

THE REHEARSAL - PREPARING FOR A SUCCESSFUL CONCERT

By Carl Topilow

While much has been written about the grammar of conducting - beat patterns, gestures and the like – the following discussion presents ideas about preparing for a rehearsal and techniques for running a rehearsal. Although, the gestures are what the orchestra and audience see at the concert, the groundwork takes place in rehearsal. By no means wishing to denigrate the importance of a clear and expressive baton, the points related in this article should go far in helping achieve a satisfactory performance. Without the knowledge and know-how of preparing for and running a rehearsal, the physical part of conducting is at best based on a foundation of quicksand. Observing conductors who know how to rehearse is a crucial step for anyone desiring to become a conductor. However, there is something to be learned from people who don't rehearse effectively, as we then compare those experiences to observation of highly competent and efficient conductors.

I

PREPARING FOR THE REHEARSAL: PART PREPARATION

Once a program has been selected, and the music has been procured, preparation of the parts for the musicians is an important factor for both a successful rehearsal and a successful performance. Here are some elements that might help a rehearsal go smoothly.

REHEARSAL FIGURES

Rehearsal numbers or letters exist in most sets of parts. If you are fortunate, they are numerous enough, and all occur on beginnings of phrases or important structural points in the music. If there are not enough rehearsal figures, I would suggest adding extra numbers in the aforementioned places. Also, be consistent – use rehearsal figures at corresponding points in the recapitulation as the exposition if the piece is in sonata-allegro form. If the piece already has letters, you may add numbers, and if numbers, then add letters. I would suggest, to avoid confusion between measure numbers and rehearsal numbers, that you may want to start your rehearsal numbers anew with each movement. Don't forget that the extra rehearsal figures are equally as helpful for the people who are resting, as it enables them to keep track of where they are in the music more easily. You may even consider adding indications of important entrances of other instruments. If some rehearsal figures are in "unmusical" places, i.e., not on phrases, I would suggest changing them. One of my adages is "When you're on the bench, keep your head in the game". Rehearsal figures on phrases and at important places in the music can serve to engage musicians who have long periods of rests.

Measure numbers are often found in parts, but I find that these can often lead to wasted time and confusion for players with lots of rests. Asking the orchestra, for example, to start at measure 461 when the trumpets are in the middle of a 60 bar rest, is not helpful. Don't forget, if you put these rehearsal figures in parts that you have purchased, they are there for future use. Worse yet are parts that contain rehearsal figures every ten bars. These are of no help, and actually make it more difficult for musicians counting rests.

There is no doubt that adding these rehearsal figures is time consuming, but the rewards of a smooth rehearsal make this work extremely worthwhile.

BOWINGS, DYNAMICS, ARTICULATIONS

While information overload can be more harmful than helpful, a certain amount of information in orchestra parts is necessary, and can save valuable rehearsal time. String parts should have uniform bowings which need to take into account many factors, including phrasing, tempo, volume, articulation, and sound quality. While it is inevitable that some bowing adjustments will take place during the course of a rehearsal sequence, establishing bowings from the outset will save a great deal of time. It is also wise to make yourself aware of the bowing routine of a particular orchestra and its orchestra library long in advance, to avoid any last-minute emergencies. Although many conductors are not string players, they need to have a working knowledge of how to bow parts according to the previously mentioned criteria. Borrowing bowings from other orchestras may or may not be suitable for the players of your ensemble, and must be done carefully.

If you are somewhat unsure about how to bow certain passages, work with the concertmaster of your orchestra before the first rehearsal; if this is not possible, speak to someone whose opinions you trust. Be careful when making suggestions to string players – if you give questionable advice, you will lose their trust. Don't forget – if you know what you want to hear, but don't know how to get it, ask the concertmaster for help – that's why he or

she is in that position. In any case, young conductors should be sure to address the string sections during rehearsal; as they are the most numerous, and are playing the same parts, they need to play in a uniform manner. While bowings can be very subjective and individual, be sure that the bowing always serves the music, and not vice versa. There are times that bowings can be “uncomfortable” for the string players, yet serve the music in a unique or special manner. Don’t let the orchestra talk you out of something that you believe best serves the music.

