## Conducting Choirs

by David P. DeVenney

#### **Tutorials and Extras**

**Additional Content and Further Information** 

#### **Video Clips**

- 1. Finding the "bounce" D
  - A demonstration of the basic pulse that forms the foundation for the gesture. (Vol. 1, p. 5)
- 2. The "click" beat: a gesture of syncopation A demonstration of the "click" beat, a useful gesture for syncopations, quick dynamic changes, sforzandi, and similar musical moments.
  - (Vol. 1, p. 25)
- 3. The "hitch" gesture Demonstrating how to add a brief suspension of motion to the conducting pattern. (Vol. 1, p. 26)
- 4. Conducting a short recitative from *Messiah* (Vol. 3)

#### **Articles of Note**

Links to interesting articles, reviews, and other writings relevant to users of this series:

- A good blog by Richard Sparks, professor of music at North Texas State University, who writes on issues of pedagogy, repertoire, and other topics can be found <a href="here">here</a>.
- Two recent posts from Dr. Sparks' blog offer a succinct "checklist" for rehearsing efficiently. You can view them here as a PDF document.
- A well-regarded blog by orchestral conductor Kenneth Woods, whose postings range widely on many areas of interest to conductors and musicians; it can be found here.
- One of Ken Wood's postings, on choosing a version of the Mozart *Requiem* for performance, is particularly instructive. It may be found <a href="here">here</a> as a Word document.
  (Note: embedded links within this document will not work. To enable them, search Woods' blog at the sight above.)
- I often talk to my students about the importance of silence in their lives -- the absence of distractions to allow them time to think and reflect. In a recent New York Times op-ed piece, called "The Joy of Quiet," Pico Iyer makes a strong case, bolstered by some interesting evidence. You'll find a link here.
- What's a conductor really do? A fascinating article by Justin Davidson, writing in *New York Magazine*, about taking classes with Alan Gilbert (New York Philharmonic) and conducting a Juilliard student orchestra. More
- "Is Music the Key to Success?" -- a recent article from the New York *Times* on the value of music, practice, and work, and why so many successful people come from music backgrounds. <u>More</u>

#### **Photo and Video Credits**

Berks Youth Chorus, Reading, PA, Dail Richie, Executive Director. Used by permission.

WCU Concert Choir, Mastersingers, and Symphony Orchestra, April 2008. Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, Philadelphia. Senior Choir, Darien (CT) United Methodist Church, winter, 2010; James G. Kantor, director of music. Used by permission. Video clip no. 4: Kristin Neel, soprano; Mark Jackson, cello; John Grecia, harpsichord. Video clip editing by Robert Rust.

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#### **Tutorials and Extras**

**Additional Content and Further Information** 

#### Want Alternate or Additional Music?

Series users may request the following alternative or additional music selections from <a href="mailto:service@lorenz.com">service@lorenz.com</a>.

```
Haydn, Achieved Is the Glorious Work (The Creation)
audio
score
orchestra parts
Mozart, Dona nobis pacem (Missa brevis in D minor)
parts
```

#### **Instrumental Parts**

For those who may wish to use instruments with several of the examples, PDF files may be requested from <u>service@lorenz.com</u>. A list of available parts is found below.

```
Sing, Sing, Ye Muses (Mvt. 1) (Blow)
  strings and continuo
And the Glory of the Lord (Messiah)
  (Handel)
  score
  string parts
Scene from Messiah (Handel)
  string parts
Cantata 150 (Bach)
  score
  parts
Kyrie ("Little Organ Mass") (Haydn)
  score
  string parts
Lacrimosa (Requiem) (Mozart)
  score
  wind parts
  brass and timpani parts
  string parts
```

# Book Reviews

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Stephen Town, Editor stown@nwmissouri.edu

#### Conducting Choirs, Volume 1: The Promising Conductor/ A Practical Guide for Beginning Choral Conductors

David P. DeVenney Dayton, OH: Roger Dean Publishing Co., a division of The Lorenz Corporation, 2010. 90 pp. \$50\* ISBN: 978-1-4291-1753-1

Conducting Choirs, Volume 2: Music for Classroom Use/ A Comprehensive Collection of Musical Examples Including Performance CD for Practice and Study David P. DeVenney

Dayton, OH: Roger Dean Publishing Co., a division of The Lorenz Corporation, 2010. 208 pp. \$60\*

ISBN: 978-1-4291-1754-8

#### Conducting Choirs, Volume 3: The Practicing Conductor/ An Exploration of Advanced Topics Relevant to Working Choral Conductors

David P. DeVenney Dayton, OH: Roger Dean Publishing Co., a division of The Lorenz Corporation, 2010. 102 pp. \$50\* ISBN: 978-1-4291-1755-5

The three volumes of Conducting Choirs may be purchased as a set (Roger Dean #30/2624R) for the discounted price of \$130.

