

# What Conductors Really Do

*A Love Story*

**Dr. Gary D. Cannon**

Artistic Director, Emerald Ensemble

Artistic Director, Cascadian Chorale

Artistic Director, Vashon Island Chorale



Emerald Choral Academy

24 May 2021

[www.emeraldensemble.org](http://www.emeraldensemble.org)

# CONDUCTOR

FLORIDA GRAND  
opera



What my friends think I do



What my mom thinks I do



What musicians think I do



What society thinks I do



What I think I do



What I really do



## Meeting the Music

- Other performances
  - Concert
  - Recordings
  - Streaming
  - Radio
- Suggestions
  - From singers
  - From audience
  - From composers
- Personal experience
  - During training / youth
  - Research
  - Conference

## Why Program It?

*First meeting them*

- Personal assessment
  - You've fallen in love with it
  - You like it
  - You admire / appreciate it
- For the choir
  - They'll enjoy it
  - They'll sound good
  - Good for their training
  - Good fit for a specific program
- Other
  - The audience will like it
  - Requested
  - Historically noteworthy



# Crafting a Program

*Getting to know them*

## Musical considerations

- Is it long enough for a whole concert?
- Is it long enough for half a concert?
  - Find a partner piece
  - Or compile another half of shorter works
  - Does it open, close, ... or go in the middle?
- How long can the choir / audience withstand?
  - Community choir: 50–65 minutes of music
- Variables in compiling shorter works
  - Musical contrast / consistency
  - Thematic unity (usually text)
  - Concert order

## Practical considerations

- Difficulty learning
  - Difficulty in vocal production
  - Available rehearsal time
  - *Total* difficulty level, for voices / ears
- Budget for instruments, soloists, scores



# Pitching to the Board

*Asking friends for advice about dating them*

## The Board

- Governing body
  - Legal responsibility for organization
  - Regular meetings (monthly, or quarterly)
  - Conductor is *ex officio* (non-voting)
- Principal responsibilities
  - Development (Fund-raising, marketing, outreach)
  - Management (Budgeting, logistics, hiring)
  - Stewardship (Financial and legal oversight)



# Planning Each Rehearsal

*Preparing for each date*

## **Warm-ups** (10–15 minutes, or more)

- (1) Posture
- (2) Breathing
- (3) Sing low
- (4) Sing high(-ish)
- (5) Special elements, like tuning, vowels, resonance, dynamics, phrasing

## **First pieces**

- Blend technique into the repertoire

## **Teaching the music** (*methods vary wildly*)

- For teaching pitches, I like to find two parts that complement each other (SA/TB, or SB/AT, or ST/AB), especially rhythmically
- Rhythm. Clapping, counting
- Diction. International Phonetic Alphabet, or English approximants
- Vocal technique



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# Planning Rehearsal Arc

*Deepening the relationship*

## **THE GOAL**

- Gradually less about musicianship, more about musicality

## **First 1–2 rehearsals**

- Sight-read through everything

## **Continue rehearsals**

- Teach pitches, rhythms, dynamics, vowels, etc.
- Take notes on what was accomplished each week

## **Halfway to two-thirds**

- Re-assess (run-through rehearsal)

## **Approaching the concert**

- Be concert-ready 1–2 weeks early



# As the Concert Approaches

*Preparing for an important step*

## Concert logistics

- Venue-specific variables
  - Scheduling
  - Standing order
  - Staging
  - Setting up
- Audience interactions
  - Writing program notes
  - Pre-concert lecture
  - Mid-concert remarks
- Recommending standards
  - Concert dress
  - Concert etiquette
  - Attendance requirements

## Meanwhile...

- For next concert
  - Studying scores
  - Hiring instrumentalists / soloists
  - Recruiting / auditioning singers
- For next season
  - Planning repertoire
  - Budgeting
  - Marketing
- Professional development
  - Conferences, networking
  - Reading, research
  - Other activities — freelancing, teaching, composing, writing, lecturing, etc.





# Concert Week

*Happily ever after...?*

## Shift in focus

- **Final rehearsals**
  - Setting up (esp. orchestral chairs)
  - Rehearsals focus more on run-through
  - Very little repetition of any given section
- **Concert**
  - In rehearsals, listening with half-mind on correction
  - In concerts, conducting the angels

## The future?

- Sometimes relationship ends  
(usually amicably)
- Sometimes conductor & music return to each other forever



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#### **What does a conductor really do?**

- Music — Selecting, programming, planning, studying
- Teaching — Training, rehearsing, auditioning
- Organization — Fund-raising, logistics, management, meetings
- Professional development — Other musical activities



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