

# A Self-Diagnostic Checkup for Conductors

by Mel Unger



**Editor's Note:** This article is based on a paper presented at the conference "Preparation of Tomorrow's Conductors IV," held at the State University of New York at Buffalo, February 12, 1993.

Teaching choral conducting and rehearsal techniques with self-diagnostic checklists is based on four fundamental premises:

1. The conducting art can be systematically learned and taught; it is only partly a function of artistic intuition. In short, it is a *science* and an art.

2. The particulars of the conducting discipline can be sorted under abstracted elements and principles. The "do's" and "don'ts" of rehearsal and performance procedures remain an undifferentiated mass to all but the most analytical students unless instructors organize and categorize them into hierarchical structures.

3. Students learn most efficiently when they apprehend particulars through the framework of these topical divisions. If teachers help students organize the data they amass from listening, observing, and experimenting, they will progress more quickly and learn more thoroughly.

4. If students can recall these outlines easily, they will possess the diagnostic tools for continuous, self-directed growth. Regular self-evaluation is especially important once students leave the college classroom. Constructing an acrostic aphorism for each checklist is a practical way of making the elements of conducting and rehearsing

unforgettable. Preoccupation with certain elements to the neglect of others becomes less likely.

## A Pyramid of Skills

The conducting discipline is made up of specific skills, each with a particular role. When we order them according to function, a pyramid is formed (Figure 1) in which immediately apparent skills represent the tip of the structure, while strata of more hidden skills undergird these. Such background skills may not be evident to the casual or short-term observer, yet they are indispensable to successful conducting.

Most obvious are the skills constituting a conductor's gestural language—the "beating technique." They form the peak of the pyramid and are the basis on which conductors are initially judged. Proficiency in these matters is obvious in the short term: conductors with poor baton technique are judged inept within minutes of climbing onto the podium.

The most elegant visual gestures are ineffective, however, if the conductor has no clear aural shape of the piece in mind. Without a mental picture of the ideal rendition, the conductor has no "template" against which to judge the choir's performance, and, as a result, rehearsals become directionless and inefficient. Developing one's own mental soundscape of a musical work takes considerable effort. The inexperienced conductor is often tempted to imitate the interpretations of others or to avoid unfamiliar repertoire or repertoire not available on commercial recordings. It is imperative, however, that conductors become independent in forming aural goals: only then will their beating technique become purposeful, their rehearsal technique authoritative, and their interpretations convincing.

Even great artistic ideas do not guarantee success in the long term, however. The conductor must develop a comprehensive rehearsal methodology supported by ongoing, systematic, and

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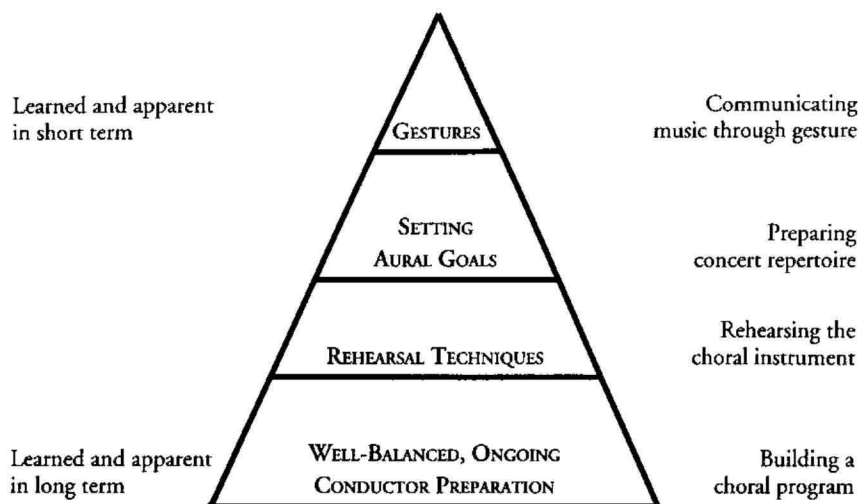


Figure 1. The conductor's pyramid of skills

balanced preparation to sustain singer interest and ensure steady, long-term musical growth. Unfortunately, many of the skills required for long-term growth can be practiced only in the long term. Although they can be taught in the conducting class, they cannot be fully experienced or evaluated there. By contrast, gestural skills are much better suited to classroom instruction. Because the impact of these skills is immediate, students soon realize what technical adjustments they should make for greater effectiveness. Though students may not perfect their beating technique until years later, they nevertheless can "learn" it within the span of several semesters.