In preparing to rehearse, it’s important to recognize whether a composer writes general dynamics for the whole orchestra, or specific dynamics for each section or at times each player. For example, if the whole orchestra is marked *fff*, but it’s obvious that the brass section is playing an accompaniment, they need to play softer. An example of this kind of issue that comes to mind occurs in the first movement of Tchaikowsky Symphony #5 at measure 108. The brass must play softer than *fff* for the strings to be heard, so you can mark a single *f* in their parts. Adjusted dynamics may also be marked to encourage a solo instrument to play stronger, or it may suffice to write *solo* at that point in the music. Sometimes adding the word *espressivo* or *dolce* can encourage a musician to play with more warmth or color to the sound. Remember: “it’s what the dynamics mean, rather than what they say” that’s key.

It may be helpful from time to time to add articulations to the parts – staccato, legato, accents, etc. can save rehearsal time and help get a desired result. Be aware that string and wind players may interpret the same markings differently. For example, dots with slurs (legato staccato) may be interpreted differently by strings and winds.

In classical or early romantic music, there is a possibility of adding or changing notes in the horn, trumpet, and timpani parts. If it seems obvious that Beethoven or Mendelssohn would have written a certain note were it possible to play that note, you might consider changing or adding some notes. For example, in the last movement of the Beethoven Symphony #9, I have the first horn continue playing the melody in measures 193 and 194. The *d* below the first line and the *f* on the first space were notes that could not be played on instruments without valves; there are countless instances where these notes may be added, usually to the second horn or second trumpet, often replacing the unison with the first horn or first trumpet by having the two horns or two trumpets play in octaves. Of course, care must be taken that the musical intent of the passage in question is not in any way altered. Also, remember that the timpani of the nineteenth century and earlier had a less distinct pitch than the instruments of today, which use plastic heads, and thus produce a much clearer pitch. I have changed the notes of the timpani part to Rossini’s Semiramide Overture so that the pitches match the bass lines more clearly. In general, if you make any changes of this nature, make sure that the sound is idiomatic for music of this period.

II

PREPARING FOR THE REHEARSAL: A FEW MUSICAL CONCEPTS

Rather than get into too much detail on the subject of score preparation, I’d like to make a few suggestions regarding interpretive decisions of the music you’re about to conduct.

Selecting a tempo is the most basic element for the conductor, but requires the most thought. I’d like to look into various aspects of making decisions concerning tempo.

TEMPO DESCRIPTION AND OTHER TERMS

The tempo marking, usually, but not always, in Italian, is probably the most important guide to selecting a tempo. It’s obviously important to know what these words mean in musical terms, as well as their literal translations. Also note that the first word is often followed by a description of that word, for example, *allegro con brio*. While *allegro* generally means a tempo that is on the fast side, it’s helpful to know that it literally means “happy” in Italian. The “*con brio*” would be “with life, zest”. *Andante cantabile con moto*, is found in the second movement of Beethoven Symphony #1 and *Andante con moto* in the second movement of Beethoven Symphony #5; the *con moto* definitely add a few clicks of the metronome to the *andante*. *Adagio* comes from *ad agio*, literally, at ease, and *largo*, while most often associated with a slow tempo, literally means broad. Also, along these lines, note the literal meaning of *fermata*, from the Italian *fermare*, to stop, as well as *staccato*: separated, not necessarily short. *Staccato* may mean short, but it always means detached.

METRONOME

For me, the metronome marking is a helpful guide, especially in cases of extremes. In other words, if a composer marks quarter note equals 72, then 48 is probably not what he or she had in mind. However, there are at times markings that seem contradictory to the descriptive words used by the composer. Beethoven marks *Allegro marziale* in the 9th symphony, but also marks dotted quarter note equals 84, which seems much too slow for a march. Tchaikowsky's *Serenade for Strings 3rd Movement* is marked 69 to the quarter note, but the indication of *Larghetto elegiaco* seems to call for a slower tempo. So the interpreter has to assemble this information and make an educated decision. Note that Mahler, who has all sorts of notes to the conductor describing how he wants his music to be played, eschewed the use of metronome markings, with the idea that he could indicate the tempo that he wanted, but that this tempo would change throughout each section or even each phrase of the music.

