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MUS 354 – Conducting

Rehearsal Techniques

Strivin'

The art of active observation is an art form I pride myself in making a conscious effort do well and to also constantly improve in many aspects of my life. This active observation paired with additional knowledge and words to describe my observations has been eye opening in relation to my developing philosophy about facilitating a rehearsal. While college has opened my eyes to even more examples of great (and not so great) rehearsing through classes and observations, I feel a majority of my opinions stem from my middle school and high school experience. Reading Robert Reynold's article *Guiding Principles of Conducting* and Stanley DeRusha's article *The Rehearsal Technique* I realize how fortunate I am to have been involved with and have the opportunity to observe many types of conductors and 'rehearsers' throughout rehearsals and performances.

The difference between a conductor and one who rehearses was never a line I had considered before. I believe both have similar, if not the same, end goal in mind but attempt to reach that goal in different ways. I am under the impression that a conductor utilizes his/her "physical vocabulary" (mentioned on page three of the Reynolds' article) as well as a verbal vocabulary but is able to draw the meaning out of the music through that "physical vocabulary." One who rehearses feels more comfortable with the verbal communication which often does not yield the same musical results as having that "physical vocabulary." Upon reflection, I can place teachers I have had in the past into each of these categories. The two groups conducted by two different individuals would receive

gold ratings at Indiana State School Music Association events, and both groups were clean in regards to technique. However, one group stood out as being more than just clean. This group had a level of musicality consisting of awareness and collaboration that I feel can only be taught through music, not technique, not notes, not intonation, music.

Post graduation I have kept in contact with both teachers, and one of the teachers and I recently had a conversation about musicianship. This was the teacher who I classified above as rehearsing the group toward a technically clean state as opposed to conducting the group. This teacher made a statement that he recognizes that his musicianship is at a different level than it should be and that this is becoming more and more evident as he works with advanced groups. When Robert Reynolds offered the three commonalities of conductors on the first page of his article, “a remarkable level of personal musicianship” was number one on that list. This got me thinking. Could this be the difference between the two ensembles mentioned above? Is the conviction of that “physical vocabulary” dependent on the ‘level of personal musicianship?’ Is the vocabulary learnable without that level of musicianship? How would that second ensemble be different if the teacher was a conductor as opposed to someone who rehearses a group?

While I am still toying with the questions above, both Reynolds and DeRusha discuss some learnable behaviors of conductors. Reynolds discusses the idea on page four that “everything grows together – the music, the right notes, the intonation, the aesthetic feeling – even though it might not happen at exactly the same time.” This jumped out at me because of a clinic I attended at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in 2013. This clinic highlighted the importance of personal practice that starts off musical with all elements involved as opposed to mastering the individual elements and then putting them all

together. It makes sense to do so in my personal practice, why not push students to do so in an ensemble setting as well?

Over this past winter break I had opportunity to sub and help out in a local middle school. Here, I saw an excellent example of this teacher blending numerous aspects of music together in an effort to show that this yields the best product. The beginning warm-up routine of his middle school groups consisted of work with air, notes, technique, articulation, AND musicality intertwined. In my middle school and high school experience, the 'musicality' section of the warm up was playing chorales. To me, this sets the tone that the items in the warm up prior to that chorale would not be viewed as needing to be played with the same purpose and intentions. It was a new perspective to see this group playing musically from the first set of long tones as opposed to just going through the motions. In this group, I was then able to see the translation of the warm up when he began working with a new piece. While *Joy* by Frank Ticheli is written in an already musical style, the students grasped onto the phrases, articulation, and the role they played at that point in the piece because they viewed all of these things (and more) as needing to take place at once. I recognize that in the first and sometimes second year of playing the brain needs to focus on one thing at a time. That being said, I feel I would be doing a disservice to my students to not gently push them in the direction of becoming an advanced player who recognizes the importance of being able to do all of these things simultaneously. However, I know that this does not happen easily and results for some students may happen in the middle school and for others it may not be until high school. Replicating and adapting this middle school teacher's success is something I hope to do in the future. I do feel that the continuous learning process of how to get students to accomplish this task is a learned skill that can

always be improved upon through observation of others and observation of student learning.