Because the less apparent skills in the lower three strata of the pyramid model are difficult to teach in the short term, this article will provide outlines that systematize them for the student. These outlines can then become tools for ongoing, self-directed growth after students leave the classroom. To help students remember the outlines, an acrostic aphorism has been created for each of them.

### Setting Aural Goals

"Now that the notes are correct, what do I do next?" It is common for a student conductor to flounder indecisively in a choral rehearsal after establishing the basic pitches and rhythms. Instructors may ask at this point, "Well, do you like it? Is it ready for performance?" Often the student will answer with a hesitant "no," unsatisfied, yet unsure how to proceed. Helping students set independent aural goals is the objective of the following outline.

The first aural goal for any new piece is to establish correct rhythms, pitches, and pronunciation. Although students may have difficulty implementing this goal (their ability to detect errors usually decreases when they begin to conduct), they have no difficulty in recognizing this as the first objective. Since our focus here is on goal-setting strategies, the following outline assumes rhythms, pitches, and pronunciation are already essentially correct. For each element, a series of typical questions that the conductor should consider in preparing for the choral rehearsal is listed.

The first three elements of the outline form the "interpretive triumvirate." Indeed, some conductors reduce all interpretation

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to these three aspects: How fast should it be? How loud should it be? How should the notes be articulated?<sup>1</sup> All nine elements, however, contribute in varying degrees (depending on the repertoire) to the final interpretation of a given piece.

1. **Tempo.** Am I performing at the speed indicated? Do I agree with this tempo?<sup>2</sup> Does this tempo suggestion come from the composer or an editor? What mood is implied by the indicated tempo? Should I be using rubato? What interpretive license with regard to tempo is allowable or desirable in this piece? Should the tempo be adjusted for acoustic reasons?

2. **Dynamics.** Am I conducting the dynamics indicated? Do I agree with the dynamics given? How loud should the performers be at any given moment? What mood is implied by the indicated dynamics?

3. **Articulation.** Am I observing the articulation indicated? Could I vary the articulation more without sounding mannered? Are the performers unified in their style of articulation? In a fugal piece, should I differentiate the articulation of the countersubject from that of the subject? What do tempo and dynamic indications tell me about appropriate articulation? For example, in a passage marked *f*, does this mean it should be aggressively loud, buoyantly loud, rhapsodically loud, or regally loud? Each of these moods imply slightly different articulation. By applying an emotional tag to dynamic markings, choosing an appropriate articulation becomes easier.

4. **Phrasing.** Should this piece be in two-, four-, or eight-bar phrases? Are performers breathing or lifting at the same points? Where is the peak of each phrase? Does it coincide in all parts? In contrapuntal textures, do parts give way to each other, or are the lines competing with each other? Do phrases collapse after their peaks? Does the energy continue to grow during long notes? Do I want growth, or do I want decay? Do all rests imply cessation of energy, or should some be spanned?

5. **Diction.** Can I understand the words? Are the vowels uniform and the consonants synchronized? What adjustments should I make to synchronize consonants when breathing spots among parts do not correspond? Are diphthongs migrating? Are lengthened consonants making the rhythm mushy? Conversely, should some impor-

tant words be caressed by starting initial consonants sooner? Are vowels generally on the beat preceded by initial consonants? In staccato passages, do I want exploded or imploded consonants?<sup>3</sup>

6. **Timbre.** To what extent might I vary timbre for expressive purposes? For example, does a passage marked *p* mean "innocently soft," "eerily soft," or something else? How might such concepts affect timbre? Is the timbre suitable to the musical style? How much vibrato do I want?

7. **Blend.**<sup>4</sup> Does the voice of any particular performer stick out because of timbral or dynamic differences? Should performers be positioned differently to produce a better blend? Are vowel formations unified?

