

BOB WEBB'S TIPS FOR CHORAL SINGING

(AS RECORDED BY TED CUMMINGS)

The following tips are words of "choral wisdom" from our Artistic Director, Bob Webb, given during actual rehearsals of the Northern Virginia Chorale, and jotted down by me (*Ted Cummings -- former singer*). Bob's advice is direct and to the point. This list is by no means exhaustive. Moreover, each concert presents its own set of challenges. However, if Bob says something that strikes a nerve or has said it repeatedly, then it is on this list.

1. **"No Talking"**

During rehearsal, listen to our director and please stop the side chatter. It wastes valuable time. A corollary is to show up on time ready to start.

2. **"Always Sing Beautifully"**

Whether the score calls for a soft or loud volume, a bright or mournful tone, always make it sound beautiful. A corollary to this is "Sing never shout." Bob sometimes urges us to sing covered tones with a rich resonance as opposed to butt-naked tones with a blaring offensive ring to them.

3. **"Listen to those around you."**

You should be singing as one section where the sectional part is clearly identified and not as a muffled or garbled sound. To do that, you have to be listening to the sectional sound as you sing.

4. **"For difficult sections of the score, leaders in a section have to step forward and carry the rest of the section."**

This is particularly relevant during a concert. However, this is not a license for others to never to learn their parts during rehearsal.

5. **"If you cannot hit the notes [because it is beyond your range or mastery at that point], then open your mouth and smile [meaning fake it until you can]."**

During rehearsal for Mozart's Requiem Bob said "Nothing is worse than a bass hitting the wrong note loudly."

6. **"Leading into a concert performance, you cannot expect to sing beautifully..."** if you are trying to read each note in the score as it occurs. Your mind and voice have to anticipate where the music is heading. You can only do

that if you practice and show up for rehearsals.” He has on more than one occasion talked about the need to see “the harmonic structure of the music” rather than try to read each note individually as fast as you can. The latter sets you up to fail. The former takes some years of experience but will be invaluable in your ability to sing choral music and develop good pitch.

7. **“When learning a new piece of music during rehearsal, sing lightly to be persuaded by a neighbor to sing the correct note.”** This reinforces the idea of listening to those around you [cited in #3 above].

8. **“When I tell you “page 6, 2, 3”,** that means we will start on page 6, second system, 3rd measure and normally with a pickup note just before that measure.”

9. **“Are you worth \$20 to listen to when you sing?** Let’s be honest. Most of you are not. A few of you out there are worth \$20 to hear. And you know who you are. But all of you when you sing together as group (clearly identifiable choral sectional sounds) can be worth the price of admission to our concerts.”

10. **“Watch me. I’m just not up here to wave my arms around. I actually have a masters’ degree in conducting. So why don’t we use the skill I’ve been trained in?”**

Bob wants you to hold your sheet music high so you glance at the music and at him almost simultaneously. As we approach a concert performance, he wants you to get your heads out of the music and sing. In some cases, he will want certain sections completely memorized (introduction, difficult passages especially related to rhythm, tricky lyrics, endings, or an entire composition). Often he will cue us as one section enters or leaves a movement. He wants us to respond based on his body language and visual cues not have our heads buried in our music. He may single an individual out by name such as “Ted, you’re not looking at me!”

11. **“Sing like you are really enjoying singing even if you are not.”** I can’t tell you how many times he has stressed the need to get energized and look like you are enjoying choral music. “Look at your selves when you sing. Use a mirror and see for yourselves if you are enjoying it. I’m seeing lots of serious faces with heads buried in their sheet music.” Note: This may seem easy to do or even fake but I can assure you it is not. In challenging sections, you are trying your best to produce a quality sound. Sometimes the trying restricts your vocal chords, affects your breathing, and results in a dismal output, which only causes you to try harder and make you look like you are not enjoying singing the work at hand. The solution of course, as Bob tells us, is to

practice at home, attend rehearsals, and build confidence. Then, you will look like you are enjoying singing choral music because you can.

12. Bob often employs “count-singing” a technique pioneered by his mentor Robert Shaw, conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Chorus and Orchestra. He uses this technique to master difficult sections of the score. Refer to the following links about count-singing:

Excerpts from The Robert Shaw Reader:

http://books.google.com/books?id=d7k4G0szY6sC&pg=PA82&lpg=PA82&dq=%22count+singing%22&source=web&ots=Ar5HFHMx2K&sig=peca9itkdlM_jYOl_oZ1x7QcDSzw

a link to The Robert Shaw Website:

<http://delasso.googlepages.com/>

To underscore the importance of being able to count Bob has said more than once, “The hardest thing for a singer to do is to count the rests.” He often mentions that singers with an instrumental background find counting the rests second nature whereas those who don’t find it very challenging.

13. I once asked Bob if he ever got nervous just before a concert was about to begin.

Here he is about to lead some 70 community singers along with a small chamber orchestra through a program lasting about 60 minutes of actual music (with an intermission, our concerts last about 80- 90 minutes.). He looked at me and said, “No, I have never been nervous before our concerts.” I told him I was just the opposite. I have always been a little edgy, excited, and “pumped” just before we start. Then when we begin singing, I calm down and get one with doing my part in producing the best choral sound we can. I know if I have really practiced and mastered the program to the best of my ability it will come out fine. Now, as a relatively new member of the chorale, I have to improve my ability to sing with greater confidence and expression as I see Bob in front of me leading us and enjoying every moment of our choral sound.

[back to top](#)

9/21/10