

Introduction: Lesson 4 is designed to give practical tips for song-leading in a church congregation, specifically in conducting hymns. Some aspects of leading a church choir will also be discussed.

CONGREGATIONAL CONDUCTING

Practical Tips for Conducting Congregations

- Congregational song-leading involves much more than hand gestures and motions, it must involve the entire body and demeanor of the song leader. The problem is, conducting patterns are the most difficult part of song-leading, and they take the most time to get comfortable with. Once the patterns become natural, they should fall to the background in the conductor's mind, and he should focus on facial expressions and body language such as leaning forward, standing on tiptoes on a climax, smiling, or having a pleasant or excited look in your eyes.
- Be sure to take good care of your voice while song-leading. The conductor should sing with confidence, but he must be careful not to be too loud. It is not his goal to be heard above the rest, but to be consistently on key and on time when the congregation hesitates or is unsure when to come in, how long to hold a fermata, or where a word is divided on the syllables.
- When selecting the songs to sing, pay close attention to the details of the song. Examine it for doctrinal errors, ensure that it has good substance, and analyze it to make sure it has proper musical structure. Study the hymn looking for the best way to accurately communicate the message. Pointing a line of the hymn and briefly explaining it to the congregation is a great practice that can edify the church and affect the way they sing the hymn. Another idea is selecting hymns along a common theme so that the congregation looks for the connection.

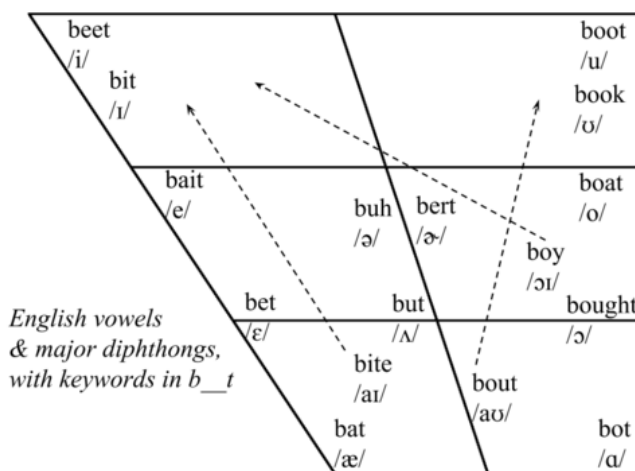
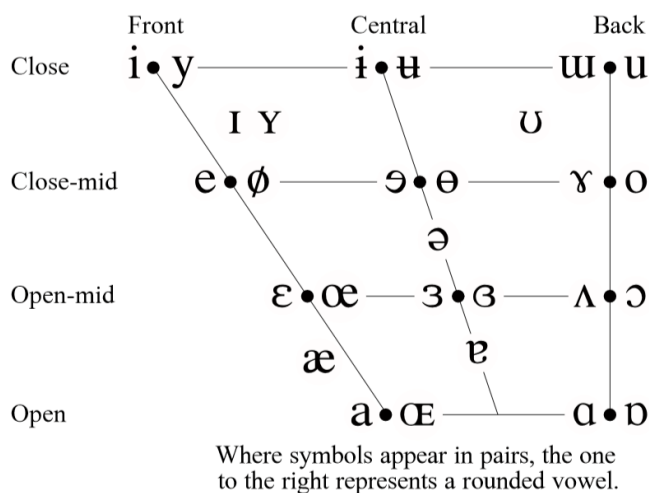
CHURCH CHOIR CONDUCTING

The Rehearsal Schedule

- There are three rules about choir rehearsals that must be followed:
 - (1) Do not waste vocal gold. The voice is a delicate instrument, and everything that is done in choir rehearsal must be done with voice preservation in mind. Limiting how long the rehearsal goes, having the choir sing most of the rehearsal in a soft voice, and ensuring frequent breaks during extended rehearsals are all essential to preserve the voice.
 - (2) Do not try to master all the musical disciplines at once. Each time through the song should focus on no more than one or two aspects (i.e. the words, notes, tempo, dynamics, phrasing, pronunciation, intonation, color, articulation, blend, etc.) This is important.
 - (3) Do not waste time. Every second of rehearsal must count! The only time the chorus is not singing should be when the conductor is teaching on a component of the song that is being worked on. Otherwise, the time should be filled with singing and fast-paced.
- The choir rehearsal can begin even before it officially begins by having the pianist be playing through the songs as the choir members shuffle in, grab their music, and find their seats. This allows the choir to already be hearing the music and maybe even seeing it before rehearsal.
- After opening in prayer, the choir rehearsal should commence with actual stretching. Taking the time to stretch out the arms, back, and neck can have a dramatic impact on the sound.

