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### Mentorship in Music Education: Youth Chorale as an Incubator for Young Conductors

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# Mentorship in Music Education: Youth Chorale as an Incubator for Young Conductors

## ABSTRACT

*Straddling the role of conductor-teacher can be a daunting task for young artists. Providing space to hone both musical and pedagogical skills can lead to transformative moments for young conductor-teachers. As someone who experienced this complementary space first-hand, I can attest to the sustainable effects on one's teaching and artistry. Moreover, coupled with the potential for merging the development of musical and pedagogical skills is the need for mentorship and modeling. In this article, I outline the ways in which a community youth chorale, the Westminster Conservatory Chorale, served as an incubator for young artists to practice balancing conducting and teaching skills, providing consistent mentorship for growth. I offer a personal reflection on the impact of Frank Abrahams's mentorship and modeling, and the ways in which learning to be a conductor-teacher currently manifests in my current work as a professional conductor.*

## Keywords

mentorship, music education, conducting, children's chorus

One important tenet of education is understanding that some lessons might not be learned immediately by those you teach; often, these lessons are like seeds that may bear fruit many years later. There are still times to this very day when my mind snaps back to a “teachable moment” with my first conducting teacher Dr. Frank Abrahams when I think, “Oh, *that's* what he was trying to teach and tell me.” Lessons from decades ago have sudden clarity and impact on my current conducting responsibilities. I credit my initial formative conducting experiences with the Westminster Conservatory Chorale, established by Dr. Abrahams, for developing the skills I needed for a career as a professional conductor. But looking back over the long list of equally successful musicians that served as conducting apprentices for the Westminster Conservatory Chorale, I'm also struck by the wide range of educators,

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conductors, and musicians that have all equally benefited from our time with the ensemble. While the skill sets for a high school orchestra director and professional conductor may overlap, they require vastly different approaches, and are even distinct from that of an elementary choir director and educator. Yet the instruction and experience gained working with this regional high school choir allowed musicians of varying interests to develop the skills necessary to be successful in a wide range of areas in music education and performance. By providing carefully structured podium experience with a focus on applying less traditional music education methods and pedagogies to the rehearsal process (Abrahams, 2009, 2017), Dr. Frank Abrahams created an environment that not only encouraged the artistic excellence of high school vocal students, but also a strong foundation of initial conducting and teaching experiences for the conducting apprentices.

### **WESTMINSTER CONSERVATORY CHORALE**

The Westminster Conservatory of Music is a community music school which served K-12 students in the region around Princeton in central New Jersey. Typical of community music schools, students can take a variety of instrumental or vocal lessons, and there are often multiple workshops and summer camps (Leglar & Smith, 2010). However, this community music school happened to be located on the campus of Westminster Choir College, one of the most famous music conservatories worldwide. Many of the professors at the college—including Dr. Abrahams—taught or ran programs at the Westminster Conservatory of Music. Westminster Choir College, one of very few dedicated choral/vocal colleges, performed regularly with world-class organizations like the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, New Jersey Symphony and others. The Music Education department at the college boasted a 100% placement rate for their students, and dozens of schools in the tri-state area have Westminster trained educators and musicians.

The Westminster Conservatory Chorale, founded by Dr. Abrahams, catered to high-school students far beyond the immediate vicinity of Princeton. Students from neighboring states like New York, Pennsylvania, and Delaware would drive upwards of an hour to attend the weekly rehearsals and performances of the Chorale. As an auditioned ensemble, the Chorale consisted of 40-60 talented high school students, many of whom were taking private lessons and considering careers in music.

The activities of the Chorale mimicked those of a professional chorus. With three or four major concert sets per year and additional special projects and events, the range of repertoire was vast with a heavy emphasis on contemporary music, with numerous commissions and world premieres. Discontent with the lack of Jewish holiday music (Abrahams, 2009), Dr. Abrahams commissioned numerous works for Chanukah, which led to a published Jewish Music Series by Transcontinental Publishing. Numerous recordings were made, collaborations with orchestras, dance companies, and the Chorale performed in venues throughout the tri-state area.

Assisting Dr. Abrahams in the musical preparation were four conducting apprentices, one for each of the major voice parts: soprano, alto, tenor and bass. The responsibilities of the conducting apprentices spanned all areas of the chorale, not only were apprentices responsible for warm-ups and sectionals, but the apprentices took turns preparing repertoire in rehearsal and conducting in performances. While ensembles are sometimes subjected to the inexperience of young conductors who are in need of their first conducting experiences, with Dr. Abrahams' Westminster Conservatory Chorale the apprentices were an integrated part of the artistic team led by Dr. Abrahams, working in tandem to enhance and enrich the activities of the Chorale (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2017). By investing in the apprentices, the Chorale served as an incubator for young conductors and educators of all levels and interests to develop their techniques and jump start the training process for these budding conductors.