8. **Balance.** Which parts are intended as foreground, which ones as background? Who has the melody? Do the acoustics of the performing venue favor certain areas of the frequency spectrum? Do I like chords with richer low notes? If I insist on

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the balance that I think would be ideal, will this adversely affect performers' technique? Do tessituras require that dynamics be adjusted so that proper balance can be achieved? Conversely, do differing dynamics really mean that one part is to be louder, or is the composer attempting to compensate for tessituras of unequal strength? What effect is divisi writing having on balance? Is the balance adversely affected by the performers' positions? Should soloists be brought forward?

Should instrumentalists be repositioned or turned?<sup>5</sup> In contrapuntal textures are entries equal in strength? Should they be?

9. Pitch. Are the pitches accurate? Could I use pitch as an expressive variable (bending, scooping, sliding, dropping off), or would that be inappropriate in this piece? Are voiced consonants pitched accurately? In syllable connections involving two different pitches, on which pitch should the voiced consonant come?

Admittedly, novice conductors may not be able to remember all these questions; however, if they remember the basic outline, they are much more likely to remember the particulars. An acrostic aphorism is a simple tool for making such an outline unforgettable. The one in Figure 2 reminds students that developing an aural template for a piece of music is a sequential process.

## Rehearsal Techniques

Having formed a detailed image of the finished aural product through score study, the conductor must convey it to the singers clearly and efficiently. Efficient rehearsal techniques are indispensable to meeting concert deadlines. Amidst this concern for efficiency, however, the conductor must take time to educate, to help singers grow in their understanding and skills. It is possible to become so concerned with short-term results that one neglects issues of long-term growth. To ensure both short-term efficiency and long-term development, rehearsals should include the following six elements.

1. **Training.** Conductors must do more than teach particulars in choral rehearsals. While performance pressures sometimes force conductors into this mode, they should never displace long-term educational goals: learning correct voice production, musicianship, stylistically appropriate performance practices, and rehearsal discipline. Therefore, conductors should ask themselves the following questions: Do my singers sing with proper diaphragm support? Do they place high tones well "into the mask"? Are any still lifting their chins to reach high notes? Can they sing high notes softly? Can they sing softly without losing tonal intensity? Can they sing descending passages without flattening? Do they know when to sing an *r* and when to omit it? Do they understand the difference between imploded and exploded consonants? Do they know how to stretch sustainable consonants before the beat? Are they able to de-emphasize unimportant words and syllables? Can they lessen their vibratos without constricting their vocal muscles? Do they grasp the difference between Baroque and Romantic articulation? Are they improving in their ability to sight-sing? Do they listen to each other? Do they work as a team? Have they learned the discipline of punctuality? Does everyone

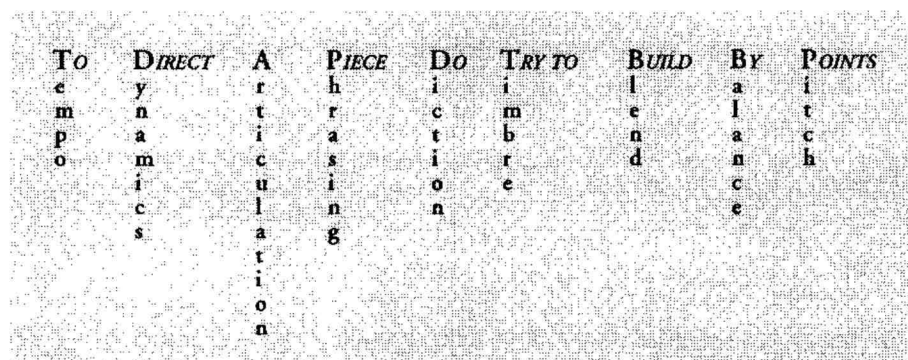


Figure 2. Setting Aural Goals

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always carry a pencil? Do their eyes ever stray in performance or their heads get buried in the music? Have they developed the self-discipline to sing with expression and animation, even when they feel a lack of enthusiasm?

