

Book Review

A Practical Guide to Choral Conducting By Harold Rosenbaum

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Every so often, think about how lucky you are to be making music...

I recently had the pleasure of hearing Harold Rosenbaum's New York Virtuoso Singers perform in composer Andrea Clearfield's new opera, *Mila, Great Sorcerer*, presented in NYC as a work-in-progress by the acclaimed Prototype Festival. Mr. Rosenbaum's confident and exacting ensemble of professional singers presented a solid background for the dramatic transformation of the Tibetan yogi Milarepa, a deeply moving and successful premiere.

Harold Rosenbaum presents a similarly confident and solid offering of experience and expertise in his recently published text, *A Practical Guide to Choral Conducting*. Divided into two distinct sections, Part I of this text constitutes a broad and wide-ranging look at choral conducting, defined by the author as "more of a calling than a profession." Part II offers an extensive anthology, defined by the author as masterpieces, from Machaut and des Prez to Debussy and Webern.

Organized into nineteen short and conversational chapters, the Part I synopses range from how to find a job, to the nuts and bolts of establishing a professional choir. Through the lens of his many years of experience as a choral conductor, Mr. Rosenbaum generously counsels his readers in a relaxed and easygoing stream of consciousness style rhetoric. With a sprinkling of personal examples, the author advises us on finding appropriate repertoire and program planning relative to choir size and venue acoustics. Based on his personal experience, the narrative addresses score learning in a three-page guide consisting of two separate lists on how to understand the score and how to prepare a score.

Part I continues with a focus on "the most persistent musical mistakes choral conductors make in rehearsals and performances," such as failing to hear and correct mistakes in rehearsal. Mr. Rosenbaum's chapter on conducting technique addresses gesture, and outlines movements that might be effective. The chapters on rehearsing, choral sound, concepts and techniques are liberally scanned, supported by bits of Mr. Rosenbaum's personal wisdom and experience. I appreciated the author's musical examples and personal stories inserted to offer contextual relevance to his discussions.

The book's wide range of practical advice on the subjects of organization, both for orchestral and choral ensembles, presented in digestible list forms, is indeed practical and valuable for emerging conductors. I found the discussion on concerts and venues perhaps too generalized. It was of course valuable to mention the relationship of acoustics and tempo. (While reading this chapter, I remembered my own blunder in presenting a Bach cantata in an ultra-resonant cathedral acoustic in Toronto.) But what comes first? Do we choose the concert repertoire to accommodate a particular acoustic, or do we choose a venue to accommodate our choice of concert repertoire? On the discussion of concert halls, there are many more variables and restrictions, particularly in relation to union halls versus non-union halls and in relation to budget and academic restrictions as well.

On matters related to the concert experience, Mr. Rosenbaum tells us that “having total control over your technique” is key to successful musical experience. He says, “When you are entirely confident about your technique, you can create magic.” To take the musical experience from “average” moments to “special moments” the author makes a list of circumstances in which the reader may achieve special results. Readers may or may not be able to relate to these particular circumstances, but the list contains valuable insights to be adapted for conducting studies—which is of course, the point of the book.

In addition to his valuable insights on touring and recording, Mr. Rosenbaum courageously offers a chapter on when to “break the rules”—when “not to conduct” and when “not to interpret something that lies before you on the page.” Again, the author adds musical examples and personal experiences to support his discussion.

As one who has conducted symphonic and professional choirs throughout their career, I found the author’s insights into the world of professional choirs quite resonant, and particularly useful for emerging conductors seeking to start a professional choir. Finally, and in relation to the subject of performing modern music, I celebrate Mr. Rosenbaum’s deep commitment to living composers as he makes a passionate plea for discerning conductors to embrace the challenges of new music.

He tells us to make a “special effort to support living composers;” he says that if we believe in the worth of the music, we should not be afraid of what the audience might think! I particularly appreciated his concern for current publishing trends to promote “easy to sell/easy listening repertoire.” Along with Harold Rosenbaum, I too applaud those conductors who “take more risks” to find and perform cutting-edge music.

The author’s selected lists of repertoire, from accessible to more complex are indeed valuable, as are his fine examples of unaccompanied contemporary choral music. These ready-made lists may be particularly useful for university choral literature and conducting courses.

As I read Mr. Rosenbaum’s “Final Thoughts” in the last chapter of Part I, I chuckled at his curious collection of ideas. From his deeply profound words, “Every so often, think about how lucky you are to be making music...” to his oddly basic advice to “carry breath fresheners” before greeting fans backstage, the author brings us the benefit of his broad and impressive history.

The Part II compilation of fifty public domain works from Machaut to Webern is organized as an anthology of selected masterpieces. The anthology contents span a vast repertoire of European classics accompanied by the author’s performance suggestions and general thoughts embodied in the first page of each composition. While the anthology is focused exclusively on all male European composers from early Renaissance to late Romantic and early Contemporary music, this traditional body of repertoire nevertheless remains an important segment of any comprehensive choral conducting curriculum.

Mr. Rosenbaum’s contribution set forth in *A Practical Guide to Choral Conducting* is indeed practical, pragmatic and personal. In an intimate and conversational style, this seasoned and successful conductor has generously contributed an abundance of practical information with personal insights offered honestly and decisively in his own voice. Who among us does not appreciate the enormous effort and generosity of spirit involved in compiling a lifetime of musical wisdom and experience?