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The Performance Pyramid

Building Blocks for a Successful Choral Performance

Dr. Richard Zielinski, Presenter

"Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all the time thing. You don't win once in a while; you don't do things right once in a while; you do them right all the time. Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing."

From David Maraniss, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi*
(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 150.

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“There is no substitute for work. Worthwhile things come from hard work and careful planning.”¹ I first read this quote from John R. Wooden’s *Pyramid of Success*² in 1975. John Wooden coached the UCLA Bruins men’s basketball team from 1953 to 1975, winning 81.5% of all games played, including 10 NCAA championships, 7 consecutive conference titles and an 88-consecutive-game winning streak. In July of 2001, John Wooden was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George W. Bush for “significant public and private contribution”. It was ironic that Coach Wooden’s *Pyramid of Success* was not hanging on the wall in our locker room, but was on the wall of my high school choir room. As I prepare for another year of conducting choirs and working with young music educators, it has become clear to me that my choir directors, athletic coaches, and family had a huge impact on my style and method of teaching. Over the years, my athletic upbringing and artistic schooling has enabled me to develop a method of working with choirs that has proven effective. My *Performance Pyramid* (Figure 1) combines seven building blocks which will assist you in teaching the basic elements of choral music as you proceed toward a successful performance. I hope my *Performance Pyramid* can assist you in your teaching endeavors.

Think back to your first days of directing a choir. I clearly remember my first years of teaching; this scenario will probably sound familiar. I had just graduated from the University of Wisconsin - Madison, where I had performed some of the world’s greatest choral repertoire under the direction of two of the most talented conductors I have ever experienced, Robert Fountain and Paul Weins. I said good-bye to my family, and was off to my first teaching job. I had prepared for my first meeting with my choir, selected repertoire, made sure pencils were sharpened and the choir room was set up. The students walked in and picked up their folders. I took them through a vocal warm up and asked them to take out a selection that I knew would work: Heinrich Schutz’s motet, *Die mit Tränen säen*. The starting unison pitch of E-flat was played, the preparatory gesture was given and . . . BANG! I was hit with a reality lightening bolt accompanied by a robust chord cluster. This choral selection was wrong, completely wrong for this group of enthusiastic, but novice singers. It was a tränen-wreck! My next comment was, “Please hand that music to your right.” My first year of teaching taught me that if my choral groups were going to have any chance of contributing to the advancement of choral music, I would have to take complete responsibility for all the activities that would happen within the walls of my choir room. I realized that singers, like athletes, need to be guided through a systematic learning process if they are to have any chance for success. To prepare, inspire, teach voice, and encourage singers in an orderly step-by-step manner is the foundation of my system of learning: *The Performance Pyramid*.

1 Preparation (30%)

This is the most important building block of *The Performance Pyramid* process. As the director, I must take responsibility to prepare every aspect of the rehearsal before first meeting with the students. The importance of rehearsal preparation was impressed upon me while studying under conductor Donald Neuen at the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester. Materials such as syllabi, handouts, translations of foreign texts, rehearsal grids and appropriate repertoire selections must be completed and understood by the teacher before the first class meeting. Each year, the director must anticipate the students’ current strengths and weaknesses, thus adapting and adjusting teaching methods and materials. In choosing the

appropriate repertoire, the director must analyze the scores thoroughly before assigning them to a specific ensemble.

