and (at least hereabouts [in Austria and Germany]) **every word is a nail in his coffin.**"

~Carlos Kleiber, quoted in Charles Barber, *Corresponding with Carlos: A Biography of Carlos Kleiber*, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2011.

Marked scores are overrated: Only you can see it! You must communicate the markings in gesture or word.

Talking in rehearsal is too often ineffective:

- Takes up time in rehearsal (lessens playing time!)
- Musicians may or not pay close attention to what is said
- Musicians may not always respect the authority of your musical instructions, or
- They think they will remember what you said and decline to make a note of it in their parts

Conductors editing (marking) parts prior to the rehearsal period can help overcome these issues:

- First we must train students to pay attention to markings and train them in their meanings!
- The conductor's interpretive decisions are evident from the first rehearsal
- Important musical instructions are not left to the inconsistent marking habits of musicians
- Musicians are less likely to question something in their part (even penciled in) than something a conductor says. As opposed to oral instructions, conductor doesn't have to justify instructions already on the page. (It's not what YOU want, but what the MUSIC calls for.)

Be sure you utilize the best possible edition that requires a minimum of markings:

- (Relatively) free of misprints
- Limits others' editorial touches that you would have to change

Musical elements and considerations for part marking:

- (1) Measure numbers at the head of each staff: They cannot replace rehearsal figures, but measure numbers give the greatest specificity in rehearsal.
 - Finding a place to begin again can take a lot of rehearsal time
 - Part errors/discrepancies can often present themselves when marking measure numbers
- (2) Tempo: Metronome markings trump Italian tempo indications every time
 - Gives musicians most specific tempo information for performance, rehearsal and personal practice
- (3) Conducting patterns: Nothing is more tiresome in rehearsal than saying "Here I'm in four ..." or hearing "Where do you go into one?"
- (4) Balance issues: When asking for a given musical line to come out of the texture more, how often has a musician said, "So you don't want 'piano' there?"
 - Two "gears": bringing out and blending in
 - Dynamic markings are relative, like tempo indications
 - We must anticipate how players will interpret dynamic markings
 - Dynamics are more about color than decibels
 - Mark in parts "whom to listen for"
- (5) Questions of phrasing and articulation:
 - Breath marks (or no breath)
 - Lyrical considerations (vowel shape, consonant placement)
 - Bowings
 - Additional hairpins
 - Strong vs. weak beats
 - Legato vs. staccato
- (6) Correct errors (pitch, missing rests, etc.)
- (7) Anticipate issues that will arise in rehearsal. Can a simple marking help avoid them?

What not to mark:

- (1) "Too much!" Don't let your editing obscure the parts or overwhelm the printed music.
- (2) Complicated symbols: Keep markings simple.
- (3) Avoid re-marking what already appears in print

Part distribution:

Once master parts are marked, resource decision must be made:

- (1) Transcribe markings into all originals, or
- (2) Make photocopies and distribute. (This does not break copywriter law so long as you retain a full set of parts in your library and you collect the copies after the performance.)

Additional benefits of part marking:

- (1) Teaches students effective marking conventions
- (2) Maximizes uniformity of text for entire ensemble

It's all about time! Other considerations prior to the rehearsal period:

Performance time goal is affected by your rehearsal time budget

30 minutes of music in 6 weeks of rehearsal (1500 minutes) = 50 play-throughs of the entire program (at performance tempo!)

How many "play-throughs" will a given work need to be successfully performed?

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| Easy: | 10-20 play-throughs |
| Moderate: | 20-40 play-throughs |
| Difficult: | more than 40 play throughs |

Rehearsal schedule should be formulated according to needs as established above

- Schedule gives players clear idea of expectations
- Allows you to manage personnel effectively
- Makes conductor accountable for and mindful of actual rehearsal time use

Rehearsal time is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the preparations that goes into successful ensembles!