

## VOCAL-SYMPHONIC COMPOSITION IN CHOIR WORKSHOPS

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**Abstract:** *International choir festivals are workshops during which choir members from various choirs form a new choir over a short period of time in order to prepare a concert. Forming a homogenous choir ensemble and learning a music piece under the baton of a conductor are all the more difficult in the case of preparing a vocal-symphonic work. Under these circumstances, the art of communication involves the presence of some complex skills in the personality of the conductor: musical, pedagogical, psychological and managerial. Before embarking on such a challenging project, the conductor must know the score in detail, must predict the difficulties of study and have sufficient experience in social communication in order to find quick and efficient solutions to all possible problems that might appear during the study period. Before beginning the study of the music score, it is necessary to cover the following stages: anticipated analysis of the musical resources of the choir, finding difficulties in the score, applying efficient study methodologies, organising the rehearsal with the orchestra and finally performing the concert.*

**Key words:** *arts, choral music, choir workshops, conducting mastery, singing, communication through music.*

### 1. Introduction

The world-wide known practice of organising and running choir festivals designed as a week of choral singing comprising concerts, choral *soirées*, conferences, tourist activities and workshops during which large pieces are prepared, has become common in Romania too.

Here it is part of the contemporary humanist education implemented by means of national and international cultural and educational events organised by the *International Choir Federation "A Coeur Joie"* (ACJ-I), *Europa Cantat* (EC) and the *International Federation for Choral Music*

(IFCM). The aim of these events is cultural socialisation, a defining element in the shaping of human personality and community syntality, by means of the arts.

In essence, choir events enable a complete exchange of cultural ideas and information, on a national and international scale, creating a cultural and community environment of mutual understanding via choral singing whereby the artistic dialogue is followed by a human dialogue.

Starting with 1996 a series of international choir festivals, open to all choirs as well as to individuals, have taken place in Braşov and Satu Mare, organised by the *Romanian Association of Choir Singing* (ARCC), along

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with the *International Choir Federation "A Coeur Joie"*.

The workshops are choirs formed during the festival when choir members opt for a certain conductor or music piece. For the duration of the festival, these choirs prepare a themed repertoire or a vocal-symphonic work under the baton of a conductor.

The novel character of choir workshops at festivals is that, if under normal circumstances a choir ensemble is a homogenous group, formed in time, the choir during a workshop comprises individual choir members from a great variety of choir ensembles, used to various training techniques, sometimes from different linguistic backgrounds – so, choral singing becomes the linkage and the flow of musical sensibility that unites all the choir members of a workshop within the same emotional space.

The possibility of achieving this depends on the choral experience of the participants and especially on the conductor's capacity of achieving his goal in a short time.

## **2. The complex characteristics of the conductor's personality (musician, teacher, psychologist, manager)**

Conducting a vocal or instrumental ensemble is a human activity of spiritual communication. The complex personality of the conductor has a great influence on the psychical balance of the choir members, on the quality of the interpretation and, implicitly, on the quality of the message sent to the public. Similarly, the skills of a conductor are defined by their musical knowledge, practical experience in the field of musical performance and the dominant characters of their personality in particular.

Besides musical competences, the following are essential human qualities a conductor must possess and they have a

direct impact on the communication with the choir members: inner state of mind, respect, demand, calm, passion, patience and perseverance. The conductor must have the qualities of a good psychologist, especially when giving feedback in front of the group. The didactic mastery of the conductor in achieving efficient communication is vital. Correcting mistakes is a necessary part of study but knowing how to prevent a mistake shows the conductor's didactic skills.

The management qualities of the conductor in organising all the moments of an event well, the forward planning and the detailed thinking, gives the group a sense of safety and balance. Organising the work of a conductor and choir as well as adapting to different situations and individual behaviour types are part of the tools of music pedagogy.

A conductor's artistic talent, pedagogical mastery, personality and character as well as management skills are highlighted during the choir workshops when, in a relatively short time, the complex characteristics of their personality create an organised ensemble able to perform a vast music piece which, normally, would require a longer period of time.

## **3. Study techniques during choir workshops**

In order to support the above, here are the general and common conclusions that emerged as a result of the choir workshop with *Messe de Requiem, Opus 48*, by Gabriel Fauré, at the two International Choir Festivals in Braşov and Satu Mare.