The production of a rehearsal grid (figure 2) is the next step. Take the number of minutes in a single rehearsal, minus warm ups and announcements, and multiply by the number of rehearsals. Divide this sub-total by the number of songs to be performed and adjust minutes per song by the level of difficulty. The result of this rehearsal grid will be, as Donald Neuen states, “a minute by minute plan for each rehearsal and a long-range plan that successfully takes us from the first rehearsal to the concert.”³ I have found it works best to create this grid on a spreadsheet program such as Microsoft Excel. This approach provides you with an exact number of minutes per song (MPS), minutes per rehearsal (MPR). When extra minutes are found, reallocate the minute to a song needing attention. You will find this rehearsal grid is easily adjusted. I post my rehearsal grid outside the choir room, on our choral webpage and hand it out to each singer. This acts as a contract between the singers and me. I am saying to my choir, “If you show up, ready to rehearse, I will not waste your time.” A rehearsal grid also stops me from over-programming. If the calculation of minutes per song reveals that I have less than an hour to rehearse a chorus from Libby Larsen’s *Seven Ghosts*⁴, for example, then I am guilty of over-programming. I then remove a piece or two from the rehearsal grid, re-calculate the minutes and shorten the program. In many cases, choral singers are volunteers or students taking choir for a degree requirement. By using this detailed, minute by minute, organized approach, I retain singers, recruit new singers and elevate the artistic level of my ensemble. I try to prepare my choir rehearsals like I am running a successful business. In the business arena, the old model focused on “time management.” However, in our world of multi-tasking every hour, “it is recognized that *time management* is really a misnomer – the challenge is not to manage time, but to manage ourselves.”⁵ I first must organize my own schedule, which will allow me to prepare every aspect of the rehearsal before the first meeting with my singers. I then am accountable for every minute of every rehearsal.

#2 Practice (20%)

Now I am ready to rehearse or practice with my choir. An organized and spirited rehearsal can transform a diverse group of students into a knowledgeable and refined group. Each daily rehearsal should be organized by the total number of minutes per class meeting. I post a weekly rehearsal schedule on the designated choral board so singers can anticipate what is going to be rehearsed that week. To this day, I can see the rehearsal schedule, a minute-by-minute, measure-by-measure plan that Professor Robert Fountain posted before our University of Wisconsin Concert Choir rehearsals. When I prepare my daily rehearsal plan, on my yellow legal pad, I use the following approach (figure 3). Divide a single page into three sections: 1) *prep*; 2) *warm-ups*; and 3) *rehearsing*. I then make a list under the *prep* heading of materials such as handouts, pencils, biographies on composers, reminder cards, translations, forms, etc. This tells me to get these *prep* items out of the way before rehearsal. Handing out materials can eat up your rehearsal minutes and distract from the music-making process. Therefore, I put these *prep* materials on their chairs before the choir members arrive. I also produce a detailed seating chart for my choir. This always makes my choir room look physically organized before the rehearsal begins. Seating charts help me develop the most productive formation for my choir, and are also an expedient way to take attendance.

The second heading of my rehearsal plan is titled *warm-ups*. Before each rehearsal I write out two or three warm-ups that use motives, themes and texts from the songs we are going to sing, and standard vocalizes that I have learned. These warm-ups must get the vocal

instrument technically ready for a productive rehearsal. Here is my formula for daily warm-ups. When the clock strikes the starting time in my rehearsal, I start the warm-ups. I begin with a physical warm-up (stretching, massages) followed by several breathing exercises. Then my choir begins to vocalize. I always try to make the last vocal warm-up relate to the first choral selection to be rehearsed by using motives, intervals, diction and tonalities from the selection. (It is helpful if you can finish the warm-up period in the key of the first piece.)

The third and final section on my rehearsal plan (yellow pad) is the order of the choral selections. The selections should come directly from your rehearsal grid. The order of these choral selections is crucial for a productive rehearsal. I begin with a choral selection the singers can comprehend. This builds confidence. In the middle of the rehearsal, I challenge the students with the most difficult material. They are warmed up, focused and will be very productive. I conclude the rehearsal with a selection that my students can sing well and have learned to love, reinforcing a positive, can-do attitude. I have had rehearsals where the singers leave the room, singing, humming or whistling the final piece down the hallway.

Throughout the rehearsal I also focus on TEACHING VOICE. If you do not have a specific vocal philosophy, develop one. Read *Voice Building for Choirs*⁶ by Wilhem Ehmann, and Frauke Haasemann, talk with voice teachers, take more voice lessons yourself and sit in on voice masterclasses. I am and will continue to be a student of the voice. Truthfully, I find most choirs have problems with rhythm, intonation, dynamics, diction, blend, articulation or expression as a result of poor breath control, thus leading to a poor vocal technique. That is why I try to assist my singers in their vocal development, especially during these early stages of rehearsal.