If David DeVenney had never written the three volumes of Conducting Choirs he would still qualify as one of the most prolific contributors to the scholarly literature of the choral art in our time by virtue of

his fourteen books and nearly six dozen articles. With Conducting Choirs, DeVenney has drawn on his extensive experience as a conductor and teacher to provide us with an altogether pragmatic and useful addition in the arena of choral methods. In the preface ("Exposition") to Volume I (The Promising Conductor/A Practical Guide for Beginning Choral Conductors), DeVenney states his purpose as follows: "to provide a compact but comprehensive guide that helps teach the basics of conducting, rehearsing, and score study." In addition, he notes that Volume I targets "conductors and future leaders of...less experienced ensembles [including] school choirs, church choirs, or community choirs." To that end, the author has been singularly successful. His presentation is clear, concise and eminently readable.

Volume I is structured in sonata form wherein the "development section" (six chapters) comprises the heart and soul of the art and craft of choral conducting. Chapter One ("The Right Hand") presents the basic conducting patterns, but with an interesting and innovative twist...the patterns are modified (condensed?) thereby doing away with the need to constantly make shifts in the speed of the rebound and to provide clear ictus points. Among the many practical observations DeVenney sprinkles throughout Conducting Choirs, I especially appreciated the following:

> Since the primary function of a conductor is to keep an ensemble precisely together, the ability to internalize and communicate a steady pulse is critical to conducting success. Good communication as a conductor is further reliant upon other factors as well. Among these is meaningful eye contact [stress

added], an active and involved posture, good body language, breathing with your singers [NB: NOT singing with them], and clear musical intentions.

Another valuable aspect of Conducting Choirs is that each of the chapters concludes with suggestions for further reading and study. For example, the suggestions at the end of Chapter I include both the Rudolph and Green texts.

Chapter Two ("Two Hands") offers numerous well-considered exercises for cultivating meaningful use of the left hand. DeVenney continues his emphasis throughout on the importance of the ictus/rebound relationship in addition to eye contact... especially when starting and stopping... and breathing with the choir. Chapter Two also deals effectively with cueing, cutoffs,



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## Book Reviews

and fermati.

Chapter Three ("Expressing Ideas") covers dynamics, articulation, slow tempos, changing tempo and *rubato*, and metric modulations (proportion). DeVenney's explanation of the latter issue is one of the clearest I have seen anywhere. Conducting students should benefit greatly from this discussion and accompanying examples.

Chapter Four ("Repertory and Programming") is obviously not strictly about conducting, but does provide valuable insights into what is arguably the conductor's most important responsibility by way of ensuring an ensemble's success. This is a short chapter, but the suggestions/bibliography for further study at the end of the chapter is a fabulous asset. Beginning conductors would do well to obtain as many of the cited references as they can reasonably afford.

Chapter Five ("The Score and the Rehearsal") covers both score study and the "do's" and "don'ts" of effective rehearsals. DeVenney's very detailed procedures for

score study reflect his deep commitment to understanding the composer's intentions. While this chapter on the whole is perhaps the most valuable of the entire text, the focus on technical analysis of the score may be overwhelming to many students. I believe more emphasis on the discernment of the character and emotive content of the music would enhance students' interest in the discussion. Also, I must take issue with the author's statement that "most choral music has not been recorded." Indeed, in Volume Three of Choral Conducting, there are numerous references to recordings of choral music.

The final chapter of Volume I is titled "Singers and Choirs." Topics addressed in this chapter include posture, breathing, tone, and differences between solo and choral singing. As mentioned earlier, DeVenney has infused his writing with salient observations including the following:

Conductors should guard against the taking of shallow, gasping breaths in

their ensembles that quick breathing can sometimes lead to.

While I wholeheartedly endorse this statement, I would add that the conductor him/ herself must avoid employing noisy inhalations by way of cueing entrances. Noisy breaths are shallow breaths and shallow breaths are the enemy of good singing technique.

DeVenney includes several pages of warm-up exercises and cites additional resources for same at the end of the chapter. He also provides vocal ranges (both adolescent and mature) and offers a fairly detailed discussion of seating formations for various types of choirs.

The author concludes Volume I with a brief Recapitulation of the major themes of this extraordinarily useful and useable book. The reader would be well advised to peruse the Recapitulation both before and after reading the text by way of framing the thought process underlying the presentation of the materials in *Conducting Choirs*, Volume I.

