

Book Reviews

Andrew Crow, Editor

*The Conductor's Toolbox: Transforming
Yourself as Musician and Conductor*

Richard Sparks

GIA Publications, 2019

210 pages, \$17.95, softcover

ISBN: 978-1-62277-358-9

Neither academic treatise, nor conducting technique textbook, *The Conductor's Toolbox* provides an informal summation of wisdom accumulated by Richard Sparks over decades of teaching and conducting. Sparks includes his thoughts on excellence in other disciplines as gathered from those fields, and offers methods for incorporating those lessons into our choral rehearsals. Drawing on relevant ideas from athletics to arts, Sparks identifies the commonalities that successful conductors have with world-class coaches, and draws parallels between how coaches and conductors achieve success in their respective fields. Sparks mentions John Wooden frequently, the basketball coach who won ten national titles during twelve years at UCLA; he also references several other leadership teachers, such as Daniel Coyle and Don Lemov, in what amounts to an eight-page annotated bibliography at the end of the book.

In thirty-six short chapters with a foreword by Rodney Eichenberger (Sparks's undergraduate professor), Sparks recommends and discusses additional readings from within and outside musical fields. In an extended analogy, athletic drills are equated with vocal warm-ups for the purpose of fixing specific passages; scrimmages are running through an entire piece or section;

games are concerts. Wooden and Sparks advocate for increasing the productivity of our practices (rehearsals) by spending more time on drills rather than scrimmages, wherein only one player has the ball.

Sparks writes, "this book is for the young conductor starting out who wants to build their craft with as solid a foundation as possible. It is also for the experienced conductor who...wonders how to move to the next level or to reenergize or grow" (19). Accordingly, Sparks often has separate recommendations for the young and the experienced conductor at the end of each chapter. (We must assume that Sparks intends "young" to imply a "new" conductor, though the terms do not necessarily correspond.)

The book is replete with suggestions about how to improve one's own teaching: "Steal without apology" (35). "Your rehearsal goals for each day should include a manageable and measurable objective that is made ahead of time" (179). It's OK to fail, because that is how we learn to succeed. Get students to concentrate on their individual improvement (39). Foster the attitude that "one person's success is everyone's success" (82) so students take responsibility for the ensemble's collective growth. Frame solutions positively, meaning instead of concentrating on the error, fix problems by highlighting the desired goal.

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The impetus for writing this book stems in part from Sparks' admirable desire for perpetual self-improvement.

Mathematicians speak of the variety of proofs of a theorem, all of which are correct...but some proofs are more "elegant" than others. In the same way, there are myriad paths to the same goal in rehearsal, but some paths will move more smoothly and efficiently to that goal—dare I say, more "elegantly" as well (163).

His goal of leading "elegant" rehearsals culminating in spectacular concerts has been evident throughout his career, and this book reveals things we can all do to improve our own game. Sparks readily admits that not every suggestion from the book will apply to every conductor: "As with any toolbox, you may not need all of the tools within it, or at least not at this particular time" (18). But it's likely that any conductor could learn something from reading the book.

Readers familiar with Sparks's blog, which has been active since 2007, may recognize that some chapters of this book started out as blog posts. Through *The Conductor's Toolbox*, Sparks has provided a wealth of knowledge and wisdom for the benefit of our profession. It is not a college textbook; rather it is recommended summer reading. Alternatively, you might read one short chapter each day before checking the email, or over lunch. Far from a heady lecture, the conversational character of Sparks's writing is revitalizing; reading this book is like having coffee with a trusted mentor and friend. With its emphasis on self-evaluation and lifelong learning, this recent GIA publication is recommended for conductors who strive to continually improve their craft—hopefully that is each of us!