#3 Prioritize (10%)

To create a high quality choral program, the entire organization (singers, staff, patrons, and director) must arrange their priorities so that the needs of the ensemble become an important element in their weekly routine. It is also worth pointing out that this function, *prioritizing for the good of the ensemble* serves as the glue or mortar that holds the building blocks in place! Therefore, this can be a challenging goal to achieve. First, throughout the week, my yellow pad is never far away. So, if I come up with an idea for rehearsals, or remember an announcement that I must make in class, I simply get my yellow pad and write it down (before I forget it!). Second, it is critical that I, the director, set up a weekly schedule that allows time for my daily score study. As Moses said, that is Don V Moses, “make time early in the day, while you are fresh, to study scores. Then, for the rest of the day you do not worry because you have taken care of the most important part of being a conductor.” (University of Illinois, 1990) For me, the early morning hours before 6:00 am are the best time for score study. My mind is fresh, the house is quiet, and I get to experience the beauty of the sunrise while studying great works of art!

My attitude, work ethic and the sacrifices I make for my singers will pay dividends. I prioritize my weekly routine, which allows me to be prepared for my rehearsals. I try to lead by example and attempt to show my singers my commitment to achieving excellence by always being prepared. At the end of the week, I review the progress of each of my ensembles. Since all my rehearsal plans for all my choirs are written out on one yellow legal pad, I can keep a detailed record of what warm-ups I have used, which pieces have been rehearsed and in what order, and what announcements or pertinent information was distributed to the choir each week. Before I leave school for the weekend, I post the new rehearsal schedule for the upcoming week on the designated choral board. Knowing specific choral works to be rehearsed in the upcoming week

intensifies my score study on Saturday and Sunday. And, leaving school on a Friday knowing what you will rehearse during the next week makes for a great weekend.

#4 Personalize (15%)

After several weeks of rehearsals when my singers are comfortable with the notes, rhythms and the pronunciation of the text, and producing a solid choral tone, they are in control of the basic music rudiments. This is when they need to be challenged to find the true source of the composition. I assist them in striving to develop a personal understanding of the message in the music. Depending on the composition, the text may be taken from a variety of sources --- poetry, literature, biblical text or other religious writings. Whenever possible, I like to involve people from relevant disciplines such as literature, religion and philosophy in sharing their insight with the students, in order to enhance the students' total musical experience. I also have them research the composer's life and historical information surrounding the date of the composition. I keep asking them the question, "What inspired the composer to write this piece of music?" In many cases the answer is in understanding the origins of the text and how this text affected the composer's creative process. This is usually a very intensive, emotional and special learning time for the students and director. Recently, I was directing a wonderful high school honors choir at the 31st Superintendent's Honors Music Festival in Miami-Dade County. As I tried to get the choir to personalize Eleanor Daley's *In Remembrance*⁷, I was stopped by a student who said, "You do not need to explain. Many of us completely understand this poem of remembrance; we just sang this selection at a fellow student's funeral." This student took a moment to share with the others her personal experience with this song and the text set by Ms. Daley. Throughout the remainder of the festival and during performances, we all shared a personal understanding of the message within the music. Make the music come to life for your students by relating the song to their personal experiences and yours.

#5 Publicize (10%)

At this stage of *The Performance Pyramid* process, we are one month out from the concert. Performing for an auditorium full of empty seats can be very defeating for the group. Therefore, I organize a marketing committee of singers from within the group and map out a marketing plan to get people in the seats. I have always thought that singers can be your best promoters. If they are excited about the upcoming concert and can talk about the choral selections from a personal point of view, their friends, teachers and family members will be interested in attending. I send the singers out with posters, flyers and press releases to publicize the concert. In addition to flyers and posters, use your in-school or district mail services to send a *reminder post card* to all teachers and staff. Also, create a VIP database or list of parents, administrators, patrons, newspapers, radio stations, alumni and prospective singers. Produce a personalized letter and invite them to the concert. I find doing interviews with newspapers or radio and television talk shows gets the message of choral music into the main stream of activities. If your administration comes from a non-music discipline, get them to attend rehearsals early on in the process. If there is a narrator/speaking part in a song, for example in Hovland's *Saul*⁸ ask your principal, football coach, theater or drama teacher to participate as the narrator. Before you ask these non-music people to participate, find out how they will react in this kind of setting. I find extra time to work with them before the dress rehearsal, so the experience is a good one for them, the audience and the singers. These guest artists can bring a new group of people to your concerts.