Volume 2 of Conducting Choirs is subtitled "A Comprehensive Collection of Musical Examples Including Performance CD for Practice and Study." The author states that Volume 2 is intended for use in a sequential two-semester undergraduate conducting class. He also notes that Volume 2 is designed as a companion to Volume 1, but does not necessarily need to be used with that volume. The enhanced CD and the companion Web site (www.conductingchoirs.com) both contain orchestral scores for several of the selections. Volume 2 is organized into the following sections:

- Chant and Unison Music (5 pieces)
- Renaissance Music (6 pieces)
- Baroque Music (6 pieces)
- Classical and Romantic Music (10 pieces)
- Contemporary Music (6 pieces)

Each of the five categories is prefaced by a brief presentation of the General Characteristics of the music of that period. The publisher has wisely utilized spiral-binding for this volume, thus allowing it to lie flat



on the conductor's podium. The quality of the recorded performances (DeVenney's West Chester University Concert Choir) is superb. While the titles of the tracks on the CD can be found in the Table of Contents, it would be helpful to have the titles included on the CD itself. I would also like to see measure numbers in the orchestral parts as that is how orchestras rehearse. These are concerns that surely will be remediated in succeeding editions.

Volume 3 of Conducting Choirs is subtitled "The Practicing Conductor" and is intended more as a companion to rather than a continuation of the material in Volume 1. The author indicates the following in the Preface

to Volume 3:

There is no need to proceed through this volume as if it were a singular course of study. Rather, the reader is encouraged to explore those chapters that are relevant at a given moment in his development, tackling others as the need arises.

Indeed, DeVenney has done the profession a remarkable service by addressing such disparate (and often unaddressed) topics such as the psychology of rehearsing and the use of movement in rehearsal. While I understand the intended audience is not the

same as Volume 1, I found myself altogether engaged by Volume 3 and feeling a profound wish that I had had access to this volume in my first year of teaching.

Chapter One of Volume 3 is titled "An Introduction to Performance Practice." The author acknowledges that it is virtually impossible to cover such a vast subject in a single short chapter; however as an introduction to the topic, the chapter succeeds nicely. DeVenney provides a brief overview of the salient aspects of performance practice for each of the historical style periods replete with carefully selected musical examples.

In Chapter Two, DeVenney looks at the issue of working with an orchestra. As with



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the first chapter, it is simply not possible to delve deeply into this topic in a single chapter, however the information presented herein is totally relevant and will serve well as a starting point for the choral director facing an instrumental ensemble, perhaps for the first time. The author addresses each of the following crucial considerations: reading an instrumental score, marking parts, bowings, transpositions, efficient structuring of rehearsals, preparing the choir for the collaborative effort, and arguably most importantly-how to communicate with players (as opposed to singers). Frankly I could not imagine all of these matters could be reasonably covered in a single chapter, but DeVenney succeeds in doing so. For my money, this one chapter is well worth the price of the book!

The subject of Chapter Three is "Conducting Stage Music." The first half of the chapter (ten pages) deals with issues involved in preparing and conducting musical theater pieces. It is patently obvious that the

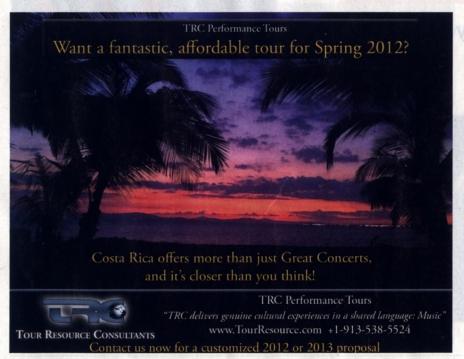
author has "been there/done that" when it comes to musical theater. His presentation of the issues is succinct and eminently pragmatic. If this material had been available when I began teaching it would have saved me mountains of head- and heartaches! De-Venney delves into such arcane (yet crucial) matters as how to split a part book between players, when to be in charge and when to let the singer lead, deciding on music to accompany bows, and parsing recordings versus the published score. It must be noted here that DeVenney has also written a text (The New Broadway Song Companion, published by Scarecrow) that lists every number from over 300 shows, providing the exact vocal range, type of song, and who sings it for each piece. The second half of Chapter Three covers issues around conducting opera and oratorio. Several relevant musical excerpts are embedded in this discussion. The author's explication of the differences between conducting recitatives and arias is most useful.

