



# EFFECTIVE CONDUCTING IN THE CHORAL CLASSROOM

AN INTERVIEW WITH RODNEY EICHENBERGER

ADAM CON

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**Con:** Rod, recently there has been a great deal of interest in the subject of mirror neurons. Your conducting DVD “What They See Is What You Get” and your approach to choral conducting have obvious connections to this new focus in neuroscience.

**Eichenberger:** Decades before I heard the term “mirror neurons,” I was absolutely convinced that a singer’s posture, dynamics, pitch, and tone were a mirror of the conductor’s stance, facial affect, and gestural language. Back in the seventies I actually titled an interest session at a conference something like “The Choir: The Conductor’s Mirror.” Notwithstanding the controversial scientific discussion concerning Dr. Ramachandran’s and other neuroscientists’ mirror neuron theory, there is little question that humans take nonverbal cues from one another. For example, if one sees a group standing on a New York City sidewalk and gazing up, it is not easy to pass by without checking to see if there is something up there of real interest.

Whatever we call it, the phenomenon that encourages me to yawn when someone close to me yawns has been the central concept that has driven my pedagogical approach to conducting. All of this led me to create my first DVD, “What They See Is What You Get,” and the second one, “Enhancing Musicality through Movement.” The former demonstrates the natural response of singers to a conductor’s posture and gestures, which is directly related to the concept of mirror neurons. The latter demonstrates how one could use singer movement to beautify singing. Quite possibly the connection between conductor and singer establishes this framework for an effective nonverbal communication network.



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**Con:** How does your approach to conducting differ from the way you were taught?

**Eichenberger:** I grew up with a conducting pedagogy that introduced “technique” before sound! First, one learned the conducting patterns, which were usually diagrammed. In 4/4 time there was a point on beat one and loops on beats two, three, and four. Sometimes students were asked to draw the pattern on the chalkboard repeatedly, despite the fact that no piece of music is very interesting if measure after measure sounds the same. Little emphasis was given to body language as it related to choral tone, pitch, rhythmic accuracy, and all that makes music really exciting.

These things were usually talked about as opposed to being demonstrated through gestures! Early lessons often consisted of conducting recorded performances where there is no possibility of the student conductor affecting the performers. The conducting class was so large at St. Olaf that I only remember conducting twice, and in my student teaching I was given only one opportunity to conduct a rehearsal. In the early years of my career, I learned most of my conducting in an attempt to rid myself of frustration.

**Con:** What was the pivotal experience that sparked you to seek a different approach?

**Eichenberger:** I was added to the faculty as a lecturer at the end of my first year of doctoral study at the University of Washington in 1963. Five years later, while still an assistant professor, I found myself in charge of a doctoral program. I had no reputation as a teacher of conducting, but the UW program was the only doctorate in choral conducting west of the University of Colorado or north of Stanford. Even the program at the University of Southern California

was a doctorate in church music. Among my first students were Bruce Browne, Dick Clark, Larry Marsh, and Kirby Shaw, all of whom enjoyed very successful careers. I am certain they did not come to study with me but rather to get a degree at the most conveniently located university. Thus, it was not possible for me to follow the old practice of “This is how you do it!” I had to seek the answer to “Why do you do it?” and “What is the effect?” It was early in my career as a teacher of undergraduate conducting that I noted that the choir sounded different with each of the conductors. I needed to discover why this happened.

**Con:** Nonverbal communication has been at the core of your conducting philosophy. What led you to this significant discovery?

**Eichenberger:** Feeling that the teaching of conducting must include much more than time beating techniques, I began a long study of body language and brain research. Such important authorities as Charles Darwin, Paul Ekman, Ray L. Birdwhistell, and Albert Mehrabian convinced me that body language and tone of voice were significant factors in the believability of words. Both Birdwhistell and Mehrabian had conducted sufficient research projects, concluding that in face-to-face communication, the nonverbal had more than a 65 percent impact on the believability of the verbal. It became obvious that facial affect, gesture, and paralinguistics could make the same words either positive or negative.