#6 Project the Message (10%)

To successfully project the message of the music to the listener, the ensemble must deliver a choral product that reflects the intent of the composer's work. Today, our choirs and audience, especially students, are very visually oriented. YouTube, MTV, DVDs, video phones has had a huge effect on how people perceive performances. Two to three weeks out from the concert, I videotape the entire rehearsal. After I review the tape, then I set up a special *student-directed* review session with the choir. Before I turn the video on in class, I ask my student section leaders to engage the choir in a 10 to 15 minute discussion on "Improving Our Performance". Each student should have a comment or grade sheet, similar to the ones used at state solo and ensemble contests. Don't be surprised if your choir members, led by your team of section leaders, become very creative and analytical in discussing posture, tone, facial expressions, dynamics, unified vowels, etc. Collectively, they set the standard before they watch the videotape. As they watch, I may encourage the students to take time to reflect and focus on a specific area of their performance. Make sure you have the students write down their comments. Then over the next day or two, I read their comments, summarize them, get them typed, and hand them back to the entire class. Then we spend an entire rehearsal discussing their discoveries. By making them a part of the process, they learn the art of constructive criticism.

#7 Polish the Product (5%)

Once we finish with our video-analysis session, an attempt to polish every aspect of the concert is made prior to the performance. During this final step in *The Performance Pyramid* process, every musical aspect (vowels, consonants, cut offs, facial expressions, phrases, articulations, etc.) and technical aspects (attire, folders, walking on and off, set up, lighting, etc.) should be reviewed, analyzed, unified and perfected. If your choir does not completely understand what a polished choral product is, then it is the director's responsibility to take the choir to concerts, festivals or conferences to experience the work of a choral master, such as Dale Warland and *The Dale Warland Singers*. Recently, my students had an opportunity to perform side-by-side with the *The Dale Warland Singers*, conducted by Dr. Warland. Trust me, this opportunity changed our choral program forever.

I have always felt that my ensemble must practice performing before the final concert. Therefore, one week from the concert date, I take my choir to nursing homes or assisted living communities. Many of these elderly people are not able to attend my concerts . . . so my kids and I take the concert to them. It may be in an informal setting, such as a meeting room, cafeteria or fellowship hall. No matter what the facility, we go through our concert as planned. We sometimes bring old hymnals, so we have a chance to sing, spend a little extra time and socialize with the residents. These people are always grateful for these music presentations, and even more thankful for our visit. I am always amazed at what happens when I mix young students with our senior citizens. Many times, these experiences end up being more memorable than the final concert.

When I have led my group through the seven building blocks of *The Performance Pyramid*, then it is time to share my singers' talents and efforts with the audience. The performance or concert is the final destination, not a step in the process. It is through hard work, dedication and a personal and collective understanding of the message in the music that sincere singing occurs, and great performances are made. I have never believed in the saying, that a bad dress rehearsal means a great concert. Coach Lombardi said it the best, "Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all the time thing. You don't win once in a while; you don't do things right once in a while; you do them right all the time. Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing."⁹

A choir, much like an athletic team preparing for a game, must be guided through a systematic learning process before they perform their final exam (concerts), collectively, each semester, in public. Let the ensemble and the message they have to deliver be the focus of the concert. The results I have seen and heard are choral experiences that have a lasting effect on my singers, as well as the listeners.

¹ John R. Wooden, *They Call me Coach* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1978), 98.

² John R. Wooden, *The Pyramid of Success*, (accessed 15 July, 2002); available from <http://www.coachwooden.com>.

³ Donald Neuen; assisted by Piero Bonamico, *Choral Concepts* (California: Schirmer Thomson Learning, 2002), 177.

⁴ Libby Larsen, *Seven Ghosts*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁵ Stephen R. Covey, *The seven habits of highly effective people: restoring the character ethic* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 150.

⁶ Wilhem Ehmann, Frauke Haasemann, *Voice Building for Choirs*, ed. Ray Robinson, trans. Brenda Smith (London: Barenreiter, 1981; Hinshaw Music, 1982)

⁷ Eleanor Daley, *Requiem* Toronto, Canada: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1995), 21-26.

⁸ Egil Hoviland, *Saul* (North Carolina: Walton Music, 1972)

⁹ David Maraniss, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 150.