Chapter Four ("Psyched Out") might well have been included in Volume I of Conducting Choirs in that it offers many valuable insights that have been gleaned through the author's years of experience. I commend DeVenney's courage in approaching this most subjective aspect of the discipline. As he states in his suggestions for further reading at the end of the chapter: "There is surprising little written on the concepts addressed in this chapter, perhaps because they are elusive and somewhat difficult to put into words." Indeed, and yet he has once again succeeded to a remarkable degree. As might be expected in such a discussion, the author has included several personal reflections each of which he calls a "concept in practice." For me, these anecdotes are the heart of the chapter and a most engaging read.

DeVenney subtitles Chapter Five "Locomotion—Using Eurhythmics in the Choral Rehearsal." Following a brief overview of eurhythmics, the author provides three illustrations of how the general principles might be applied to specific musical examples (Bach: Lobet dem Herm; Fauré: Cantique de Jean Racine; Schütz: Jauchzet dem Herren). In conclusion, the author rightly notes that "the only limit to the effectiveness of eurhythmic movement is the creativity of the conductor."

The final chapter of Volume 3 which is subtitled "Futures," deals with commissioning new music. As usual, DeVenney has covered the topic succinctly, yet thoroughly. Among the issues presented are the following: finding composers, deciding on compositional parameters, money and budget, finding funding, composition contests, choosing text, the letter of agreement, and the conductor's role during the writing process. This discussion will be most useful for the conductor who is approaching the enterprise of commissioning a new work for the first time.

Through the course of time I have had the privilege of reviewing a number of books for the *Choral Journal*. Naturally I have enjoyed reading some texts more than others, but I can honestly state that *Conducting Choirs* by David DeVenney has been one of the most satisfying reading experiences I have had to date. I commend DeVenney for this most useful contribution to our



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discipline and to you, dear reader, for your edification and professional growth.

Vance D. Wolverton, Highland Heights, Kentucky

### Evoking Sound: Fundamentals of Choral Conducting, second edition

James Jordan Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2009. 466 pp. ISBN: 978-1-57999-726-7.

The first edition of Evoking Sound was reviewed in the April 1997 volume of the Choral Journal by Joel Knapp. His review can be summarized with the following points about the first edition (all which are expanded in the second):

- Exhortation to develop the conductor "from the inside out"
- Influence of the Alexander Technique and Laban movement theory
- Theory on the ahead-of-the-beat ictus and why it is preferable
- Conventional beat patterns as a mere starting point for expressive conducting
- Search for greater abstraction and more "universal" meaning in a given text
- · Variety of literature for practice

Jordan's volume is one that is as useful for the conducting pedagogue as it is for the student; this is particularly elucidated in the supplemental DVD which features a discussion on technique helpful to those of us who teach this art. Jordan takes pains to emphasize that teacher and student rely on an awareness of one's soul and spirit as fundamental; while this sounds subjective, he makes a good case on how openness and transparency of spirit and renunciation of ego is reflected in gesture and rehearsal

technique, and is worth considering. It is particularly on the role of "self" and the debilitating effects of "envy" to which Jordan speaks, exhorting us to adopt a "kenotic" model of conducting (a "self-emptying" process).

There is a wealth of excellent advice for the conductor young and old here, especially as it relates to posture and "body mapping." As an example, Jordan states that all motion in the conducting gesture should feel like it originates from the fingertips and travels backward, and that correct "mapping" includes the sternoclavicular joint which is often overlooked. As a general answer to variance of pattern and range of movement for the conductor, Jordan asks "Is my movement the result of not trusting the choir or is my movement a natural organic part of the musicing process?" In addition, the section on the Saito conducting method (one which takes the use of hand percussion as its inspiration) is quite useful, as demonstrated on the method of achieving a clear marcato in the gesture with a small hand rattle. Somewhat problematic—or at least at variance with other conducting methods—is the use of mirror conducting, though the notion of "connecting the palms" is a very useful (and musical) one. Helpful items relating to

rehearsal technique include the notion of staying in "the moment" and not allowing judgment to interfere with the evocation of sound in real time.

Jordan's volume is one quite useful to the introductory conducting class, though its length makes it more functional as an excerptable source rather than a week-by-week methodology. As Knapp mentioned in his review of the first edition, the universality of the issues discussed makes it a useful read for the conductor at any level, and especially for the conducting pedagogue.

lan Loeppky, Florence, Alabama

#### Hans von Bülow: A Life and Times

Alan Walker
Oxford University Press, 2010.
510 pages.
ISBN: 978-0-19-536868-0.