Each workshop had around 100 choir members among who there were about 45 individual singers from France, Switzerland, Belgium, Canada and Hungary, as well as two choirs from Romania – an adult choir and the choir of a music highschool.

The programme of rehearsals lasted 15 hours and covered three days. During the morning of the fourth day there was a rehearsal with the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra and in the evening, the concert.

#### 4. The anticipated analysis of the musical and expressive resources of the workshop choir

The balance between the choirs was relatively good. The choral voice the least consonant was among the *Bass*, with young voices, without the necessary vocal and harmonious charge, and the very good voices were in *Soprano* and *Alto*.

Most of the choir members knew the technique of the solfeggio and vocal emission, and three quarters were familiar with the score.

The level of receptivity and affective involvement was high – the majority of the choir members showed interest and enthusiasm during rehearsals and managed to solve the difficulties of tone and expressive singing.

#### 5. Vocal technique exercises – singing scales

A good vocal technique involves correct tone, homogenous tonal colour, logical

phrasing, clear and expressive diction and mobile dynamics.

Due to the heterogeneous quality of the ensemble, attention was paid to the development, through singing scales, of a homogenous vocal culture. Even though the working time was limited, the vocal technique exercises always took place for 15-20 minutes before rehearsal.

The choice of scales was made according to the goal set and contained:

- correct voice training by placing vowels homogeneously in the resonance mask;
- sustained breathing preventing difficulties in sustaining the tone in *Offertoire*, where there are some *a cappella* passages with long phrases and slow tempos.

#### 6. Technical difficulties while studying and priorities in singing the score expressively

The whole score was covered during the first rehearsal in order to evaluate the level of familiarisation with the piece and to highlight the difficulties the choir had.

At the end, it was noticed that the passages causing most difficulties were:

### I – Introit et Kyrie

Page 2

The musical score for four voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) is presented on a single page. The lyrics are: "lu - ce - at e - is, lu - ce - at e - - - is." The score is in 4/4 time and features dynamics of *mp* and *ppp*. The Soprano part begins with a *mp* dynamic, followed by a *ppp* section. The Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts follow a similar pattern. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across multiple notes.

## Page 6

S.  
o - ra - ti - o - nem me-am ad te om-nis ca - ro ve - ni - et

A.  
o - ra - ti - o - nem me-am ad te om-nis ca - ro ve - ni - et

T.  
o - ra - ti - o - nem me-am ad te om-nis ca - ro ve - ni - et

B.  
o - ra - ti - o - nem me-am ad te om-nis ca - ro ve - ni - et

## II – Offertoire

## Page 15

3  
glo - ri-ae, O Do - mi - ne Je - su Chris - te

8  
rex glo - ri-ae O Do - mi - ne Je - su Chris - te

Chris - te rex glo - ri-ae Je - su chris - te

Page 20

S. O Do - mi - ne Je - su Chris - te rex

A. O Do - mi - ne, Je - su Chris - te

T. Je - su Chris - te

B. O Do - mi - ne, Je - su

V – Agnus Dei

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S. Ag - nus De - i Ag - nus De - - - i qui

A. Ag - nus De - i Ag - nus De - - - i qui

T. Ag - nus De - i Ag - nus De - - - i qui

B. Ag - nus De - i Ag - nus De - - - i qui

5  
S. tol - lis pec - ca - ta mun - - - di do - na

A. tol - lis pec - ca - ta mun - - - di do - na

T. tol - lis pec - ca - ta mun - - - di do - na

B. tol - lis pec - ca - ta mun - - - di do - na

## Page 45

*dolce sempre.*

S. Lux aeterna luceat eis

A. Lux aeterna luceat

T. Lux aeterna luceat

B. Lux aeterna luceat

lu - ce - at e - - is Do - mi - ne cum

e - - is lu - ce - at e - is Do - mi - ne cum

e - - is lu - ce - at e - is Do - mi - ne cum

e - - is lu - ce - at e - is Do - mi - ne cum

The major difficulties presented in the examples above are mostly connected to tone, and were generated by the chromatics of the melody and the fluctuant character of the development of harmony whereby the modulation covers small spaces and extreme tones, leading to instability of tone from the point of view of both melody and harmony.

Apart from the musical fragment on page 15, all the other musical examples have isorhythmic structures that favour tone by highlighting the role of chromatics and leading tones. As a method of study for achieving correct tone one must always relate the melodic sound (horizontal) to the harmonic (vertical).

