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The use of regularly scheduled sectionals is one of the most valuable rehearsal techniques at the choral conductor's disposal. Some conductors employ sectional rehearsals on an occasional basis, particularly in learning new and difficult works. Sectionals can, however, be used profitably at all points along the rehearsal continuum: from initial "learning-the-notes" to final polishing. They can shorten the amount of time needed to prepare a concert and benefit most types of choirs.

Recent experiments in auditory perception suggest that only one or two musical lines can be perceived simultaneously. If this is true, rehearsal of one or two voice parts alone may be needed to make a comprehensive evaluation of the progress of each part.

Authorities who advocate the use of sectionals are in the minority. Out of fourteen well-known books on choral conducting and techniques only five mention sectional rehearsals.¹ In each case, they were recommended only for early rehearsals of difficult music. In his study of nine English writers, Robert Henry discovered that four discussed sectional rehearsals. Furthermore, Henry observed twelve English choirs (representing a cross section of church, school, college, community, and symphonic choirs) in a total of sixty rehearsals and found that only one made use of the technique.² The present author's experience as a regular singer in twenty-five North American choirs (representing all the types studied by Henry, as well as professional ensembles) under twenty-one choral conductors has been similar. Four conductors rehearsed voice sections separately and of the four two did so on a regular basis. In both instances, however, the use of sectionals was limited to initial rehearsals.

Considering the unpopularity of sectional rehearsals the following statement by Robert Shaw is most astonishing: "For our Russian tour [of the Robert Shaw Chorale] we had fifty hours of rehearsal, but we had to prepare three full concerts with that time. This year we will be touring "Messiah" which is much more of the standard repertoire so we will only have twenty-five hours

rehearsal. *Over half of the rehearsal time is spent in section rehearsal.*"³ Shaw conducted all the rehearsals himself rather than delegating the duties to assistants. The first rehearsals were spent with each part alone learning the correct pitches. Later, pairs of voice sections were rehearsed, each part having the opportunity to sing paired with every other part.

In Shaw's words, sectionals are "the fastest way to teach notes The sections arrive at a homogeneity of tone. They can hear themselves more clearly. It's the fastest way to polish."⁴ Shaw's sectionals served a far greater purpose than learning difficult passages. They provided opportunities to work on

verbal and non-verbal aural stimuli: spoken digits, syllables, words, or short phrases; different languages or timbres of voices; different pitches; the same pitches but of varying amplitude; etc. There has been little experimentation in the study of attention to musical stimuli but there are enough similarities between some stimuli used and the elements of choral singing to draw tentative conclusions about the perception of choral music.

Research conducted during the 1950's confirmed that while the ability to comprehend aural stimuli is impaired when two or more messages are received simultaneously, it is possible to focus attention on one message to the ex-

Sectional Rehearsals

By Timothy Mount

rhythm, blend, balance, intonation, phrasing, musical direction and line, diction, and all the other ingredients of "polish" that resulted in the universally recognized brilliance of the Robert Shaw Chorale.

Shaw did not limit his extensive use of sectionals to the professionals. The 220-voice Cleveland Symphony Chorus rehearsed two and one-half hours every Monday night. In addition, each section rehearsed alone once a month on Sunday afternoons, i.e., approximately one-fifth of each singer's total rehearsal time.

One should not advocate adoption of Robert Shaw's rehearsal practice without reason. What works for one will not necessarily work for others. However, the singular success of the individual in question warrants further investigation into the reasons why regular, intensive use of sectional rehearsals may be of value.

There are two important advantages sectionals have over full rehearsals. The first has already been suggested: it is easier for singers to hear themselves and others on their part. They can also concentrate on matters that concern only their section. The other advantage lies with the conductor. It is easier to hear one or two musical lines than it is to hear four or more. Clues to why and to what extent this is true can be found in the study of the psychology of perception and, in particular, the area known as attention. Most experiments in attention have employed the following

conclusion of others. This is known as the "cocktail party effect": a guest at a cocktail party usually listens to one conversation and ignores all others regardless of how loud they may be. Similarly, conductors can listen to specific technical problems without becoming overly distracted by poor intonation.

