

LEARNING for LIFE: LIFE:

A CONDUCTING MASTERCLASS

Conducting programs offer podium time, repertoire, relationships, real-world skills, and renewal – a recipe for continued professional growth

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY KAREN DEANS

“Cellists hang out with the other cellists, singers hang out with other singers, but conductors – who do we hang out with?” Stephen Czarkowski and 31 other conductors hung out together for four days last May to share with each other, explore some of the great works in the choral-orchestral repertoire, and learn from some of the nation’s finest choral conductors.

Sixteen conducting fellows, twelve associates, and five auditors attended Chorus America’s Choral-Orchestral Conducting Masterclass, hosted by The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. They were a varied group. Some had considerable experience as assistant conductors of large orchestras; others conducted church choirs or children’s choruses, or were in what one called “the wilderness period” between graduate school and full employment. One was a cellist exploring a career in conducting after suffering a hand

injury, one had spent 20 years in arts management before turning to conducting. One traveled from Europe to attend the class. In all, they weren’t so much a group of people collectively making a stop along a common path as people meeting at a point where their many paths converged.

Conducting fellows and associates at the Masterclass had private conducting lessons and group classes. As the program progressed, fellows conducted first the 24-voice Philadelphia Singers, then the Mannes College of Music Orchestra. On the last day they conducted the combined chorus and orchestra, under the tutelage of Otto-Werner Mueller, head of the conducting department of The Curtis Institute of Music, and Christoph Eschenbach, music director of The Philadelphia Orchestra.

Conducting fellow Octavio Más-Arocas, who is assistant conductor of the National Symphony of Spain, saw the Masterclass as “a really great opportunity to work with a fine orchestra and chorus and work with some of the very best teachers. And conducting this repertoire is an opportunity you don’t usually get as a young conductor. It’s one of my greatest dreams.”

It also was, as conducting associate Gary Keating said, “more intense than anything I’ve ever done.”



“If you clean up your conducting, everything is better. It doesn’t matter if you’re working with a children’s choir or any other choir. The basic conducting skills are the same.”

– Joy Ondra Hirokawa,
conducting associate



From top: Conducting fellows Brad Smith, Kirill Dyachkov, and members of The Philadelphia Singers.



Duain Wolfe, Christoph Eschenbach, and David Hayes, Conducting Masterclass coaches.

No Drive-By Repertoire

Co-organizers Duain Wolfe and David Hayes wanted the four days to be more than a series of disconnected lessons or an onslaught of repertoire. They focused study on excerpts from four choral-orchestral works by Ludwig van Beethoven – *Missa Solemnis*, *Mass in C*, *Elegische Gesang*, and *Christus am Ölberge*. As Hayes said, “I’ve been to workshops that offer a drive-by repertoire” of dozens of pieces in just a few days. The narrow focus on Beethoven gave participants the opportunity to explore the pieces in depth while developing conducting skills that would extend to other works.

Conducting fellow Franck Chastrusse traveled to the Masterclass from France in part because of its “precise purpose” – the relationship between orchestra and chorus. And the progression from individual lessons and group classes to conducting the chorus and orchestra turned the four days into what Hayes called “an educational process.”

But at the same time, in order to meet the needs of the participants, organizers maintained “the flexibility to create the Masterclass as we go,” said Wolfe. Instructors addressed concerns as they arose and helped the participants, with their varied skills and backgrounds, focus on areas of interest.

Why Conductors Need Ongoing Professional Development

Workshop-type experiences might be more important for conductors than for any other musicians. Regardless of the quality of their academic training, Masterclass participants felt they needed to continue learning – to improve orchestral skills if their focus was choruses, and choral skills if their focus was orchestras, and particularly to gain podium time conducting major choral-orchestral

works. Conducting associate Joy Ondra Hirokawa said, “It’s hard to get that kind of podium time. It’s a chicken-and-egg thing. You have to

try your wings in order to get the confidence and experience. But who’s going to hire an inexperienced conductor who has the risk of not doing well?”