Chromatics and modulation covering small spaces are stylistic characteristics specific to Gabriel Fauré's harmonic language.

The tune and accompaniment cannot be dissociated at Gabriel Fauré. The accompaniment ends with modulations that allow for great simplicity in the melody. One sometimes feels that the themed melody is the expression or the ornament of harmony itself.

One of the stages in the development of harmony in the universal musical creation is Fauré's harmonious language. Harmony at Fauré is a functional-tonal harmony with frequent chromatic passages and unpredictable modulations taken to the

extreme but within the limit of the idea of tone.

Besides the difficulties mentioned above, the score has the following problems:

- achieving the correct tone and sustaining it;
- unison and harmonic perception;
- change of rhythm in all the sections, and therefore change of beat or tempo;
- timing and expressive-dynamic realization of the themed phrases;
- timbre homogeneity, in part and on the whole;
- rhythmic synchronisation;
- most choir members are dependent on the score, without being able to follow the expressive gestures of the conductor.

After the first reading of the score it can be estimated that with sustained and intensive study, if the choir participate actively in rehearsals, the mistakes will be remedied.

### **7. Study methods and techniques applied to the existing situation**

Each rehearsal had five study sections of different time lengths according to the length of the rehearsal and the nature of the difficulties encountered, solved and overcome within each fragment – study sections covered in the following order:

- vocal technical preparation - singing scales;
- practising the parts that were accessible in terms of tone and register in order to continue the vocal training using the score;
- the study of difficult parts (which takes the longest time in a rehearsal) was done one section at a time, the length of each section depending on the difficulty of the musical and poetic

text; the study is done in voice groups and with the whole choir;

- the study of other sections of medium difficulty in order to assimilate and cover the score entirely;
- at the end of the rehearsal the difficult parts are revisited for a better understanding and consolidation by memorisation, and then all the sections studied are rehearsed.

### **8. Fundamental principles in the methodology of studying the score**

- the work atmosphere during rehearsals was positive, enthusiastic and relaxed – without tension or anxiety, without awkward moments, either tense or static;
- the communication between the conductor and the choir was good, filled with mutual respect, and the level of demand from the choir was maximum – in accordance with the assimilation capacity and reaction abilities of the choir members;
- the role of the accompanying teacher as well as the stylistic interpretation of the organist are vital. In both situations we had the chance of exceptional collaborations;
- the punctuation marks were established right from the beginning – breaths and caesuras, which were taken into account during the study of sections;
- in order to assimilate the score correctly, it was done first as a solfeggio, then using the text, the voices, groups of voices and then the whole choir – in a continuous and varied alternating sequence so that none of the voice groups repeated too much or waited for too long – this way the discipline of study defines the discipline of the group;

- both in tone and modulation the focus was on understanding and becoming aware of the role of chromatics and leading tones;
- the correct placement of rhythm and the expressive placement of rhythmic and metric stress and of the poetic text aimed at a perfect synchronisation of voices and the highlighting of the semantics of the poetic-musical text;
- correct and expressive phrasing of the musical and poetic text showcases thus the intrinsic message of the piece;
- the dynamics during the rehearsals was as close as possible to the expressive quality of the score – in accordance with the content of the poetic text;
- special attention was given to the change of inner rhythm which is typical of the discourse of the whole piece; a good assimilation of the tempo during the study period leads to confidence in approaching the score and an identical group reaction during the concert;
- the homogeneity in part and on the whole was a continuous aim of the study; immediate correction of tone leading to the development of the choral homogeneity desired;
- the effort exerted was split into multiple parts by correct voice preparation and breathing as well as phrasing suitable for the text;
- the permanent correction of mistakes – it was not decided to move on until a correct performance was achieved; the difficulty in correcting some mistakes by the choir members meant that the conductor had to find some suitable study methods and techniques.

In situations of this type the conductor must divide time up efficiently for each section studied and evaluate on the whole the level of assimilation of the score. In this way the whole score could be covered entirely.

### **9. The expressive performance of the musical text – finishing it off for the concert**

The nature of the performance and the musical-poetic expression were complete once the elements of language were assimilated.

The level of awareness-raising about the message of the score in each choir member leads to a good performance of the choir.