**2. Streamlining the learning process.** Efficient teaching techniques help singers learn quickly. Conductors need to question whether they have done all they could before the rehearsal begins. For example: Have I given copies of the music to accompanists and potential soloists? Have I informed section leaders about pertinent musical matters? Have I prepared well to anticipate problematic passages and devise solutions? Could I invent warmup exercises that focus on the technical problems in each piece and, therefore, help singers surmount them more quickly? Can I relate new material to main themes or to similar material in the same piece in a way that would be helpful? Do I provide new information only when singers are ready for it, moving from the known to the unknown? Do I give directions clearly, succinctly, and in a logical order? For example, do I identify page first, then system, then measure? Am I ready to disassemble difficult passages in a way that will expose the most problematic aspects and fix them as quickly as possible? Have I taught principles rather than particulars? Students who can transfer knowledge to new situations will learn more quickly than those who need specific instructions each time.

**3. Energizing.** Singers need to be motivated; they must be physically and emotionally energized. Conductors should ask themselves, am I enthusiastic about this music? Are the singers ready to sing; that is, are they mentally focused and physically vibrant? Have I fostered a spirit of inclusiveness in which they sense their initiative is valued? Is the rehearsal space conducive to maximum effort: for instance, is there sufficient light and ventilation? Do I keep singers involved? Do I alternate plodding work with more enjoyable tasks? Do I give reasons for stopping the choir or repeating passages? Should I ask them to stand more often? Would changing formation occasionally give them a psychological boost? Is the performance venue available for an occasional practice? Would taping a rehearsal and listening to it together increase the singers' concentration and responsiveness

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i	e	r	r	p	i
n	a	g	e	i	n
i	m	i	c	n	i
n	j	z	t	g	n
g	i	i	i		g
	n	n	n		
	n	g	g		
	g				

Figure 3. Rehearsal Techniques

to correction? Would it be helpful to choose an SATB quartet from the choir to listen and provide a critique?

**4. Correcting.** Providing critical feedback is one of the conductor's most important responsibilities in rehearsals. Conductors must compare their aural ideals with the actual sound being produced: Does anyone's voice protrude? Is the tone quality acceptable? Do I praise my singers enough? If I must criticize, should I direct my remarks more specifically to particular singers? Do other singers know when they are not part of the problem? Should I have a private chat with anyone?

**5. Conveying the artistic shape.** The conductor's overarching responsibility is to let the composer speak. Hence, interpreting the work is the supreme privilege and challenge. The conductor's questions should be: Have I been faithful to the expressive markings of the score insofar as these originate from the composer? Within the scope of the composer's instructions, can I add anything that will make the notes come alive? Do the singers grasp every aspect of my aural goal?

**6. Refining the performance.** In an age of recordings that exhibit impeccable performance standards, our audiences come to live concerts with high expectations. Conductors should ask: Is this piece ready for performance? Would I pay to hear it? Why or why not?

A rehearsal technique that keeps all of these elements in balance will prove successful over the long term. Conductors can monitor their progress with the aid of the acrostic aphorism shown in Figure 3.

## Prerehearsal Preparation

Occasionally we experience the frustration of preparing ever so carefully for a rehearsal, only to have it fall flat. At other times we do not prepare at all and yet come

away feeling that the rehearsal went rather well. If this is so, why bother preparing at



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all? Why not simply rely on spontaneous inspiration? Most of us also have experienced the surprise of having a performance fall flat even though rehearsals were efficient, energetic, and purposeful. Why do such seemingly successful rehearsals fail in the end?

Some rehearsals fail because conductors have prepared to the point of rigidity: having worked hard creating a detailed rehearsal plan, they refuse to depart from it when such flexibility is necessary. Other rehearsals fail because preparation has been unbalanced. When conductors

concentrate on certain aspects of rehearsal preparation to the neglect of others, their rehearsal technique fails to address the most pressing issues. Focusing on minor matters, they consume precious rehearsal time that should be spent on more significant problems. This tends to happen especially to perfectionists who, by nature, dislike moving on to new problems until they have thoroughly mastered the matter under consideration. The following outline seeks to ensure continuing preparation on all fronts.

1. **Schedule.** When do I need to order music? How soon must I book venues, additional musicians, or recording technicians? What soloists have not yet responded to my invitation to perform? When do program notes have to be finished? Do I know where the rehearsal "bottle necks" are? Have I spread out the choir's work evenly over the allotted rehearsals? Do the performers have intermediate deadlines when certain movements will be tested? Have I grouped movements by instrumentation so that I can plan a rehearsal order in which instrumentalists or soloists are not sitting idle? When should I start recruiting singers for the next concert season?