TEMPO SELECTION

In baroque, classic, and early romantic music, it's wise to look for potential proportional tempo relationships for a movement with a slow introduction. In a classical piece such as the first movement of the Mozart 39, one can get the tempo of the introduction by first establishing the tempo of the *Allegro* section, and then having the measure, or dotted half note, equal the quarter note of the tempo of the beginning. The same principal works with the Handel *Concerto Grosso*, opus 6, number 12. A quarter note of the *Allegro* can equal an eighth note of the opening. Even in Brahms' *Symphony No. 1*, first movement, a case can be made for an eighth note equaling a dotted quarter note relationship from the introduction to the *allegro*.

In selecting a tempo, it's often helpful or even necessary to look later in the piece to make it work. In Beethoven's *First Symphony*, 4th movement, the second subject doesn't make any sense if it's too slow. Setting the *Allegro* tempo based on the second theme makes the whole movement have a better sense of continuity. The same can be said for the first and fourth movements of the Tchaikowsky *Serenade for Strings*.

Finding the fastest note value can also be helpful in selecting a good tempo. For example, in the *presto finale* to Haydn's *Symphony No. 47*, the smallest note value is a quarter, which would allow a fast tempo. However, if the movement contains 16th or 32nd notes, a slightly slower tempo often is appropriate. In a piece like Strauss' *Till Eulenspiegel*, essentially a *scherzo*, it's best to select a tempo in which the quick notes can be executed with clarity. The same applies to his *Don Juan*.

Doubled notes on string instruments are also a guide in setting a tempo that is not too fast. In the first movement of Beethoven 1, playing the doubled sixteenth notes with lots of sound requires that the tempo not be too fast. Also the 3/8 section of the second movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* can be quick, but not off the charts. String players need to have the feeling that the conductor is sensitive to the technical demands of their instrument. A tempo that is too fast can be not only discouraging, but also could potentially limit their ability to play with a full sound (to say nothing of potential injury to the bow arm).

It's also helpful for each conductor to find works at specific metronome markings that he or she always hears at the same speed. For me, these would include 84 to the half note for *Don Juan*, 88 to the dotted quarter note for *Midsummer Night's Dream Scherzo*, 144 to the quarter note for Tchaikowsky 5th, 3rd movement. John Nelson, with whom I studied in Aspen several years ago, remembered 96 by the spiritual *Elijah Rock*. It works!

Of course, the metronome is the most basic tool for tempo, but a lesser known aid is a device called the *Tempowatch*, made by the late composer Cecil Effinger and still available at the Music Print Store in Boulder, Colorado, and at www.tempowatch.com. It's essentially a stopwatch that registers beats per minute. Feel the pulse of the music of which you want to find the tempo, click the watch and stop it on the 7th beat, in other words, 6 full beats. It's the same as taking someone's pulse, which also measures beats per minute. It's become an indispensable tool for me, and I often use it when listening to recordings of my rehearsals.

III REHEARSAL TECHNIQUES

The rehearsal is where the game is won or lost, well before concert day. The tone that is set and the atmosphere that is created will determine the success of the concert. Once you have finished your preparation for the concert, the rehearsal is where the work gets done.

Setting up a logical rehearsal schedule involves understanding the kinds of difficulties that are going to be encountered. While unforeseen issues do come up during rehearsals, an experienced conductor can usually

anticipate what passages are going to present difficulty. Having a concept of a piece and a plan of how you want the piece to sound is necessary, but at the same time it's good to stay flexible should a tempo, articulation, or balance issue unexpectedly arise.

Understanding and anticipating difficulties is very helpful in pacing a rehearsal, and also in making sure that you accomplish what you have set out to do. Boggling down with passages that were not anticipated as being problematic can throw off the timing of your rehearsal. The players appreciate rehearsals that are well organized. Having a goal of what you want to accomplish at a rehearsal as well as how much repertoire you want to cover is also helpful. Players also appreciate if you make good use of their time, and they can experience a sense of accomplishment if they feel that they have achieved a measure of progress and improvement in the time that they are spending with you.