Most researchers "appear to agree that increase in the amount of information presented causes a relative decline in efficiency. That is, a smaller proportion of the incoming messages is handled adequately."⁵ At a cocktail party, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a lucid conversation as the party becomes larger and louder. It also becomes more difficult to listen to the conversation at hand if the one taking place nearby is interesting. The listener has a limited capacity to absorb relevant information during a short time period.

Spatial separation of auditory stimuli improves the ability to respond to one of two different messages, but not when both are to receive a response. In other words, it may be possible to determine that a wrong pitch is emanating from the bass section but in the process a mispronounced word in the alto section may go unnoticed. "Given that messages contain *more* than the limiting quantity of information, it will be the words spoken in one voice or from one place which will be understood. Once the limit is reached, one task fails while the other is still adequately performed."⁶

Recent research in the division of attention has yielded conclusive evidence that parallel processing (simultaneous perception) of concurrent verbal stimuli is possible.⁷ Parallel processing, however, is accompanied by a significant decline in efficiency and/or the number of correct responses in tests. All tests were carried out dichotically and limited to two simultaneous messages. That is, one message was played via stereo headphones to the left ear while the other message was played to the right. Each message was far less complex than even the simplest musical phrase. In one experiment, for example,

subjects were exposed to simultaneous word pairs and were instructed to press a key whenever they heard an animal name in either ear. Conductors, on the other hand, are exposed to dozens of simultaneous, pertinent musical concerns at any given moment. It becomes clear that the experiments cited do not indicate clearly that parallel processing may be a relevant perceptual possibility for the choral conductor.

The difficulty in hearing two or more simultaneous audio messages may be compounded by the physical movements of the conductor. A number of experiments suggest that it is more difficult to maintain tapping a regular beat with the foot or hand while performing a variety of different perceptual tasks.⁸ Unfortunately, the perceptual tasks in these experiments did not involve hearing.

The research and experiences discussed above suggest it is difficult, if not impossible, to follow more than one or two musical lines simultaneously. Indeed, the number of incoming messages is multiplied by the number of musicians playing or singing the same part. The human brain is capable of perceiving multiple stimuli only through serial processing. In parallel processing attention is divided. In serial processing attention switches from one message to another. The conductor, for example, hears a pitch which does not belong to the chord being sung and locates the problem somewhere in the tenor section. In the process, however, an incorrectly sung rhythm in the bass section may have gone unnoticed.

Although it is possible to process serially a multitude of musical stimuli within a very short time, it is inescapable that something must be missed. Given the complexity of musical language, the mind can focus on only one or two messages simultaneously. Sectional rehearsals reduce the number of stimuli. A conductor is less likely to miss hearing something that went wrong simply because there are fewer messages being sent.

Most conductors would agree it is

easier to hear in sectional rehearsals than it is when the full ensemble is present. However, "some choral conductors maintain that the sectional rehearsal helps group identity, esprit, and élan"⁹ while others caution against using sectionals too frequently or allowing them to last too long because boredom and irritation may ensue.¹⁰ Some conductors maintain that the use of sectionals is the most efficient way to "learn notes" and some feel it is a waste of time. In the face of such opposing opinions it may be expected that the manner in which sectional rehearsals are conducted is directly related to their effectiveness.

It is important that the conductor of an ensemble directs the sectional rehearsals. While sectionals may give a student assistant valuable conducting experience, only the conductor can dictate the interpretation with precision. Conducting all the sectionals may produce scheduling difficulties but the problem is not insurmountable.