—*Vaughn Roste*

*Emotion in Choral Singing: Reading
Between the Notes*

Jameson Marvin, Foreword by Simon Carrington

GIA Publications, 2019

297 pages, \$24.95, softcover

ISBN: 978-1-62277-286-5

Traversing an immense range of subjects, conductor Jameson Marvin strives to reveal the emotional content of a choral composition beneath the surface of the printed score, and guide the conductor's translation of that content into performance. The book's overarching focus is identifying vehicles for emotional connection that lead to transcendent performances. Jameson Marvin asserts that "achieving inspired rehearsing and performing... is realized through a conductor's understanding of, and connection to the emotional vocabulary of the composer, and the process is completed by the conductor's musicianship and musicality that offers this realization to the choir" (182). Insights from Marvin's decades of experience as the Director of Choral Activities at Harvard and as conductor of the Radcliffe Collegium Musicum, Harvard Glee Club, and Radcliffe Choral Society guide his investigation of how such inspired conducting can be achieved. The approaches and perspectives advocated by Marvin aim to help conductors overcome an excessive focus on notation that leads to performances that are simply reproductions of harmonies, rhythms, and pitches.

Marvin divides his book into three major sections: Emotions and Symbols, The Core, and Special Topics. In Part I, he touches on the historical evolution of singing in the Western style as well as the conductor's approach to choosing and studying repertoire. He also gives advice on musical nuance, gesture, and interpretation. Part II relates to practical issues of rehearsal technique such as intonation, learning stages, and standing

formations. Marvin also recommends strategies for developing a mental-aural image of a composition and informing expressive choices based on structural elements. Finally, in Part III, Marvin addresses more specific concerns including word painting, Renaissance choral music, polyphonic music, and the “rich vocabulary of meaning” (173) of both harmonic and melodic intervals. Throughout his text, but particularly in this section, Marvin strongly advocates for the teaching and performance of polyphonic works which, he notes, have declined in frequency of performance. Moreover, Marvin firmly believes that large or inexperienced choirs can perform Renaissance music well, and this practice of singing polyphony is vital to choral education because it “shapes and challenges the musicianship of singers” (164).

Extensive appendices present repertoire lists from the Harvard Glee Club and Radcliffe Choral Society, valuable resources on their own. Another provides in-depth studies of several short scores that serve as clear examples of how Marvin himself prepares to interpret the composer’s intentions. These detailed guides cover a broad historical spectrum, including Schütz’s *Selig sind die Toten*, Bach’s *Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden*, Mozart’s *Ave verum Corpus*, Brahms’s *Warum ist das Licht gegeben?*, and Britten’s *The Evening Primrose*. Palestrina’s *Sicut cervus desiderat* provides the basis, elsewhere, for a discussion of word painting. Finally, the appendices contain diagrams describing moods that may be suggested by various chord progressions and voicings. Although these assertions may be controversial and dependent on context, they demonstrate Marvin’s belief that every musical choice by the composer is an opportunity for expressivity.

At first, the range of topics covered in this book seems far too vast to be treated with any depth, but Marvin writes with clarity and concision. Some readers may wish for more detailed treatment of

some assertions, but *Emotion in Choral Singing* serves more as a handbook than an exhaustive guide. Each subject explored connects to the author’s larger goal of building choral expressivity, and Marvin’s text gives a fresh perspective to conductors of all levels of experience. As Simon Carrington states in the preface, “We all need constant reminders to consider what nuances our choirs can apply to clarify the composer’s thinking” (16). Indeed, Marvin’s enthusiasm and dedication radiate inspiration for conductors of any level.

—Luke Duroc-Danner

The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy
Frank Abrahams and Paul D. Head, editors
Oxford University Press, 2017
545 pages, \$175, hardcover
ISBN: 978-0-19937-336-9

This addition to the Oxford Handbook series, published in 2017, includes twenty-seven commissioned chapters on the topic of choral pedagogy, divided into two parts, Theory and Practice. Part one is in three sections: Challenging Traditional Paradigms, Construction of Identity and Meaning, and World Perspectives. Among the most valuable chapters in this first section are Frank Abrahams’s overview of critical pedagogy, Nana Wolfe-Hill’s overview of feminist pedagogy, and Liz Garnett’s meaty essay on various theories of identity construction in relation to choirs. Garnett provides directors with a framework to challenge “implicit cultural hierarchies.” Particularly welcomed is Mollie Spector Stone’s article, “Striving for Authenticity in Learning and Teaching Black South African Choral Music,” a detailed dive into specific teaching methods and resources for a discrete choral culture.