Pacing rehearsals, accomplishing what you need to accomplish in the amount of time you have, is vital. Make sure that you are not caught at the end of the rehearsal not having rehearsed adequately, or in some cases, at all, passages or entire pieces. If you have limited rehearsal time, know when to stop, and when to trust the musicians to make corrections on their own. If something needs some attention, but you are afraid to stop and work for lack of time, make note of these passages, and go back if time permits at the end of the rehearsal. Keep a watch or clock handy to help pace the rehearsal. Developing an inner sense of timing, as well as figuring out what needs rehearsal and for how long, are attributes that take time to develop, but are valuable tools when time is short.

An interesting point: when a young conductor bypasses a passage that he feels the players will be able to fix themselves, does he run the risk that perhaps the players think that he didn't hear the problem? When and how does a young conductor admit when he made a mistake or a miscalculation?

Be sure not to shortchange the concerto on your program. Often these pieces are as complicated - or more so - than the other works on the program. The accompaniment for a work such as the Copland Clarinet Concerto is fiendishly difficult. A piece like the Chausson Poeme for Violin presents issues of balance which can all but obliterate the soloist if not dealt with.

If you are limited in time, you might rehearse, or merely point out, difficulties in specific sections of the music by bringing these passages to the players' attention before starting the piece or movement. This practice can ultimately save you time.

If you have a few rehearsals, and feel that one rehearsal is best spent by rehearsing the strings or winds alone, by all means excuse the rest of the orchestra for that rehearsal or portion of that rehearsal. Having players sit around and play nothing for long periods of time, or have no attention paid to them, is boring and demoralizing. Respect players' time as much as is possible. Be sure to arrange your rehearsals, whenever feasible, in order of diminishing forces.

Be careful also to work with all sections of the orchestra. Don't forget the percussion section – their sound quality can be influenced by their choice of sticks, what part of the instrument they hit, or the kind of instrument they are playing; i.e., the size or a certain snare drum, tom tom, cowbell, or bongo. Brass and percussion players deserve more than just being told that they are too loud!

Orchestras tune in different ways, but I like to have the strings (minus basses) tune first, followed by basses, and finally winds and brass together. My reasoning is three fold: first of all, the strings have the greatest need to tune; the winds and brass know their instruments well, as tuning the "A" will often throw off the intonation of the rest of their instrument. Secondly, the strings should be able to tune without the winds continuing to play after they tune – the winds often need to be reassured that their reeds are wet, or that their chops are working. This leads to point #3, namely that the wind players like to play as close to the beginning of the concert as possible. The tuning order is not really crucial, but this order, including allowing the basses to have the rest of the orchestra quiet while they tune, is sure to help a bit. In addition, teaching a young orchestra to tune quickly and softly is a good idea.

The issues that need to be dealt with at any rehearsal include phrasing, balance, articulation, pitch, sound quality, ensemble, atmosphere, and color. I seem to spend a lot of time adjusting balances, making musicians aware of who has the leading line, who has a secondary part, who is supplying the harmony, and from where the motor, or moving part of the music, is emanating. In addition, I deal a lot with articulation, which also includes choosing

appropriate accents for each style of the music. Remember that the musicians don't have the score in front of them, which makes it your responsibility to bring to their attention matters of which they might not otherwise be aware.

It may seem obvious, but the real job of the conductor is to listen to the orchestra. This is actually easier said than done. There are a lot of musicians in front of the conductor, and to know what to work on, when to work on it, what techniques to use, when to trust that something will get fixed without stopping, and what needs immediate attention are skills that come with experience. There is so much to listen for, and it can be overwhelming, especially when rehearsing mammoth works, such as those of Strauss or Mahler. Learning to keep your ears open is much more important than planning gestures or learning "baton technique". One cannot happen without the other. Avoid being distracted by specific musicians or extraneous goings-on while on the podium.

In general, I like to read a piece, movement, or large section with the orchestra, followed by detailed work, followed by putting the work back together with more general comments. It's good to give the players an idea of the music, as well as your approach to it, before getting down to working on details. You may want to make some general comments the first time through, and then get more specific with subsequent rehearsals. Nothing drives musicians crazier than a conductor who stops every measure.

I like to use dress rehearsals to go through the program in order when possible, and to play through works without stopping. This gives the players a sense of security, and also allows them to pace themselves appropriately, especially if the piece requires a lot of stamina. If the time for the final rehearsal is too close to the concert, or if the concert contains a huge work such as Mahler 6 or Ein Heldenleben, I'll often use the rehearsal the day before the concert as dress rehearsal. If it's unavoidable, be sure that the trumpets and horns don't waste themselves in rehearsal.