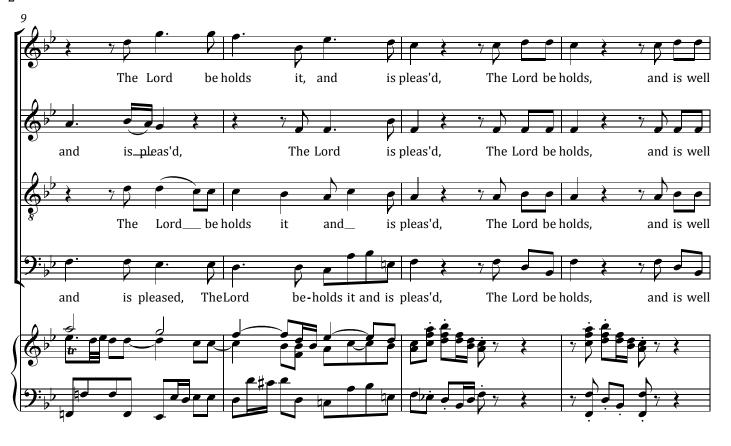
After his earlier, superb three-volume set on Franz Liszt (New York: Knopf, 1983–96; Cornel University Press, 1987–97), Alan Walker now presents another detailed biography, this time focusing on the life of



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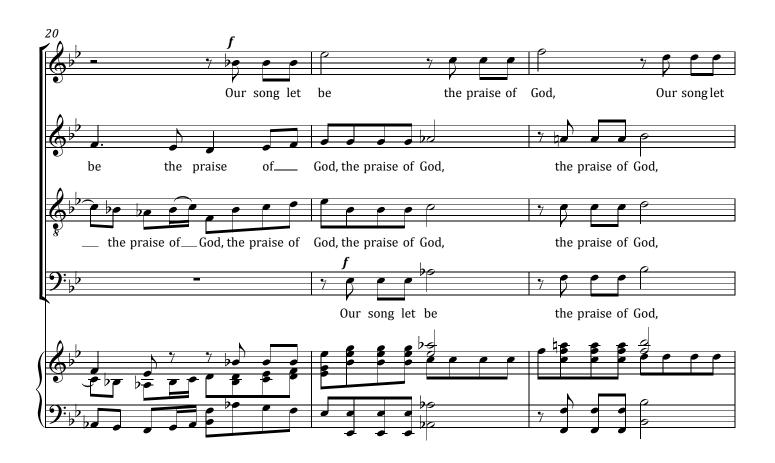
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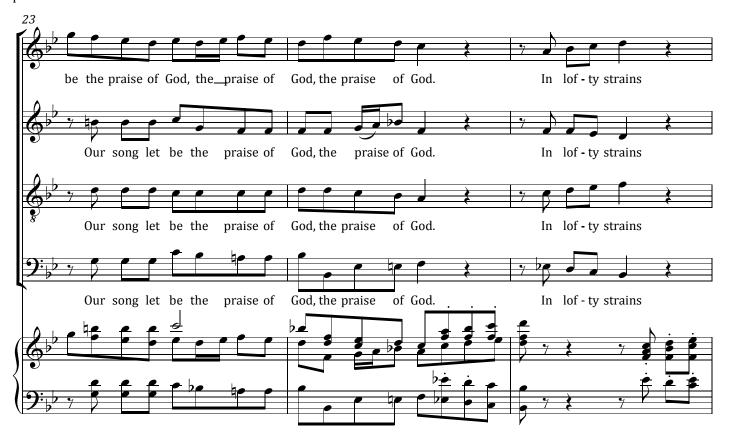


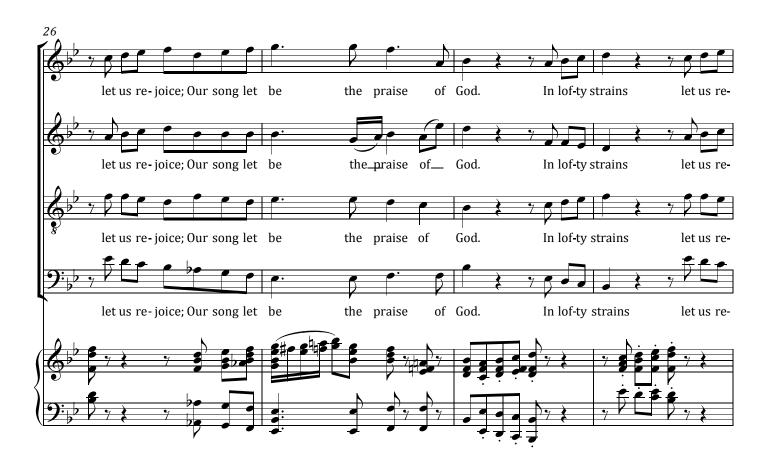














#### Achieved Is the Glorious Work

from The Creation

















### Dona nobis pacem

from Missa brevis in D Minor, K. 65/61a (1769)

W. A. Mozart (1756-1791)