The dynamic-expressive curve is a complex result of the accumulation of music and poetic language elements. In each of the parts the expressive climax is external in relation to the excesses of fury, harshness or force – it is the accumulation of intense feeling of the message of the score.

Decoding Fauré's melodic meaning and obtaining the harmony chromatics and the modulation spaces is a necessity in understanding the language of the score.

The themed character of each part, especially the linear-ornamental or *parlando*, is a stylistic necessity.

In terms of the formal structure the piece is of impressive balance; nothing is too much, each section is concise and sustained only as much as it is necessary, moving then on to another section.

The serene atmosphere of deep calm is present throughout the piece and the conclusion is implicit – purification through divinity.

The artistic performance was determined by the minute organisation of all the moments and details of this complex cultural project:

- establishing and strictly respecting the programme of study;
- establishing the details of the timing of the concert – time needed for costumes, voice preparation, organisation for entering the stage and delivery of the concert;



- the information about the organisation of the concert was explained in detail and assimilated during rehearsals – not before the concert;
- a state of normality, balance and calm must anticipate the beginning of the concert.

The complementary elements regarding the appearance and stage presence of the choir:

- position of the choir members within the choir ensemble;
- posture and position of the score while performing;
- the role of the look in the dialogue between conductor and choir;
- the importance of continuous breathing and smiling – in order to maintain balance and affective opening.

#### **10. Rehearsal with the orchestra**

The scheduling of only one rehearsal with the orchestra may be an obstacle in running the concert, if the three components –choir, soloists and orchestra – do not master the music piece well and do not pay enough attention to an expressive performance.

Before the final rehearsal with the orchestra, the choir workshop had overcome the difficult study problems, managing to assimilate the score and to give an expressive performance of the piece, on the whole.

The tone was correct, the tone and phrasing during the *a cappella* passages were sustained, there was homogeneity of music sections and of the choir ensemble, the rhythmic synchronisation was good. Moreover, the state of mind of the choir was positive, neither exalted nor concerned. The self-control, self-confidence and confidence in the others were dynamic elements in sustaining the collective morale of the new choir – only a few days into a major project.

The soloists adapted easily to the performance style and the orchestra, of a high professional level and with a sensitive attitude in their performance, followed closely all the performance demands of the conductor.

The final rehearsal went well, each participant following with maximum attention the gestures and indications of the conductor.

It is extremely pleasant to reach the moment of the final rehearsal after only three days of intense study with a choir workshop.

#### **11. The concert**

Performing a religious concert is always best, spiritually and acoustically, in a church or cathedral.

Usually the state of mind before the concert impacts on the quality of the concert itself. The good organisation of the choir, the attention paid to respecting the rules established during rehearsals, the timetable and the calm verbal communication meant a good mental preparation of the choir, creating a state of trust and safety within the group.

The mental balance achieved before the concert is also the result of a choral education based on discipline, which was present at the choir members of the workshop and had been assimilated in their choirs of origin. The stage presence impressed through discipline, colour and atmosphere.

In an acoustic environment different from the rehearsal space, the dynamic planes were well balanced. The spatial distance required by the stage arrangement and the presence of the orchestra did not affect the meter-rhythmic synchronisation.

The participative reaction of the orchestra was in line with the sensibility and involvement of the choir.

Communication during the performance was like an energy flow that reunites the individual states of mind achieving a positive collective emotion.

## 12. Final thoughts

The success of the concert and of the workshop was fully achieved. Developing such a project could not have been possible without the presence in the workshop of some choir members experienced in terms of the affective side of the performance.

Unfortunately there was an unwanted event during the concert that affected the recording of the sound. One of

the members of the orchestra moved the chair disconnecting the cables that ensured the recording. Here is an example of an unwanted event that could have been avoided and that affected the recording of the concert.

Besides the music, the conductor must pay attention to events that could affect the quality of the final performance.

Preparing and sustaining a concert of such extent is a cultural richness for the choir as well as for the audience.

Festivals have created a sense of belonging to the great choir family where cultural communion overcomes the limits of the geographic space.

In an attempt to define the musical miracle, Plato concluded: "Music is the essence of order, and leads to all that is good, just, beautiful, of which it is the invisible but nevertheless dazzling, passionate and eternal form".

## References

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- 2 Fauré, Gabriel: *Messe de Requiem, Opus 48*, versiunea 1900. Leipzig. Edition Peters, 1977.