Proximity in the classroom is another skill I feel can be learned. The same middle school teacher as above has his classroom in traditional arcs with an aisle down the middle. I witnessed how proximity was used appropriately and not as an intimidation factor. The students were constantly more aware throughout the rehearsal, and the teacher was able to walk around the room and help with notes, posture, and hear positive and less positive sounds from the group/individuals. Although Reynolds briefly mentioned this on page six of his article, I would appreciate to have heard more of his perspective and uses of this technique. Having recently been on both sides of this proximity factor, I see the value in it but I think there is a fine line between its effectiveness and it being intimidating. As a performer I still become much more aware of my playing when a conductor or other person is standing close to me and take it quite personally like they believe I am going to mess up. On the flip side, as a teacher I recognize that rarely is that the intent. When I am filling in the role that typically makes me nervous, I am not out to 'get' anyone as I just want to improve the ensemble and individuals so that the highest potential is reached, and it is not personal at all. Presenting positive comments when walking around the room can help ensure that proximity is not used to just 'call out' things and can also help with rapport.

A lifelong skill where there is constant room for improvement that I believe is intuitive but can be learned is in building and maintaining rapport. My definition of rapport in this case includes the overall feeling of the rehearsal as well as the professional teacher-student relationships that form. On page thirty-three, DeRusha mentions the importance of

“react[ing] to the group in its present, not past, state,” and that “each rehearsal should end by giving the performer a positive feeling.” These two quotes stuck out to me because I believe that they foster a trusting environment where the students feel safe. I do not want students to walk into my classroom feeling nervous or scared because of how I may react, and I certainly would love for students to look forward to the time in their day they can come perform and learn about music. Reynolds’ idea of not forgetting to praise the group instead of always just moving on when someone matches the conductor’s aural image or other things just going well is also a building block for positive rapport of a rehearsal.

I feel building positive rapport can come out of any situation, as the teacher is able to choose how he/she reacts to every situation. While only a sub, I feel I made an effort at this over my winter break when I had to choose my reactions to a class as they became eager for their lunch period. This 6th grade brass class was not appreciating that I was going over new material with them despite that being my instructions from their teacher. This caused them to be more talkative and make it harder for me to earn their respect and they believed I was going against their teacher’s wishes and trekking onto new material. In an effort to bring them back in, I let them know that I had an award to give out. This perked their ears up. The French horns received the best posture award and the talkative first row of trumpets immediately changed their behavior, as they also wanted an award. Immediately, the environment of the classroom changed, and I was able to get back to the material their teacher had wanted me to begin. I feel that the small things matter and that almost everything, if not everything, a teacher does has the opportunity to leave a positive or a negative impact on a classroom and individual students. That is quite a lot of pressure!

One of my high school band directors, the one who communicated well with his “physical vocabulary,” was a role model for me in building rapport. He knew how to get a group to listen and work together, and he made an effort to care about each student. One of his mottos was “if I can’t do it for everyone, I can’t do it for you.” Naturally there are exceptions to this motto, but as a general statement, I hope to abide by that with my students. He helped push me to be better through his high expectations and letting me know he cared about the success of me but also of our ensemble. I wanted to be a better clarinet player, ensemble player, and person because of my interactions with him as well as my observations of his interactions with others.

I would commend that teacher with much of my appreciation for music, personal discipline, and views on good character. Also, he is on the top of my list for exposing me to a majority of the examples of great teaching, especially within music, and there are very few ‘what-not-to-dos’ that I picked up from him. When I read the DeRusha discussing one of my only ‘what-not-to-dos’ in relation to this teacher, I chuckled to myself because one of my ideas on how to change one of those ‘what-not-to-dos’ was hit right on the head through this article. Rotating sections physically throughout their location in the ensemble, as mentioned on page 32 of the article, and also rotating players on parts within sections are both details of my future classroom I feel passionately about. Throughout my time in the top ensemble in high school, I played almost all third and second clarinet parts; this was and continues to be a very safe place for me while playing in an ensemble. I feel I can contribute positively and am in a position of less risk to negatively impact the ensemble as my opinion from high school was those parts were less important. Although that view has changed since being in college, I feel that it should be a view my students should hold as

early as possible—all parts are essential to the ensemble. The system in my high school under this teacher was that the same people typically stayed in the same place for the whole year. The few times I played first part in high school, I strongly disliked it and would dread having to play those pieces. While I recognize that my fear is a personal problem, I also wonder what would have happened if I had not classified myself as that second and third part/inner parts player throughout high school. High school players through younger players should not be boxed in to playing a certain part as it is part of their education to experience as many roles in the music making as possible. In my ideal world of teaching music in a middle/high school band setting, I plan to strategically allow everyone the opportunity to play all the parts as well as rotate them around ensemble proximity-wise like DeRusha suggests. I recognize this as an ideal situation, but in the words of Mr. Speck, why not strive for ideal? When I am actually putting this ideology in place, I see it as possible that I will realize why my director made the choices he did, but I intend to test out my ideology in my own classroom and let the results be a learning experience.