I noted that the nonverbal and the emphasis on words completely altered the meaning of a phrase. Saying, “Altos, THAT was BEAUTIFUL!” with hands up in front and close to the body is entirely different than, “Altos, that was BEAUTIFUL?” with hands tossing outward at shoulder height. It appeared to me that the fewer words spoken and the more that facial affect, posture, and gestural

language coincided with musical intent, the greater the achievement would be in rehearsal. It was obvious, for example, that a large gesture never achieved the kind of *pianissimo* that a small one elicited.

**Con:** I assume that the age old adage “Actions speak louder than words” also had an impact.

**Eichenberger:** It certainly did. In performance, conducting is a wordless exercise. It occurred to me that the more meaningful my gestural language, the less words were needed in rehearsal and the more meaningful my gestural language would be in concert. Unless the conductor has a magical way with words, the attention of the choir quickly diminishes after a sentence or two. Few words, regular eye contact, and a gestural language that shows its meaning has always worked better for me. I try to limit speech to no more than 5 percent of the rehearsal.

Since I had come to be confident that gestural language is so powerful, I was interested in finding gestures that seemed to have universal meaning. I searched for iconic gestures that look like their meaning, avoiding emblems that have significant meaning to individual groups. If one puts one’s hand up and makes a circle with the thumb and first finger, it means “okay” in the United States, but it is a vulgar gesture in Brazil. It is the sign of the asp in some North African countries, suggesting hatred, and it means zero in others. The gestures that I was interested in identifying have meaning in ordinary life.

If carrying a large box, one would put the hands on both sides and lift straight up. Using that gesture gets a wonderful *forte*. With hands in the position of hugging, someone gets a warm sound. Reaching down as if picking up a light object gets a nice *pianissimo*. Bouncing away from a beat gets an accent. Many

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gestures are used to clarify the meaning of words, and when used without words, such as gestures for large and small, they probably ignite the motor mirror neurons.

**Con:** What were some of the more important things you discovered that contributed to your conducting philosophy?

**Eichenberger:** I was interested in finding those gestures that conductors habitually use that send mixed messages and may be the cause of intonation problems, sloppy attacks, etc. As I observed conductors in rehearsal “correcting” the choir when it appeared the conductor was sending confusing messages, I became interested in discerning what problems were conductor-induced rather than the fault of the singers. I began to investigate the things that seemed to interfere with what makes music wonderful. I noted that knees that bend at entrances and elsewhere encourages under-pitch singing. To prove this, all one need do is ask a choir to hold a chord and bend the knee several times and hear the wavering pitch. I discovered that looking down at the score on an entrance or the climax point in a phrase lowered the pitch, caused vowel decay, and weakened clarity and emphasis. If singers hold a chord and the conductor looks down and up again and down again, all those problems are easily identified. I noticed that the more frustrated conductors became, the more mixed messages they sent.

**Con:** What other influences have contributed to your understanding of the connection between what conductors do and how singers respond?

**Eichenberger:** Another important contribution to my developing interest in the effect of gesture on sound was my introduction to Dalcroze Eurhythmics.

I discovered that the movement that Émile Jacques Dalcroze (1865-1950) implemented in exercises did wonders for energizing singing. One of the most important elements of Dalcroze is that when singer movement improves rhythmic accuracy, intonation, and choral

tone, it is the singer who has improved them. This gives ownership to the choir members. I discovered that if I could get singers to use movement to improve sound, I could then add that movement to my conducting repertoire, and their memory bank would do the rest.

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When singers ignore a very small beat that suggested a piano entrance, all one has to do is ask them to mimic the small gesture and gently pick up the note and presto! The piano entrance is there. When singing in a 6/8 meter, if a passage gets “sing-songy” like a nursery rhyme, have choir members with a hand at their sides slowly lift the hand forward in a smooth arch while singing. The bumps are gone, and the passage becomes smoother. When I first asked singers to swing their arms or walk to the music, there was huge resistance.

That is no longer a problem for me, and I happily note that I rarely visit a choral rehearsal in which some singer movement is not employed. I encourage lots of singer movement in rehearsal, and Randy Stenson at St. Mary's International School in Tokyo has shown this works in performance. As a conductor in concert, I try to make certain the audience is drawn to the choir rather than to me.

“downbeat,” it sounds as if one is hitting the first word, but with “first beat,” it sounds as if one is lifting the first word. A conducting gesture that implies the lift of beat one in a measure tends to encourage a forward thrust of the music rather than an accent. Thus, gestures that imply an upward movement are very valuable conducting tools. Singers react in exactly the same way to these gestures everywhere I have conducted.