When playing through a piece for a dress rehearsal, inserting an index card in a page to which you'd like to return is a good way to help you remember what needs rehearsing. Jorge Mester taught me this technique when I studied at Aspen several years ago. The trick of course is to remember why you put the card there in the first place.... I haven't yet experimented with post-it notes on a specific spot of the page in question – maybe that would help!

When you rehearse, I would suggest finishing a phrase before stopping to make corrections. If you stop too often, the players don't get to feel how your comments fit into the larger picture, and thus lose any sense of continuity. They also begin to lose their focus, and don't pay attention. It's also helpful to accumulate a few comments before going back and rehearsing, rather than stopping for each small detail. On the flip side, there are exceptions to the rule of finishing a phrase before stopping: if you have just made a comment, and begin again and feel that the orchestra is not grasping your suggestion, you may want to start right away.

When you stop to make corrections or suggestions, following these tenets will help. Be sure to make your comments right away. Also be sure to speak clearly, remembering to also address the players in the back of the orchestra. Don't talk only to the first stand of string players – keep everyone's attention. Be sure that your comments are concise and to the point. When you begin again, be sure to start at the same tempo at which you stopped. If you choose to give instructions while the orchestra is playing, make sure that you are completely audible; if someone cannot hear you, you run the risk of alienating that musician. Once you've made the correction, be sure to reinforce it with the appropriate gestures, both immediately, and when that point is reached in subsequent rehearsals.

The language that you use when rehearsing can contribute to the success of the rehearsal. I teach young conductors to get used to using words like "Let's" or "We" rather than "I", "I need", "I want" or "it should be like this." The orchestra has to be treated as equals, and while the conductor is the one in charge, the players need to feel that they are being treated with respect, and are able to ask questions and express concerns. "Le bon mot", using the right word, can set a good working atmosphere. Also, overly analytical comments that are fascinating to you may have little interest to the musicians, unless it will directly affect the way the musicians play.

After the orchestra resumes, be ready with encouragement and compliments when appropriate. As you work on the passage, be sure to comment as you feel it's improving. Avoid platitudes; be honest, but not destructive or condescending.

If doing a passage under tempo is determined to be helpful, if possible, have the players perform with proper dynamics and phrasing. One technique learned from “The Inner Game of Tennis” requires the conductor to concentrate on one problem at a time. When working on rhythm of a particular passage, it might be necessary to momentarily overlook intonation. Conversely, when working on intonation, let the rhythm and articulation go for the moment. I often have the brass play slowly and quietly in chorale style in order to improve the intonation and tone quality of a given passage, even when the tempo of that passage may be fast and detached.

Comments made to the orchestra can include a healthy combination of technical and emotional suggestions. While explaining to the players how much bow to use, what technique for staccato for a wind or brass instrument, or what stick to use for the percussion is very useful and appropriate, adjectives describing the desired emotion of the music shouldn't be overlooked. Stormy, angry, calm, pleading, gloomy, joyful, sad are just a handful of descriptions that can accompany technical suggestions. This kind of imagery can help stir the imagination of the musicians and lead to more emotional involvement on their parts. Singing to the orchestra what you'd like to hear (preferably in the right key), can often eliminate or curtail lengthy explanations. It's also helpful in indicating phrase direction. One of my favorite clichés is that “a song is worth a 1,000 words”. Remember that everyone processes information differently. Also, be careful not to be a DA CAPO conductor, someone who goes back to the beginning every time something goes wrong. Also, be sure to focus on the problem spot that you just corrected, and don't go back too far, diluting the reason that you stopped in the first place.

Making suggestions to the string players is an important part of any conductor's rehearsal abilities. Whether or not you are a string player, you must have a very good knowledge of how to deal with the strings. Be careful not to make suggestions that go beyond what you know. String players respect conductors who make educated suggestions, but quickly become suspicious if something offered from the podium doesn't make sense. Something as seemingly inconsequential as holding the baton like a war club instead of like a bow when demonstrating how you'd like something played might provoke an unfavorable response. If you feel that you know what you'd like to hear, but don't really know the technique needed to produce that sound, ask the concertmaster for help. For example, there are times that a suggestion for a fingering will help facilitate a certain passage. The concertmaster can be invaluable in solving these sorts of problems. This assistance might include interpreting the best way to produce certain harmonics.