## THE CATCH-22 OF LEARNING HOW TO BE A CONDUCTOR

The reflective commentary of conductors of yore are filled with fantastical tales that make the art of conducting seem mysterious and mystical. Arthur Nikisch's power over his orchestras was so great it was said his conducting mesmerized his players. Leonard Bernstein's charisma and infectious energy exuded the music, whether he used a baton, his hands, or on one famous occasion, crossed his arms and conducted with his eyebrows alone. Of all the individuals on stage for a performance, conductors are the only ones who don't even make a sound (or at least they're not supposed to); what is it that conductors are doing on the podium anyway? With lack of clarity on what a conductor does, what are we supposed to be teaching musicians interested in this art of waving one's hands?

At its very essence, conducting certainly focuses upon the physical gestures used to portray and unify the music being performed. Conducting masterclasses and workshops often solely center around the refinement and clarity of one's baton technique. The craft of conducting is essential to the success of a performance—poor conducting can certainly make performing more difficult for musicians and can certainly derail performances.

However, learning how to be an effective *conductor* is very different from learning the *art of conducting*. While the physical gestures on the podium are essential to a performance, equally or even more important is the preparation in rehearsal that leads up to the performance(s). In other words, being an effective conductor requires excellent baton technique *and* rehearsal technique. To be a conductor at any level requires the responsibility of leadership; whether working with elementary school band students or seasoned professionals, a conductor's job is to unify the musicians behind a singular artistic vision of the repertoire (Wis, 2007). It therefore goes to say that the most important job for a conductor is to be of greatest service to the musicians, in performance *and rehearsal*, to create the environment that allows them to perform at their best, and to connect each of them to the larger collective artistic goal. Hand waving

is important; but what is behind the hand waving is even more important. It's no wonder that conducting programs are graduate programs. Clarity of gesture to effectively depict musical ideas takes practice, developing the musicianship to generate those musical ideas portrayed through conducting will take a lifetime.

A catch-22 then arises in the field of conducting. Ensembles are reluctant to provide podium time to inexperienced conductors and conductors need podium time to gain experience. Dr. Abrahams used to state,

just like learning any instrument, people need time with that instrument. Waving your arms in front of a mirror is the equivalent to air playing a trumpet. You need musicians in front of you and responding to you to actually practice conducting...but its more than just conducting.

The structure of the Westminster Conservatory Chorale, however, directly addressed the predicament of lacking and yet requiring experience by incorporating undergraduate Music Education majors into the chorale program, conducting, and rehearsing the high school students (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2017; Orzolek, 2020).

## **REHEARSAL SPACE AS AN INCUBATOR FOR BEGINNING CONDUCTORS**

Dr. Abrahams structured the Westminster Conservatory Chorale to not only provide a rich environment for beginning conductors to prepare for the real world, but the structure of the program with the Chorale specifically created opportunities for young music directors to learn, while advancing the activities and scope of the Chorale for its singers. Instead of reluctantly giving podium time to inexperienced conductors, the structure of the Chorale built skills amongst conducting apprentices that, at the same time, helped develop the musical skills of the high school singers.

The primary focus of the apprenticeship was not just on baton/physical technique, but structuring efficient and effective rehearsals, combining skills both musical and pedagogical (Abramo, 2016). As all four conducting apprentices were Music Education majors at the college, the Chorale acted as a practicum ensemble to directly apply the strategies learned that week from the collegiate courses. And since Dr. Abrahams had structured the music education program to include broad experiences in numerous music education methods and philosophies, such as Dalcroze, Kodaly, Gordon, Orff, and more, the chorale provided the ample opportunity for the conducting apprentices to engage with the students in varied pedagogical ways, which also broaden the musical experiences of the students.

The Chorale's rehearsal space, unlike a typical children's chorus, community, or professional ensemble rehearsal was structured around classroom lesson plans and highlighting certain pedagogical elements is a critical distinction. As Dr. Abrahams challenged his conducting students to identify musical elements in the music and structure a rehearsal built around rehearsing and refining those elements, the rehearsal

process became not only a didactic journey, but one which moved beyond becoming a maestro or attaining best practices. With a clearer idea of the elemental musical ideas within a work, conducting gestures were clarified to reflect those musical ideas. Physical arm and hand motions influenced and were directly tied to the essence of a musical work. For instance, instead of coaching a conductor on the arm motions for a crescendo, Dr. Abrahams modeled discussions through questions on *what type* of crescendo is present in the music, and what types of gestures would best represent the shape of that crescendo (Allsup & Baxter, 2004; Bernard & Abramo, 2019).