**Con:** You have conducted choirs and presented conducting workshops throughout the world. How did these experiences assist you in the development of your conducting pedagogy?

**Con:** As you noted earlier, many conductors are taught to conduct the pattern with a loop on the second and third beats in a 3/4 pattern or a loop on the second, third, and fourth beats in a 4/4 pattern. I have often seen you demonstrate the effect of using a pointed versus rounded ictus with those various beat patterns. Can you describe why this is an important concept?

**Eichenberger:** Yes, I have been fortunate to conduct and lead workshops in many parts of the world and have had a fifty-year professional relationship with conductors in Australia and New Zealand. I found that singers there responded as the singers in the United States do. When I had the opportunity to conduct singers who did not speak my language, I was delighted to see that Brazilian and Korean singers responded the same way to iconic gestural language even when they understood no English. In every language I have tested—and I propose that it is true in all languages—the word that means “up” is spoken at a higher pitch than the word for “down.”

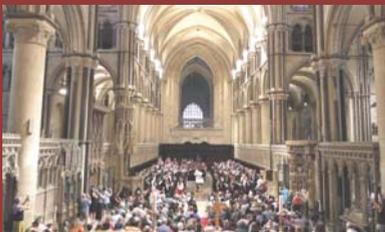
**Eichenberger:** Clarity of the ictus in conducting can eliminate a lot of rhythmic and phrasing problems. When conducting in 3/4 time, for example, conductors often have the habit of making beat two a loop so that the hand continues in the same direction after beat two occurs. If a dotted quarter and eighth comprise the first two notes, it seems that this not only muddies the definition of the tempo but also affects the ensuing eighth note. With the loop, the eighth note seems to attach to beat one. When the second beat is a clear V so that the direction of the release is up instead of out, the eighth note attaches to beat three and gives forward movement to the phrase. Another aspect is the importance of a smooth, even movement between beats and reserving the bounce away from the ictus for special effects.

If one points in the air when saying “up,” it is stronger and probably higher. Pointing to the floor while saying “down” strengthens that word. If one points to the ceiling while saying the word “down,” the pitch is often as high as if one said “up” and always higher than if pointing down. The “up” gesture is a very strong, positive gesture. Note that virtually all positive words are spoken at a higher pitch than negative ones. For example: glad/sad, win/lose, pass/fail, beautiful/ugly.

If one says “downbeat,” observe the lowered pitch of the word “down.” In contrast, if one says “first beat,” the first word takes on a lifted quality. With

**Con:** Having studied with you, I have noticed that in conducting lessons you almost never draw attention to more

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than one or two details. Where do you begin?

**Eichenberger:** I found that addressing more than one or two issues simply leaves the student confused. A gesture from a quiet body is the most meaningful, and so I often begin with posture and eye contact. Wandering feet and poor eye contact are indications of frustration and lack of conviction, so I try to make certain the conductor is anchored with an absence of body tension. Some of the most prevalent postural habits that work against the conductor are bending knees, lifting the head with the intake of breath and dropping it at the ictus, and looking at the score on the preparatory beat. Stomping feet and pacing back and forth are signs of frustration and interfere with the clarity of hand gestures. All of these

tant to note that I never tell students that they are wrong. I simply ask them to try two different gestures, and if they hear a difference, they have added two more moves to their gestural vocabulary.

I try to get conductors to listen carefully to the rhythmic function of an individual note. Does it have a downbeat feeling? An away from the down beat? An off the down beat? Or an into the down beat character? Using the example of the dotted quarter and eighth, if the student is asked to conduct the three beats in the measure but has the choir sing only those two notes with a rest on beat three, the function of the eighth notes becomes clear. If the eighth note attaches to the dotted quarter note, it takes on an “off beat” quality; if it cries for a third beat, it takes on an “away” or “into” character. The character

wonderful Temple University Professor and Conductor of Philadelphia’s Singing City, would say to her students, “Look like the music!”