Understanding the instruments of the orchestra is one of the keys to running a successful rehearsal. As previously mentioned, knowing the string instruments and their possibilities is crucial, but understanding the capabilities and limitations of the wind, brass, and percussion instruments is also vital. Some examples: while the clarinet has no difficulty playing extremely quietly in its low register, the oboe can encounter difficulty playing softly and with good intonation in its corresponding range. Another: the various woodwind and brass instruments have inherently different breath capacities, and one must take into account the differences of what is possible to do in one breath.

Also, understanding how to work on intonation for wind or brass chords is a technique in and of itself. Understanding the difficulties in certain registers of these instruments can also prove helpful. Most times I will have all the musicians playing the root of the chord play by themselves, and when in tune, add the 5th, followed by the 3rd, which is the most difficult note to adjust, as it often has to be tuned just a little low in a major chord. The conductor must understand that this adjustment will be helpful for the moment; however, the players must ultimately make these adjustments in subsequent rehearsals as well as in the concert, and have to learn to adjust on their own. As a result, I will only occasionally offer specific suggestions, and only with extreme respect and care. For example, rather than say “you're sharp”, I'll offer “It sounds a bit high to me”. Wind intonation is a very touchy matter to many musicians, and treading lightly is usually the way to go.

When making corrections or offering comments, several interrogatory words comes to mind. They are:

The what – what went wrong

The who – which sections or players need work

The where – where in the music specifically did the problem occur

The why – why did it go wrong - was it a technical problem, were the players not aware of who had the leading part, was the chord was out of tune, etc.

The how – what techniques are needed to fix the problem

If the first four are clear, but the fifth isn't, you can ask the concertmaster if it's a string problem. Or just describe what you want to hear, and let the musicians make the necessary adjustments.

A few additional points:

It might be helpful to notice if you're using a particular word or phrase too much in your rehearsal – these can include: sorry, thank you, please, OK, you know, etc. Thank you and please are great words, but anything overdone can be annoying.

Don't keep talking or offering instructions when your arms are in the air and you're ready to start.

Also, when you stop, unless it's really obvious, or you've built up a certain kind of rapport and understanding with your players, be sure that you tell your musicians why you've stopped.

Another very helpful technique, especially for young musicians, is to have them play without the conductor. Sometimes I start the orchestra, and go into the hall to listen. I find that this technique obliges the musicians to listen to each other more carefully, which is one of my goals for any ensemble. I even use this technique after the orchestra is comfortable playing the Sacrificial Dance from the Rite of Spring – I like to imagine the look on people's faces when they enter the hall and hear the orchestra playing Stravinsky ala the (conductorless) Orpheus Chamber Orchestra!

Another useful practice that I've incorporated has all the strings playing a spiccato open string (usually the d string, since it's an interior string for everyone) at the tempo of a spiccato passage that needs work. I have used this technique for the 3rd movement of Beethoven's Eroica Symphony – everyone plays open d at tempo, and then switches to the written part on cue. This helps the string players concentrate solely on their spiccato bow stroke, and allows them to establish a steady tempo within a solid technical base.

Taping and reviewing your rehearsals is extremely helpful. It's difficult to hear everything when you're on the podium, and listening in the comfort of your own study gives you a chance to check tempos and pacing, and also listen to a specific passage several times.

Identifying with the musicians is of the utmost importance. Put yourself in the musicians' shoes and ask "if I were playing right now in the orchestra, would I want to be lead by me?" "Would I want to watch me or listen to what I have to say?" "Am I clear in my gestures and comments?" "Is my personality captivating and interesting?" "Am I being defensive?" "Is my rehearsal supportive and positive"? Empathy with and understanding what the next person is feeling is helpful in all walks of life, and in the orchestra, the musicians needs, concerns and opinions deserve consideration.

The musical concept that you bring to a rehearsal is, of course, essential; but the way you interact with the musicians and the personality and leadership qualities you exercise will prove to be equally pivotal to your success.