The Masterclass also presented an opportunity for conductors to renew themselves. As conducting fellow Brad Smith said, “After you leave college, it’s hard to find the time and opportunities to keep growing professionally and artistically. Dealing with the day-to-day things like moving chairs grinds you down. You get comfortable with your own players. Even for performances I don’t get nervous. But here that’s not the case. You’re on display and you have to perform under pressure.”

It was also a place to gain the perspec-

tives of many other conductors. The participants shared what Hirokawa called a “very supportive environment,” and had the opportunity to be instructed not by just one or two accomplished conductors, but several. “It’s useful to learn from another conductor’s experience,” said associate Gary Keating. “We all have points we stress. Working with a variety of conductors broadens our perspective and gives us other ways to look at and interpret music.”

The participants generally saw workshop experiences as a good complement to their academic experiences, rather than a place to make up for failures on the part of their universities. Several felt that, although their college training had given them a solid background, there simply wasn’t enough time for them to get all of the needed orchestral and choral podium experiences during their student years.

The one area several participants mentioned as lacking in their academic experience was the management side of being a conductor. Czarkowski said, “A problem with college programs is that they don’t tell you enough about the world as it is – things like dealing with management, how to present a program, how to talk with a donor. Or with how to put on a pops concert or a concert for fourth- to sixth-graders.” ►



Christoph Eschenbach coaches Cara Suzanne Tasher.

Conducting fellow Robert Boardman also noted a lack in academic training of preparation for the economic realities of maintaining a music group. "At the university, if nobody comes to a concert, we still have a concert," said Boardman.

Lessons Learned

On one level, what participants took from the Masterclass varied as much as their backgrounds. A sampling of some of the specific tips they picked up:

- "You can't treat the chorus like an orchestra. You can't have them go over and over a difficult passage. I didn't know about how useful it is to have them speak the text or just sing it softly."
- "Separate movement of the two hands so you can use them to convey two pieces of information – to two different instruments, or to the chorus and orchestra, for instance."
- "You have to breathe. Breathing for a chorus is essential."
- "We have to have the courage to be small [in conducting movements]. A small gesture can be more powerful than a big gesture, even if you're conducting a group of 200. It's easy to understand, but difficult to do."
- "The relationship with a chorus is different than with an orchestra. It's closer, friendlier."
- "At the moment of the beat, you have no power. You influence what the musicians will do in the preparation, the trajectory of the beat."

Other important lessons were universal. The Masterclass stressed the need for careful score study. Conducting fellow Cara Tasher noted how teachers "reinforced the need to have the score completely under your belt. That determines how fast your mind can put the music into the gesture." Fellow Arlette Cardenes added, "As a player, you don't think about what's going on around you. But as a conductor you have to have a complete understanding of what you want and how to interpret that."

Teachers underscored the need for participants simply to clean up their conducting. Hirokawa, whose duties include conducting a children's choir, said, "If you clean up your conducting, make it better, everything is better. It doesn't matter if you're working with a children's choir or any other choir. The basic conducting skills are the same."

"The motto of this Masterclass could be 'How you look is how they'll sound,'" said Czarkowski. "What breath? What gesture? That's how you create the music."

Perhaps what was most important about the Masterclass was the passing of a great conducting legacy from one generation to another. One participant said he was thrilled when private coach Amy Kaiser shared with participants a copy of the score to the Gloria from the *Missa Solemnis* that had Robert Shaw's handwritten notes on it. But the point of the Masterclass was not just to hand down a legacy, but to give conductors skills that will allow them to create their own legacy. As Chastrusse said, "We have to be ourselves. When you get a driver's license, you still have to learn your own way to drive. On the podium you have to find your own way." ■

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on Chorus America's upcoming
Conducting Masterclasses in 2007,
see pages 15 and 31 in this issue, or
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