**Con:** Why do you emphasize that conductors should utilize the space between the belt and the clavicle?

**Eichenberger:** Adam, you are an expert in Tai Chi, which agrees with my philosophy that the power center plays a powerful role in healthy living. I know it plays an important part in support of tone. Since upward movement helps support tone and prevent vowel decay, it is important to consider the navel area as the power center and the neutral position for conducting gesture; this provides a wide spectrum of tone and dynamics. If one keeps a hand steady at the belt level and slowly lifts the other hand above it while singing an “ah,” the vowel will remain constant and pitch will be maintained. If the upper hand starts to fall, the vowel will turn to “uh,” and pitch will sag and intensity of tone will diminish. Conducting at the shoulder level negates many positive tonal possibilities. Since the power of the upward gesture is a key ingredient in beautiful singing, I promote the use of all the space from the belt up.

**Con:** I have heard some criticism that you teach your students to use too low a conducting gesture. Can you help shed some light on this topic?

**Eichenberger:** Yes, I am often accused of asking conducting students to conduct too low. But in reality, I am simply asking them not to avoid the belt area. Often conducting instructors suggest that the hands should be almost at shoulder level for the attention position. Giving the preparatory gesture at this level not only encourages clavicular breathing, but if the conductor continues to conduct at this level, it leads to vocal fatigue and ne-

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negatively affect pitch and tone quality. Of course, some students already have fine posture and eye contact, and so it is possible to deal with other important musical issues.

I find that most conductors do not use sagittal movement (to and from the body) as effectively as they could. A *pianissimo* gesture slightly above the navel and within a couple of inches from the body gets an entirely different sound than the same gesture eight to ten inches forward. A *fortissimo* ending has a much more grounded and warm sound with the hand coming straight up directly in front and close to the body than it does if the hand goes directly out a foot or so from the body. It is impor-

of beat two determines which of these exists.

I cannot over emphasize the importance of eye contact, pacing, and the elimination of unnecessary speech in achieving an on-task rehearsal. There has been ample research to prove that continuous eye contact is the most important ingredient in achieving on-task behavior in the rehearsal, and so I often simply take the score away from the student conductor to ensure eye contact. A conductor’s tall, Alexander-like stance with a total lack of tension encourages good posture and healthy vocal production. If the conductor looks like a singer, the chorus is more likely to perform freely. Elaine Browne, the

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gates a wide area of usable conducting space. I believe that the upward movement is powerful, and failure to use the full range from the power center to the shoulder takes away many possibilities. Both hands cupped in front of the body with palms down just above the navel gets an entirely different sound than with both hands cupped at shoulder level. When I demonstrate this in clinics, I have yet to have a choir sound the same with both of these positions.

**Con:** You always insist on a podium height that allows the singers to see you from at least the waist up. Why is this?

**Eichenberger:** Since I believe the entire body is the conducting gesture and that the area between the navel and the sternum is so important, it is essential that the conductor not have to conduct from the shoulder up in order to be seen. If one has to build a podium of sorts, it is important that singers see as much of the conductor as possible. With a choir singing a *pianissimo*, a hand hanging normally at the side, palm facing the leg, a simple slowly turned palm outward without lifting the hand will get a slight crescendo. If the hand quickly moves back to the original position, a subito-like decrescendo takes place. Hands directly in front and close to the body achieve a warmer sound than hands spread to the outside of the body and different yet if at the sternum level. It is important that the choir see all of these gestures.

**Con:** Why is the conductor's use of eye contact and modeling good singing posture an important component to achieving the best results in the choral rehearsal?

**Eichenberger:** There has been sufficient research to assure me that eye contact is one of the most important tools a conductor has. Beyond that, Paul Ekman's

extensive research into the universality of facial expressions demonstrates the importance of what accompanies eye contact. He has conclusive evidence that happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, anger, and disgust are shown facially in the same way in all societies. Note that of these six facial affects, only happiness is completely positive. Surprise might be, but sadness, anger, fear, and disgust are all negative.

Thus, facial affect can be a valuable tool for a conductor. The normal reaction is for the conductor's face to send a message of disapproval when a choir fails to meet expectations. I observe that conductors' facial affect and gestural language often mirror what they don't like in the rehearsal instead of mirroring what they want. Rather than giving that disapproving look and admonishing singers for being "flat," there is a more positive way to accomplish the correction. To encouragingly ask the singers to make upward and forward gestures until they succeed in singing accurately and then happily saying, "Ah, that's in tune!" tells them in a positive way that they were "flat" but have now corrected the problem.