### Practical Application

One work that greatly influenced me during my years as a conducting apprentice with the Westminster Conservatory Chorale was “Choose Something Like a Star,” the last SATB choral movement from *Frostiana*, by Randall Thompson (1959), a setting of various poems of Robert Frost: (1945)

*O Star (the fairest one in sight),  
We grant your loftiness the right  
To some obscurity of cloud --  
It will not do to say of night,  
Since dark is what brings out your light.  
Some mystery becomes the proud.  
But to be wholly taciturn  
In your reserve is not allowed.  
Say something to us we can learn  
By heart and when alone repeat.  
Say something! And it says "I burn."  
But say with what degree of heat.  
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.  
Use language we can comprehend.  
Tell us what elements you blend.  
It gives us strangely little aid,  
But does tell something in the end.  
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,  
Not even stooping from its sphere,  
It asks a little of us here.  
It asks of us a certain height,  
So when at times the mob is swayed  
To carry praise or blame too far,  
We may choose something like a star  
To stay our minds on and be staid.*

Every note in Thompson's setting of this Frost poem supports the central idea of the poem, that one should emulate the steady consistency of a star and not be overly affected by tumultuous whims swirling about. A soft steady G Major pulse from the piano opens the work while the sopranos repeat a floating octave leap on a D, gently representing the steady purity of the star. The altos, tenors and basses emerge from the texture, collectively building in dynamic and harmonic complexity as we continue to insist on answers from above. Unsatisfied and impatient with the response from the star, the chorus grows increasingly insistent, but to no avail. As the tensions dissipate towards the final third of the work, the harmonies relax, returning to the original opening chords, with the accompaniment ascending as if reaching up towards the heavens. That original note, sung in the beginning by the sopranos, ends the work, with the chorus resolving, both harmonically and spiritually, in calm and peace. Robert Frost, present at the premiere, was so moved that he immediately stood up at the end of "Choose Something Like a Star," asking it to be repeated.

A rehearsal process structured around treating the musical elements as focal points for educational instruction transforms the choral rehearsal in a way that gets to the very heart of what the composition is about. This didactic performance preparation is focused on the articulations, dynamic markings, and other musical notations in a way that questions *why* those markings are there in first place, focusing on how a deeper understanding of the work affects the musical interpretation and approach to the work.

Choruses worldwide work on ensemble consonants and correct enunciation of the text. American choruses work hard to try to counter the natural tendency of dropping consonants when singing in English, discuss the various treatments for singing "r" consonants and other glides in words, and rehearse other diction concerns during rehearsal. With a good performance, the text will be easily understood and natural, with the volume of consonants not out of proportion to each other within the word, phrase, or sentence.

However, with the Westminster Conservatory Chorale, a rehearsal of the text goes one step further, towards exploring the *dramatic intention* of the words and how that affects the dynamics and consonants in the word or phrase—just like a good actor plays with which words are emphasized and experiments with the cadence of their lines, rehearsing how the text is set within and outside the music not only leads to great comprehension of the meaning of the text, but also leads to a richer exploration of the musical aspects of the work. One can see through the articulations which words Thompson thought were more important in a phrase. Increasingly articulated notes with accents and tenutos hint at the intensity and insistence of the "the mob"—the chorus can change its tone accordingly. Consonants are not just present, nor are they only in proportion to each other, but they appear as another opportunity for the chorus members to further the musical and dramatic ideas of the work.

The building of dramatic and harmonic tension in the text can even serve to aid in the rehearsal process focused upon notes and intonation. Thompson depicts the

crowd's aspirations for the star with stepwise ascending parallel chords. As "the mob" becomes more agitated, the harmonies become more complex, with suspensions and other non-chord tones matching the tension of the crowd. Instead of simply learning notes, the chorus learns the function of their part within the chords, how their part may or may not build tension, and how that harmonic tension is connected to the text. Learning chord functions, scale degrees, and harmonic progressions suddenly ceases to be dry and theoretical for high school students. Likewise, for the young conductors of the Westminster Conservatory Chorale, score preparation was less about where our arms go, but a deeper look at what the music is saying and how we approach the music accordingly.