2. **Marking.** Score marking is largely a perfunctory task. There are basically two kinds of markings: those that highlight existing features and those that add information to the score.<sup>6</sup> Conductors should ask: Have I highlighted score markings that I tend to miss? For example, will I remember accidentals of notes tied over pages, sudden tempo or meter changes, or entries after page turns? Have I marked important musical events, aural reference points between parts, or projected difficulties? Do I need to add any interpretive markings other than those already in the score? What about indications regarding technical adjustments (unstresses, consonant synchronization, etc.)? Have I marked phrasing? Will I need an interlinear translation of the text? Should I write in a phrasal analysis? Have I indicated where I will subdivide the meter? Have I marked the orchestral parts (bowings, breath marks, rehearsal or measure numbers, etc.)?

3. **Notes.** Knowing the notes ranges from the ability to detect errors to memorization of the complete score. A conductor should ask himself or herself: Are the notes of each part in my ear? Can I sing each part? Can I



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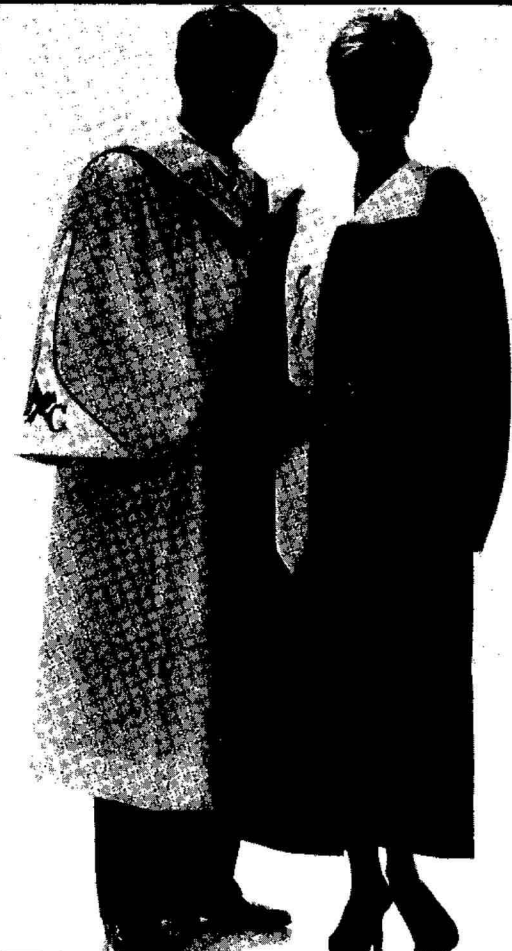
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sing a conducting line moving from part to part and incorporating the most important musical event at any given moment? Do I know the notes well enough to look up from the score? Do I understand the notes functionally? Should I memorize all or part of the score? Which sections will cause the greatest difficulties for the performers? Have I read through the instrumental parts to anticipate each player's needs and concerns? Do markings in the instrumental parts from previous performances provide clues to potential danger spots?

**4. Gestures.** Although conducting gestures comprise the first level of the hierarchy of conducting skills and although they can be learned in the short term, they should be practiced and reassessed throughout one's career. The maxim "talk little, conduct much" is good advice—but only if the conducting gestures clearly convey the messages intended.

Conductors must answer questions such as these: Can I conduct through this piece without pause, showing everything I want to hear? Are my gestures truly expressive of the rhythms, dynamics, and articulation in the score? Which cues, cut-offs, or special gestures are needed? Are my preparatory motions to sections with abrupt, fast beginnings clear? (This is particularly crucial for irregular meters such as  $\frac{3}{8}$  and  $\frac{7}{8}$ .)

**5. Interpretation.** Can I identify the expected tempo, dynamics, or articulation for any given measure of the piece? What is the general mood of each section of this work? Can I defend my interpretation on structural and historical grounds? Is the piece convincing the way the choir and I are performing it? Are there sections that are compositionally weak? How can such sections be helped?