**Con:** How would you suggest a conductor keep a positive atmosphere alive in the choral rehearsal when issues such as poor intonation and wrong notes can easily cause frustration?

**Eichenberger:** I was taught to first listen for mistakes in rehearsal and go immediately to correct them, which easily results in a disapproving facial affect and negative verbalization. This often means stopping the choir over and over even in first readings. I now let the choir sing all the way through a piece if there is any semblance of order. While I clearly hear the mistakes, in early readings I have begun to listen for things that go well and then give the singers a chance

to correct themselves before I do. I find that a positive facial expression that accompanies, "Let's sing that again!" far exceeds the look that usually accompanies, "Sopranos...page 2."

Rarely does a choir that has any experience with the printed musical page fail to correct a number of things missed in the first reading if given a second chance. On successive rehearsals, as more and more issues are solved by using the gestural language and then complimenting the improvement, problems are solved in a positive manner. It is an important rule for me to never say anything to the singer that I would find offensive if spoken to me. I want the very best from the choir, but I believe in kindness in the rehearsal. No one enjoys being told they are wrong. Being complimented for solving a problem is encouraging and stimulating.

**Con:** What is your feeling concerning the use of the baton and left-handed conducting?

**Eichenberger:** I am quite certain that no one can listen to a recording of an orchestra or choir and determine if the conductor is right- or left-handed or with or without a baton. Moreover, all one need do is put a left hand out and have the choir sing and then change to the right hand. There is usually a difference and is proof that each hand has a unique effect, and each can be used as a conducting tool to affect the sound of the choir.

I do believe that the positioning of the hand makes a difference. The conducting hand in front of the body with palm down where a pencil can rest easily across the wrist gets a warmer sound than if the hand is cocked and showing a bit of the heel of the hand. The singer's soft palate will react positively to the conductor's uncocked hand position with or without a baton. Again, I would think that this directly relates to the

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concept of mirror neurons.

**Con:** What is your approach to beginning conducting lessons?

**Eichenberger:** With beginning conductors, I start with ownership. Asking students to teach a camp song by rote with iconic motions puts them completely in charge of the performance. They need to sing for us, give us a pitch, set a tempo, keep the beat, and control all aspects of the performance. After successfully teaching the song, I make certain the class applauds; the student, having received positive support, sits down with no instructional corrections. Conductors who sing with their choirs do not really hear their choirs as well as they should, and asking students on the following class day to lead the camp song without singing establishes one of the most important elements in conducting—*listening*.

The next assignment is to take away the iconic movement that was used when teaching the camp song. If the student has problems starting the piece without the pictorial gesture, I ask them to use the iconic gesture they used when they first taught the song. Suppose, for example, they taught “Do your ears hang low.” On the first singing, the student took a breath as the hand went to the ear on the anacrusis words “Do your” and got to the ear on “ears.” That allows a nice opportunity to talk about the use of the breath and the gestural movement indicating the preparatory beat. Once students start the song without the iconic gesture, I ask them to make a dynamic change without verbally instructing the choir. In accomplishing this, students will always go from large to small or small to large gestures.

Should these gestures be extreme and silly, by simply asking them to be more subtle, another important gestural activity connected to sound takes place. If this is effective, perhaps asking them

to conduct an *accelerando* or *retard* is in order. Students have only been asked to make musical decisions, and therefore they have been totally in charge of the performance and cannot be wrong! This sequence of activities transforms

the student into an emerging conductor. They own the piece, they own the dynamics, they listen, they modify. Note that these short exercises allow every student in the average conducting class to be on the podium every day or per-

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haps twice if the class is small.

I have discovered that the absence of negativity in these early lessons encourages students to want to get to the podium. Invariably, students soon ask, "What if I wanted...?" which maintains their ownership of the work and provides an opportunity for instruction at their request. I never ask a question that requires them to guess what answer will please me. My experience has been that some students already use the traditional conducting pattern, and while some don't, that is no problem at this stage. They show us the tempo by conducting in their own version of a "pattern." It is important to me that the student be comfortable on the podium before requiring the traditional conducting pattern.