The second half of the book, titled “Practice,” also divides into three sections: Repertoire as Pedagogy, Teaching and Conducting Diverse Populations, and Choral Pedagogy and the Voice. Mary Goetze’s “Repertoire as Pedagogy: Music of Diverse Cultures” stands out with particular excellence as she outlines her direction of the Indiana University International Vocal Ensemble and her specific rehearsal methods for creating authentic and inspiring choral performances from a wide variety of cultures. As a practical guide for other directors to emulate, this chapter alone makes the book worthwhile. Other terrific contributions include J. Donald Dumpson’s inviting and practical article on “Black Gospel Choral Music: Identity, Race, Religion, and Community,” complete with valuable resources and lists at the end of the chapter; Richard Bjella’s charming and whimsical discussion of programming; and Deborah Bradley’s forthright exploration of “The Inclusion Conundrum and Community Children’s Choirs in Canada.”

This anthology also highlights some of the troubling issues facing the field of choral music. The chapter titled “Choral Pedagogy and the Construction of Identity: Boys” is followed by a chapter called “Choral Pedagogy and the Construction of Identity: Girls.” This woefully-outdated gender dichotomy ignores a significant population of genderqueer choral musicians. The inclusion of Charles Beale’s thoughtful essay on LGBTQ choral pedagogy later in the book, and his discussion of the experiences of transgender singers, does not erase the omission. An entire chapter about transgender singers would have been helpful and welcome. Moreover, the binary contrast between “Boys” and “Girls” was not necessary since the two chapters are not remotely parallel. The former is a useful exploration of the male adolescent voice; the latter, a cultural overview of the recent introduction of girls’ choirs at various cathedrals in the UK. Among several lacunae, the book lacks any discussion

of the female adolescent voice change, although at least two separate chapters address the male adolescent voice change.

In the preface the editors write, “Today’s young conductor can hardly comprehend the notion of multi-cultural music, but instead, has come to expect an intermingling of musical tradition... the idea of distinct genres and ethnicities has large [sic] disappeared” (6). Not everyone will agree that intermingling cultures erases distinct ethnicities or genres, and this statement may explain why the book feels unbalanced. The authors do not explicitly state whether or not they are aiming for a global view; the perspective certainly seems firmly rooted in American and British traditions. The section called “World Perspectives” includes chapters about choral communities and repertoire from Brazil and South Africa, as well as ideas for programming global choral music in general, but there is an outsized emphasis on the western canon. In the last chapter of the book, “Vocal Pedagogy in the Choral Rehearsal”—oddly, the *only* chapter in the section “Choral Pedagogy and the Voice”—Duane Cottrell writes that “the fundamental concepts of a well-produced tone have remained largely unchanged through time...an ideal tone quality which throughout the historical literature has been called *chiaroscuro*” (491). We find no disclaimer that Cottrell is writing of European historical literature, and that this ideal tone quality pertains to repertory from the western canon. One might argue that readers will assume this frame of reference, but therein lies the problem. In their earlier chapters, Bradley and Garnett address the troubling fact that the choral sound of western Europe is frequently framed as both “the default” and “the most healthy.” So why, then, end the book with an assumption that an ideal western European vocal production and tone color interests the reader most? Rather than ending up with such an unbalanced anthology (there is no discussion of any choral tradition in Asia, from Russia to Japan, and yet three

separate chapters discuss British choral traditions and pedagogy) it might have been better to divide the book into two volumes: one based on choral pedagogy for the western canon, and a global volume that addressed a variety of tone production, repertoires, and pedagogical methods from around the world.

This book is a valuable addition to any library, containing a number of chapters that are true gems. At the same time, on a structural level

The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy mirrors the difficulty many choral conductors face in their daily lives; despite good intentions, a collection of individual choices ends up reproducing an implicit cultural hierarchy.

—*Allegra Martin*