Another aspect I feel is important to nurture in the middle and high school band world is what DeRusha stated about what a graduate of your program should possess – “he should have had experiences which make him want to continue his involvement in music as a connoisseur of the fine arts, to hear more great music, and to become an active consumer and supporter of the fine arts.” I believe this starts from beginning band, I feel all of the teachers I have had, especially the one in the previous example, provided me with a solid foundation and thirst to know more. Since I went on to study music in college, this foundation and drive to know more started my bank of musical experiences. Reynolds states that this is important to conductors and musicians on page eleven - “even though we

have what we call an 'intuitive' idea of how music should be played, we have *informed* that intuition through many musical experiences." He goes on to say "it's an ingrained reaction that has grown in us as a result of many years of deepening musical experiences." I had never considered where that 'gut feeling' came from only that it did exist. I feel this also explains why different people hear different things when in front of an ensemble.

The flow and spectrum of the intensity during a rehearsal is also not something I had considered as a factor in rehearsals. I have been involved in rehearsals that seemed engaging, and I have been in rehearsals that seem less than engaging. However, I had viewed those 'less than engaging' ones as my fault as I may have had less sleep the previous night. While I am sure some of the 'less than engaging' rehearsals were my fault, I wonder if intentional rehearsing with a timeline and peak in intensity would have helped kept my interest more. Reynolds expanded on this topic on page six of his article with the subheadings "The White Heat Time" and "Get/Keep/Focus Attention."

In "The White Heat Time," he discusses the idea of pacing the intensity throughout a rehearsal and how there can/should be a period of the highest intensity where the most productive work happens. Again, this is logical; I had just never considered including pacing in my planning. Along with pacing, I had never considered the simple ways to diversify and set the tone while working on a specific piece. Intentional voice characteristics that match the music can help set up what the feeling of the piece should be. For example on page six of the Reynolds article, "if it's a fast piece, talk fast. If it has a lot of staccato, talk that way; but if it's mellow, you should imitate that feeling." I do not feel I have ever observed a director I have watched or rehearsed under use this technique. However, it has potential to be effective.

Another rehearsal technique I have rarely experienced in my career is when DeRusha presents the idea on page thirty-two of playing lines the opposite way from which they are written. "Ensemble precision as well as continuity of musical life can often be enhanced by treating a line opposite to how it is written." I do this in my personal practice often, however never in a large group setting; I must learn the notes, melody, and direction in order to achieve the passage and choosing other ways to play the passage allows this to happen. While I have seen it work in my practice, I have to wonder what this technique does to the brain processing in order to help this technique be effective. Why does doing the opposite thing make something else click within the brain? In what other ways have I not yet discovered that 'trick' the brain into learning something new in a creative way?

The silent rehearsal technique where everything is communicated with non-verbal gestures I have only seen used as a punishment or as an "I am frustrated with you" from a director. While it was effective, if I ever use that I do not plan to have it stem from frustration. Mentioned above was the idea of a 'learned physical vocabulary,' and it seems that the silent rehearsal would force a conductor to expand his/her vocabulary. When stemmed from frustration I would assume that could affect what is learned in that vocabulary during the time as the mood and setting of the piece could not be in harmony with the conductor's outlook on the ensemble. While my view on 'bad words' is a different discussion, I think it is interesting to think of this 'physical vocabulary' as it being possible to learn less than ideal conducting when frustrated or upset.

Reading these two articles and being able to relate them to my personal experiences and observations has solidified the idea that growing as a conductor is a constant learning process. Through this, I think the ideas of the 'physical vocabulary' as well as my need to

continue working toward a 'level of remarkable musicianship' would two areas I recognize I need to continue striving for. Through further observations, life experiences, asking questions, and reading quality articles, I feel I still have much to learn and am excited to continue that journey to strive for excellence.