**Con:** When do your students begin to conduct standard choral repertoire?

**Eichenberger:** That is next, at least by the third or fourth lesson. In early lessons, I ask students to conduct a rather short piece of music they know well and have memorized. The class has the score in hand, and while I prefer that the

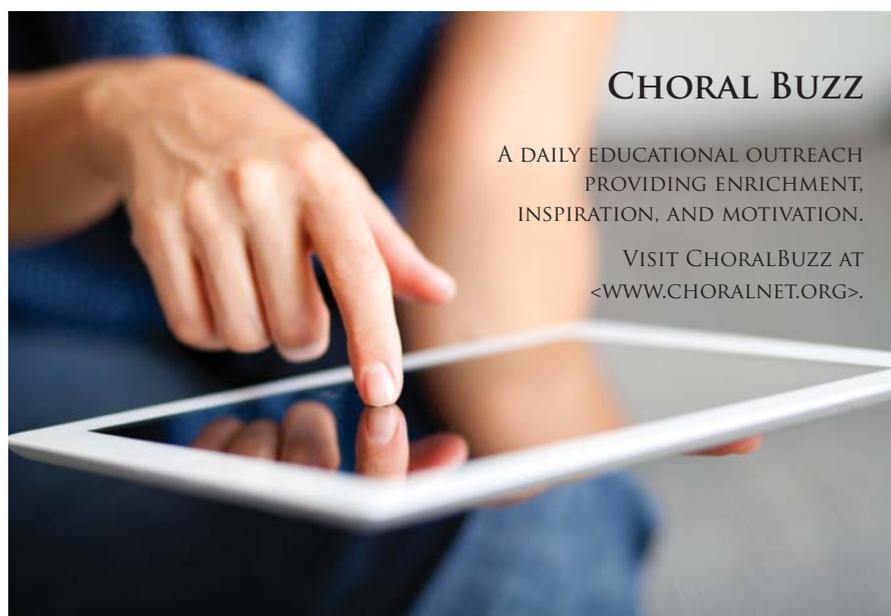
music selected be in unison, if a larger score is chosen, I have everyone sing the melody so that the conductor has only one line with which to be concerned. I encourage the student conductor to select a work that begins on the first beat of a measure. This provides a great opportunity to introduce elements of the conducting pattern.

I tell the student who is having trouble starting the choir that it is traditional when a work begins on beat one to give the preparatory beat with the hand outside the body so that the starting note will be shown in front of the body and to take a breath with that preparatory gesture. If the class is small, I continue with unison and two-part music. With large classes by the end of the semester, more advanced literature is introduced. It is important that students are always involved with the sound in front of them rather than imagining that there are basses or altos in the room. Questions such as, "What if you want a faster tempo?", "How would you get a quieter first phrase?", or "Suppose you wanted a crescendo here?" still keeps the student in control.

**Con:** I would be remiss if I did not ask one last question, and I do so with great respect. Why, at the age of 84, instead of devoting all your time to fulfilling a bucket list, have you chosen to maintain a very active professional life?

**Eichenberger:** Part of my bucket list is to continue my professional life as long as I can. I feel very fortunate to have enjoyed good health. In the past forty years, I have not missed an engagement or day of work because of illness... Knock on wood. I don't take lightly that this has allowed me to be actively involved in my chosen profession—guest conducting, leading workshops and clinics, and teaching conducting. The two summer choral conducting workshops sponsored by George Fox University and annually held in Alexandria, Virginia, and Cannon Beach, Oregon, have particular significance for me in that a number of people attend year after year, requiring me to be a continuing student.

Investigating new ideas such as mirror neuron concepts and reading through thousands of newly published octavos for choirs of all ages and abilities in order to select a packet for these workshops helps me to think forward instead of dwelling on the past. I have never auditioned conductors for these workshops, because I feel it is important to work with conductors at all levels of development. The first twenty people who register for the master class receive instruction. Along with a number of experienced high school and church choir conductors, last summer's master class included a high school student, several beginners, and a university professor. I do all I can to maintain a positive and encouraging atmosphere so that learning the art of conducting is nurtured and celebrated. That so many young, talented musicians are excited about this profession brings me great joy and assures me that choral music will continue to be alive and healthy in this county. 



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