**6. Attack plan.** Throughout the rehearsals, the conductor should have one overriding concern: to facilitate and guide the learning process. He or she should also ask: What proportion of the next rehearsal should be devoted to issues of long-term musical growth? As for learning the repertoire, now that I know what I want, how can I achieve it most effectively? Will I need to sell this piece to the performers? How should I introduce it: by a read-through or some other way? In what order should I rehearse the pieces? What are the physical demands of each piece, and what bearing might this have

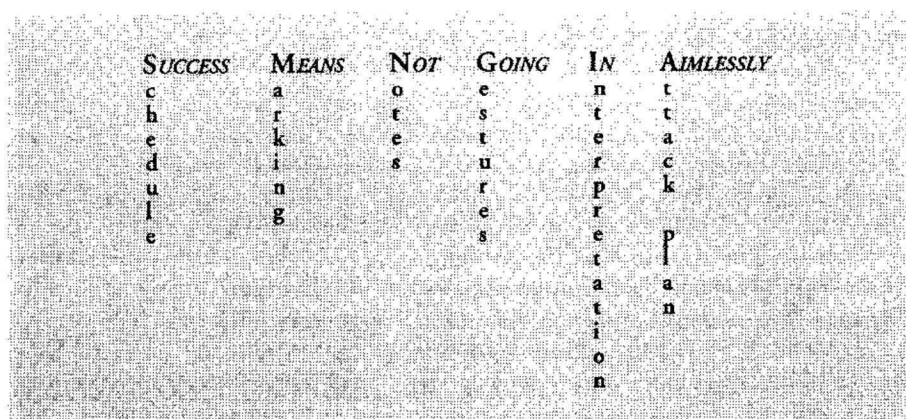


Figure 4. Prerehearsal Preparation

on rehearsal sequence? How will I keep the rehearsal energized? Should I employ sectional rehearsals? Should I use a "macro" approach, correcting the grossest errors first before mentioning the lesser ones, or should I use a "micro" approach in which I disassemble the piece completely, then put it back together bit by bit, adding each new component or layer only after it is completely mastered?

Once again, an acrostic aphorism serves as a simple aid for remembering the checklist. Conductors may wish to design their own. The one in Figure 4 encourages students not to rely on artistic intuition alone.

## Conclusion

Conducting instructors must do more than demonstrate the "how" of their craft; they must encourage students to think

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about the "why." Imitation alone will produce little more than conducting clones. Many student conductors realize sooner or later the limitations of their teachers and seek out other masters to emulate. As they compare teachers, students develop a hybrid model, a new composite image of the ideal conductor, which combines the strengths of each of them. In the process students become more analytical, less blindly accepting. Why not encourage students to start thinking for themselves from the very outset? Let us encourage conducting apprentices to analyze, to evaluate, to experiment, and to discover.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Helmuth Rilling understands all interpretation to consist of these three basic elements.
- <sup>2</sup> At the conference where this paper was presented, the composer Samuel Adler admitted to having once performed a piece by his friend Milton Babbitt at twice the indicated tempo. To Adler's chagrin, Babbitt learned of this violation when someone played a tape of the performance for him. Fortunately, the composer took it in good humor, saying later to Adler, "It's a gas at that tempo!" At the conference, however, Adler admitted, "I wouldn't want anyone to do to my pieces what I did to his! You should first try the speed indicated by the composer!"
- <sup>3</sup> Consider the staccato line from *My Fair Lady*:

*Lots of chocolate for me to eat,  
Lots of coal makin' lots of heat...*

Using imploded consonants tends to make the staccato articulation sound less mannered, because, by leaving the tongue against the palate until it is time to sing the next syllable, it avoids the little puffs of air between successive consonants that otherwise occur.

- <sup>4</sup> Usually blend may be regarded as an element to be refined rather than varied. One factor affecting blend that may legitimately be modified according to style, however, is vibrato. It affects both timbre and blend.
- <sup>5</sup> James Fankhauser of the University of British Columbia has been experimenting with physical performing arrangements based on original concert layouts. See James Fankhauser, "Choral/Orchestral Balance: An Old Problem Reviewed," *Choral Journal* 30 (August 1989): 5-7.
- <sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Green and Nicolai Malko, *The Conductor and His Score* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 32. —CJ—