### **So(I) DO—COMPLETING THE CYCLE**

I couldn't be more thankful to Frank Abrahams for the formative musical experiences I had both as a singer and as a conductor with the Westminster Conservatory Chorale. The years with the Chorale were deeply rich, a model of what a chorus (student or professional) could be, providing an integrated experience for the young conductors on the artistic team. I consider my experiences in the Chorale the source for the way I approach score study and the rehearsal process, searching for what is the essential *raison d'être* of a musical work. Whether it's the manipulation of forms and motives in the symphonies of Beethoven, text painting in Strauss' operas, or the complex fugal structures of Bach, Frank Abrahams taught me to reach deep into these works, and more importantly, how to connect the essence of a work to the rehearsal process.

After my studies with Dr. Frank Abrahams, I matriculated to Carnegie Mellon University to study with Dr. Abrahams's mentor, Robert Page. Page would often state that his job was to "light a fire under the bottom of his students in the first few years of undergrad," after that it was the students' job. Having just come from multiple years of study with Dr. Abrahams, I understood that comment.

As a result of my own experiences in the Chorale, I have tried to create opportunities for young conductors in the organizations I lead to continue the mentorship cycle (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2017). With the Berkeley Community Chorus and Orchestra in California, we have set up a very similar conducting apprentice program to the one that gave me my first conducting experiences at Westminster. These staff conductor apprentices dive into the music in the same manner that I did, seeking out the musical aspects in each piece of repertoire that will guide them in their rehearsal process with the chorus. With the Mozart *Requiem*, analysis of the double fugues and how the motives are manipulated and transformed can create a rehearsal process that is not only efficient, but also educates singers to the structure of the casual brilliance of Mozart's music. Knowing the pain and despondency Dvorak experienced after losing three of his young children while writing his *Stabat Mater* greatly affects the musical approach to the work and can connect singers in a deeper way to the music. The



rehearsal process becomes a richer experience than simply the refinement of notes, rhythms, and intonation. As Dr. Abrahams has shown, rehearsal organization can be structured so that conducting apprentices do not slow down the rehearsal process; rather, they gain experiences while adding to the musical training of the singers.

As students, my friends/colleagues and I would have fun with Dr. Frank Abrahams's name; his initials FA were like the solfege scale degree "fa", the fourth scale degree which functionally wants to resolve down to "mi." We'd joke, especially with his intensely dark stern eyebrows (and mustache... during my school years) that Dr. Abrahams was "fa," but who maintains that intensity without resolving. However, "fa" has another function, often found in cadences, to lead to the dominant "sol" which propels us to a strong resolution with the tonic "do." It starts and propels us into the cadential process. As I think of the hundreds, if not thousands, of students that Frank Abrahams has propelled into the professional world through his mentorship and leadership, he really is "FA"; as "fa" leads us to "sol-do." Frank Abrahams reminds us to always take action, to "so do."

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### About the Author

With the “energy, creativity and charisma not seen since Leonard Bernstein” and “vibrant,” “mind-blowing,” and “spectacular” conducting, Ming Luke is a versatile conductor that has excited audiences around the world. Highlights include conducting the Bolshoi Orchestra in Moscow, performances of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella* at the Kennedy Center, his English debut at Sadler’s Wells with Birmingham Royal, conducting Dvorak’s *Requiem* in Dvorak Hall in Prague, recording scores for a Coppola film, and over a hundred performances at the San Francisco War Memorial with San Francisco Ballet. He has been recognized nationally for his work with music education and has designed and conducted education concerts and programs with organizations such as the Berkeley Symphony, Houston Symphony, Sacramento Philharmonic, San Francisco Opera and others. Luke has soloed as a pianist with Pittsburgh Symphony, Sacramento Philharmonic, and San Francisco Ballet, and currently serves as Music Director for the Merced Symphony and Berkeley Community Chorus and Orchestra; Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Nashville Ballet, Associate Conductor for the Berkeley Symphony; and Principal Guest Conductor for the San Francisco Ballet.

Luke has written, arranged, and performed over 150 education concerts with the Berkeley Symphony and has served on grant panels for the National Endowment of the Arts and the Grants and Cultural Committee of the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission. An exciting pops conductor, Luke has created and conducted a variety of pops concerts in many venues, from baseball stadiums, to picnics in the park with over 4,000 people in attendance, traditional concert halls and recording for Major League Baseball.

Ming Luke holds a Master of Fine Arts in Conducting from Carnegie Mellon University and a Bachelor of Music in Music Education and Piano Pedagogy from Westminster Choir College of Rider University.