



OnSite Choral Encouragement Video Series

Commentary for Teachers

VIDEO #2 – Putting on the Last Touches

The work we are rehearsing in this video is a Tenebrae responsory by Tomás Luis de Victoria from the 1580s, i.e. music for the week before Easter. This responsory is called *Animam meam dilectam* and here is its text in translation:

*I delivered my beloved soul into the hands of the wicked,
and my possessions have become to me like a lion in the forest.
My adversary spoke out against me saying:
Come together and make haste to devour him.
They placed me in a solitary desert and all the earth mourned for me;
Because nobody could be found who would claim me and be kind to me.
Men without mercy rose up against me, and they spared not my soul.*

I believe that whatever we sing, we need to know what we are singing, both on a semantic and an emotional level. When the music is in Latin, there is a great danger that we just forget what we are singing and close one big door to understanding the intentions of the composer.

Run-through of a longer section

This phase is a little like what the dentist does first on your visit: has a close look at your teeth to decide what needs to be done. I let it run – however much I would want to stop and fix things immediately – and make mental notes of things that need to be addressed. Even though I knew we would only sing through the first section, I still take the transition into the next section to make sure we know how to do it. The transitions can be the biggest obstacles in mastering a piece – this method takes most of those obstacles out of the picture.

After the run-through, I try to give some detailed feedback. This needs to be so detailed that the singers can make markings in their score. The bigger stuff (sound, intonation, ensemble, phrasing) normally needs to be approached by singing (and repetition). I try to end the feedback with the most general-level takeaway, and as a rule on a positive note.

Work on details

From approximately 4:30 in the video, I shift to working on making the performance better. My method is to be really picky at the top and set standards that then flow into the whole section.

At 4:40 I give the tenors feedback about using a more heady or toppy (overtone-rich) sound. You'll notice my hands going on top of my head as if to form a crown here and later in the video. I have found that adding a physical trigger to a technical idea / to technical guidance is very efficient and saves lots of words. The singers remember the advice and at best react physically to the trigger movement without further deliberation.

After this, you will notice that there is no one single thing that I concentrate on, but rather react to things I feel could be better. After 5:00 you will notice that I address vowel color; wrong notes; phrasing; text content; expression.

At 6:15 I address a technical or phrasing problem though emotional expression. Because the voice is so integrated to our emotions and thoughts, sometimes the most direct way of fixing a technical program is indirect: the right emotion might bring out the most natural manner of singing.

Feedback is a key element of this phase. The singers need to know when their execution improves. Even major changes happen gradually through guidance and feedback.

Approximately 7:00 – if I were as picky as I was in the beginning of this phase, we would never get through our program. As I said above, setting the standards normally makes work on the rest of the piece easier. Much of what I need to correct or guide, can be done by speaking while the singers are singing or by conducting.

At 10:21 you'll see a soprano wave her hand. She is acknowledging having made a mistake – and giving me the signal that she knows what it was and that we don't have to stop to correct it together.

At 10:37 I am frustrated by an 's' that is not simultaneous. Instead of giving a precise moment for the 's' (for example, "second eighth-note of the fourth beat"), I prefer to raise awareness and give a fairly general rule (for example, "before the barline"). This, in my experience, leads to a better result (less emphasis on the event; better sense of ensemble). You'll notice that at 13:17 the 's' is perfect without any input from me.