- A major part of the choir rehearsal should consist of vocal warmups. The best warmups focus on tuning the choir to the same pitch, developing good intonation, articulation, energy, and placement, and waking up the vocal cords. Here is an example of a great pitch warmup:
 - Have the choir start on one pitch, and try to increase the pitch by only a half-step over the course of sixteen pulses together. This is really just a mental trick that helps the choir develop an acute sensitivity to pitch and singing together as one unit of sound.
 - This same warmup can be done using a four-part chord, which is more advanced.
- The next thing to do in the rehearsal is to start rehearsing music! ***The conductor's greatest tool is his ear***, this cannot be overemphasized. It is as if the conductor has the best sounding choir singing in his head at all times, and any time he hears something from his choir that does not match the sound in his head, he must stop and correct it. This requires listening to high-quality music that is sung the right way and conducted by musical conductors.
- Another large percentage of the rehearsal must consist of teaching things such as energy and placement. The conductor is essentially a voice teacher to each person in the choir. He must therefore know how to train each section of the choir. Another thing he must teach is vowel formation. There are twelve vowel sounds in the International Phonetic Alphabet (see charts below). To simplify for more practical use, the list can be reduced to the six common vowel sounds: OO / OH / AW / EE / A / AH (the first three being dark, and the last three bright). The choir must be taught to get all of the bright vowels from the OO to make them warmer.

VOWELS



- Always be prompt to end the rehearsal on time, this is the best way to end on a high note!

Conducting the Rehearsal

- Abruptly stop a rehearsal any time you hear something you think should be done better. Do so by clapping two or three times to get the choir's attention. They must be taught to watch you!
- Use techniques such as count singing or practicing the pronunciation by singing the words on a single note or chord throughout the rehearsal. Teach them to connect the final consonant of one word to the beginning syllable of the next for the best diction. Use imagery to teach.
- Teach them to watch you, since you might make a change "in the moment" during a service.

ADDITIONAL TOOLS

- Conducting Batons are very helpful for choir rehearsals, especially if there is an orchestra. A baton is held in the right hand and is basically used the same way the conductor's right hand would be used normally. The shaft is grasped by the thumb, pointer finger, and middle finger while the ring finger and pinky remain suspended to the side of the middle finger. The "bulb" (sometimes called the grip) is pointed at the palm of the hand and comes just short of actually touching the palm. Its main purpose is to balance the baton. One test to see if you are holding the baton correctly is to see if it balances on your pointer finger when the other fingers are released. Wherever it balances, that is where you want to hold the baton with a loose grip.



- A music stand is vital to successful rehearsals, and they can be useful for getting attention.
- There are many helpful books that will be an immense benefit to your music education and your effectiveness as a choral conductor. Get books by musical people who have experience.
- Take note of music rehearsals you are a part of or see. Everything that I have learned, I got from being a part of college choir, volunteer college mens' ensemble, college auditioned mixed ensemble, camp staff choir, a few church music and choral conducting classes I took in college, sitting in on the college chamber ensemble, symphonic choir, and private choirs, and watching recordings of rehearsals. Learn every chance you get! You can learn as much as you want to.

Videos

1. [Don Neuen Rehearsal](#) Donald Neuen rehearsal on vowel formation for good choir resonance.
2. [Donald Neuen : Artistic Musical Conducting 1 & 2](#) Course by Donald Neuen, the cost is \$15.
3. [Donald Neuen : Choral Techniques and Methods](#) Course by Donald Neuen, the cost is \$45.
4. [Robert Shaw: Preparing a Masterpiece, Volumes 1–8](#) Robert Shaw rehearsals at Carnegie Hall.
Be careful if you watch any of these that you pick one of his rehearsals of a good classical song.
5. [Dr Irene Messoloras, Rehearsal](#) Irene Messoloras rehearsal, good conducting but bad piece.

Books

1. [With a Voice of Singing by Dr. Robert Regal](#) Excellent book about proper vocal technique.
2. [Up Front!: Becoming the Complete Choral Conductor by Ray Robinson](#) Essays on conducting.
3. [Coral Concepts: A Text for Conductors by Donald Neuen](#) Fantastic textbook about conducting.

Tools

1. [Music Stand](#) This is here partially as a joke...I get no commission from you buying these items.
2. [Conducting Baton](#) Okay, this will be the last thing, but I do highly recommend getting a baton!
The one in the link above is the one I recommend, but a cheaper option can be found [Here](#).