Groups whose rehearsal time is limited can, with careful scheduling, take advantage of sectional rehearsals. Within a regular time period of 7:30 to 9:00 pm one night a week, for example, the basses arrive at 7:00. The rest of the choir comes at 7:30 and rehearses together until 8:30. The tenors alone stay to rehearse from 8:30 to 9:00. The next week sopranos and altos rehearse in sectionals. With this system, no one stays longer than the original one and one-half hour time period and the efficiency gained compensates for the reduction of total "singer-hours." Another possibility would be rehearsing two voice parts together from 7:00 to 7:30, the whole choir from 7:30 to 8:30, the other two sections staying for the final half hour. Different combinations can be used each week and all voice parts rehearse the original one and one-half hours. With high school groups, "one of the best aspects of a part rehearsal is that it can be scheduled in an otherwise useless time segment; such as a 20- or 25-minute study hall after or before lunch, or even as part of a split period . . ."¹¹

It is essential that the conductor be as well prepared for the sectional as for the full rehearsal. Because detail is more apparent to conductor and singer alike it is necessary to have a clear idea of exactly how each note or phrase should



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be performed. Once past the initial "wood shedding," concerns such as phrasing, articulation, phrase direction, dynamics, and diction can be addressed.

Sectionals should not be confined to rehearsing technical difficulties of the music. They provide ideal opportunities to develop blend, experiment with seating within the section, and teach the skills involved in sight-reading. Singers learn to listen to themselves and each other. When two voice parts rehearse together, chorus members can better perceive the relationships between both parts.

A rehearsal pianist should be present at all sectional rehearsals. The conductor can then focus complete attention on the singers. Those voice parts not present should be played by the accompanist so that the harmonic context of the music is not lost.

Sectionals can be valuable for different kinds of choral groups. The last group one would expect to need them would be the professional choral ensemble, with its experienced singers and rehearsal time dependent upon financial considerations. Yet, the Robert Shaw Chorale spent fifty percent of its time in sectionals.

An often voiced objection to the use of sectional rehearsals is that they can become tedious and boring. The interest of the singers must be maintained. If only pitches and rhythm are rehearsed both the more skilled readers and those who may have performed the work previously (not to mention the conductor!) will undoubtedly suffer. Sectionals for the purpose of "learning-the-notes" should be limited. If, however, the time is also used to polish and work on finer details of the music in particular and choral singing in general, it can be an efficient and exciting method of rehearsing.

It takes courage to commit an ensemble to regularly scheduled sectional rehearsals. Fear for the morale of the group, limited rehearsal time, and the pressure of performance can mislead the director into assuming that the more voice parts there are present, the more will be accomplished. On the contrary, the efficiency gained in not allowing three quarters of the choir to sit idle while the other quarter rehearses should contribute to both morale and the success of the concert.

1 Works written or edited by Davison, Ehmann, Finn, Garretson, Holst, Stanton, Jones, Lamb, McElheran, Boyd, Neidig and Jennings, Robinson and Winold, Thomas, and Decker and Herford. The last five discuss sectional rehearsals.

2 Robert Alphonso Henry, "A Comparison Study of English Choir Rehearsal Theories and Practices" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Indiana University, 1965).

3 Jack Boyd, "Conversations with Robert Shaw," *Choral Journal*, 7:12, September-October, 1966. Emphasis not in original. In a correspondence with the present author, Boyd states that ever since he first interviewed Shaw he has been "totally sold on the usefulness of sectional rehearsals."

4 Ibid.

5 D. E. Broadbent, *Perception and Communication* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1958), p. 45.

6 Ibid., p. 35.

7 Daniel Kahneman, *Attention and Effort* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 145-48.

8 J. S. Michon, "Tapping Regularity as a Measure of Perceptual Motor Load," *Ergonomics*, 9:401, September, 1966.

9 Lloyd Pfautsch, "The Choral Conductor and the Rehearsal," *Choral Conducting: A Symposium*, eds. Harold A. Decker and Julius Herford (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 88.

10 Warner Lawson, "Practical Rehearsal Techniques," *Choral Director's Guide*, eds. Kenneth L. Neidig and John W. Jennings (West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing, 1967), pp. 256-57.

11 Jack Boyd, *Rehearsal Guide for the Choral Director* (Champaign: Mark Foster Music, 1970), p. 129. Boyd devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of sectional rehearsals and it is well worth reading.

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