

## **Compelling Rehearsals: Great Music + Great Imagination = Great Results**

**Jerry Blackstone**

**University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance**

**Conductor, University of Michigan Chamber Choir**

An expanded version of this article was originally published in *Sing Out*, the magazine of the Australian National Choral Association.

### **Great Music + Great Imagination = Great Results**

It is my strongly held conviction that the greatest conductors are those with the greatest imaginations. They choose the very best repertoire of which their ensemble is capable, knowing that the texts of these pieces may be the only great poetry or prose that members of the ensemble will encounter for the next several months. Imaginative conductors study the score and envision sounds to match the notes, rhythms, and words they see on the page. They come to rehearsals ready to engage the music and the singers in a dynamic, energetic, focused, and efficient moment of music making.

Imaginative conductors are driven by their love of both the music and the people with whom they collaborate to make the music come alive. Imaginative conductors realize there is seldom enough time in rehearsal to make the singers comfortable with the music and bring them in line with the conductor's imaginative concept, so efficient rehearsals become the norm rather than the panic-induced rush job that often occurs near concert time. Imaginative conductors come to rehearsals with deep, strong, and flexible convictions that infuse every moment of the rehearsal. They do their best to not lead hectic rehearsals, even though their musical agenda involves packing four hours of work into a two-hour rehearsal. Imaginative conductors have a very hard time settling for OK, when the score has instilled in them a remarkably clear vision of the musical and communicative possibilities latent in the piece. They have a hard time imagining the piece any other way than the dynamic vision they bring with them to each rehearsal.

Have you caught the emphasis being placed on the conductor's imagination and score-induced vision? I am firmly convinced that the music itself motivates our rehearsals. The conductor's passion, gestures—after all, we are a gesture based profession—energy, efficiency, care, and organizational abilities are a natural result of having spent time with the score and having developed a “dream” bank account that is full of musical possibilities. Choirs led by “dreamless” conductors realize their potential immediately. They live up—or down—to the expectations of their conductors right away!

The rehearsals, however, tend to be lifeless, slow, unorganized, and meandering in their musical productivity. “Dream-deprived” conductors lead “dream-deprived” ensembles, often settling for less than stellar repertoire performed in a perfunctory manner. Why would musically gifted singers give themselves to these ensembles? If time is limited, and with the most talented singers often leading the most hectic lives, it is extremely important that we arrive at every rehearsal armed with a vision of musical possibilities.

Individuals come to our rehearsals and classrooms with a host of differences—different levels of musical expertise and sophistication, different levels of social/emotional expectations, different levels of musical backgrounds and experiences. For some, merely walking in the door is comforting, affirming, and a welcome respite from the day-to-day; for some, singing in the choir or playing in the instrumental ensemble or developing musicianship skills is another duty that makes for a very long day; for others, no musical challenge is too great, so bring it on!

Let me take you back to the wonderful summer of 1974 when, as a young and very green conductor, I had the remarkable opportunity to rehearse and sing under the legendary conductor, Robert Shaw. Those choral rehearsals with Mr. Shaw were life changing. I will always remember weeping over the beauty and majesty of *Ein deutsches Requiem*—and we were still count-singing! I remember being overcome by the infectious rhythmic energy that permeated the room. It made no difference whatsoever that we were working extremely hard inside a rehearsal room when the weather outside was incredibly beautiful and warm. The excitement, the challenge, the inspiration, the beauty, and the musical drama were inside, where we were. I was in the presence of greatness. I was meeting BRAHMS, and it changed my life.