

# **Features of conductors' work with amateur music groups in countries without traditional music education (a new look on music education in general)**

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## **Abstract**

One of the fundamental problems of music education is a search for new methods which could help put the education process in harmony with the individual's inner-self. This is especially important for all those working in the area of community music, because they have to deal, as a rule, with amateurs who are eager to sing or play music, but in many cases have no elementary music education. An example of that is Brazil, where a lot of people participating in various forms of musical activities never learned standard music subjects, due to the lack of qualified teachers and of deeper tradition in music education, as opposed to European countries. I would like to share my experience of work with various groups of amateurs in countries with quite different traditions and cultural references such as Russia and Brazil, emphasizing the common problems encountered by leaders of music groups or music teachers in their out-of-school activity.

## **Plan**

1. A brief comparative review of conductor's activities of professional and amateur groups.
2. Common difficulties in the work with amateur groups and how to solve them.
3. Basic principles of work:
  - development of initiative, independent and creative thinking;
  - correlation between different moments of conduction, adequate response of participants to conductor's hand gesture;
  - development of self-correction, pointing out participants' achievements, struggle against negligence.
4. Lessons of vocal technique and rehearsals as means of putting the theory of music education into practice.
5. Various types of activities during rehearsals: musical games and riddles, special exercises, short theatrical plays.
6. An analysis of principal components: repetition, execution, efficiency of conductor's gesture, intercommunication and corrections.

## **Introduction**

Teachers of Music Education in standard and music schools, colleges, universities and conservatories, have to devote their time to theoretical lessons and practical applications. In many cases they conduct choirs, orchestras, or some other music groups. As a rule, these groups are composed by the students of the same school (college, institute, etc.) or by music lovers of different ages and different levels of education, frequently with insufficiently developed artistic tastes. Conductors (teachers) working with such groups meet countless difficulties and problems which must be solved during rehearsals, but the solutions are frequently hidden. However, despite specific individual situations, there are many common problems, which can be sorted out in the frameworks of some general approach.

Leaders of amateur music groups face more problems than those working with professionals. Besides pure musical questions, they have to deal with different issues related to various aspects of pedagogy, psychology, ethics, communication, etc. Many people wish to participate in music groups during their free time. They come from different professional backgrounds and frequently have no musical preparation. Their artistic tastes are usually badly developed. Therefore, not only does a professional music leader have to explain to amateurs the basic notions of music, but also teach them how to sing or to play different instruments.

There is a great distance between personal skill in some area and the ability to teach other persons to do things in that area. Leaders of amateur groups frequently find themselves surprised that the things which seemed quite simple for them, turn out to be very complicated for the

learners. Even though the basic rules of conducting are the same for leaders of professional and amateur groups, the main aims are different.

### **Differences between professional and amateur groups**

There is a noticeable difference between the conditions and methods of work for music leaders of professional performers and of amateurs. The objective of professional musicians is to perform a variety of musical compositions at the highest artistic level, thus satisfying their public, and, at the same time, forming the audience's artistic taste. Professional groups also execute new pieces of modern composers, spreading their work. Amateur groups, on the contrary, focus their work on educating their members by means of musical art, while a popularization of musical compositions arises as a concomitant result. Respectively, the roles of leaders are different: the leader of the professional group is a performer first of all, whereas the leader of the amateur group is both a teacher of music and a general educator.

For professional musicians, the performance of music (rehearsals and concerts) is a unique kind of work. On the contrary, amateur groups are formed by persons having different professions (far away from music in most cases), and their members can rehearse only during their free time. Leaders of amateur groups have to search for such methods and forms of work, which could help them to maintain the interest of the group members in the joint work and studying music. Also, it is necessary to choose such musical compositions which could be accessible for assimilation and interesting for execution by the participants in accordance with their cultural level, not forgetting the tastes of public.

For professional groups, a stability of cast and a uniformity in the quality of performance are important criteria according to which the qualification of the leader is evaluated. On the contrary, the cast of amateur groups is not permanent. Besides, music lovers have, as a rule, low initial musical and general cultural background, and the quality of execution and studying musical pieces strongly varies from one person to another.

However, leaders of amateur groups cannot choose only persons with high level or extraordinary musical talents. The problem of staffing amateur groups is very complicated, because their leaders must take into account a lot of quite different factors, such as the difference in age and musical qualification, the availability of initial musical preparation, artistic tastes and general culture. To solve this problem, the leaders must have, besides the special musical preparation, certain knowledge of pedagogy and psychology. Also, they must know how to combine general rehearsals with individual lessons and part rehearsals, using different forms and methods of work.

The performance levels of professional and amateur groups are absolutely different. Each group has its own artistic objective, public, intentions and stimuli for its activity. Nonetheless, although there are no reasons to compare amateur and professional groups, it is necessary to elevate the level of execution, trying to reach the professional one.

Leaders of amateur groups must be ready for great amount of organizational work, such as the selection of new participants (making tests), forming the artistic council, planning and organizing performances, different creative activities beside rehearsals, etc.. In professional groups the same kinds of work are done by different persons.

The main requirement usually made with respect to leaders of professional groups is the professional competence. Leaders of amateur groups must combine various personal components. Besides the professional competence, they must possess a wide set of other qualities, from organizational talents to a personal charm. The creative growth and perspectives of success of any group depend on the personality of its leader, his/her energy and musicality, habits in establishing contacts with participants, a creative and fruitful atmosphere during rehearsals and other moments of studies, an existence of a favorable climate inside the group.

Leaders of amateur groups must feel the level of their groups, knowing exactly at which moment they have to stop. At the same time, it is necessary to demand each time more, until reaching musical or educational limits. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a contact with the group in order to get a proper response, although this could require some time before the full contact will be found.

## **How to overcome some common difficulties**

During rehearsals, a leader is always like an actor on a stage, other participants being simultaneously spectators and colleagues, carefully studying the leader's professional conduct through a magnifying glass. Thus it is worth remembering some basic principles, which could help to perform rehearsals with maximal efficiency. I would like to dwell at length on a few common problems and methods of their resolution.

*Mutual understanding between leaders and performers.* Leaders must insist on immediate perception and execution of *all* (however tiny) their demands and remarks, expressed in any forms, including gestures, looks and facial expressions. If a new leader begins to work with an established group, he/she should accept existing traditions, removing former errors and introducing new rules (if they are necessary) in the most tactful forms.

*Cast and repertoire.* Frequently, the available cast of a group does not allow to include into the repertoire many interesting compositions, simply because of lack of a sufficient number of performers for some parts (such a situation is typical for Brazil). It is necessary to think out the repertoire choice, searching for such compositions which would be interesting for the group and public, and which could be performed effectively with the available cast.

The leader must make arrangements for the concrete choir, transferring difficulties in execution to other parts, shifting accents, combining parts, and so on. If any composition appears below the potentialities of the group, it is better to remove it from the repertoire, otherwise it will not be perceived, neither by group nor by public, because the group will perform it without interest. If the choir lost interest to some piece, it is worth excluding it from the repertoire temporarily. Then in 1-3 months it will be performed again with the previous interest.

*Organization of work and staffing of a group.* One of necessary prerequisites for a success is a clear organization of the rehearsal process. Rehearsals must combine studying new material, entertainment, and the permanent creative process. The work should be thought out in such a way that new participants would not brake the development of the whole group, the arrangements adaptation would not lead to a loss of artistic image, and so on. The experienced participants should help the leader to correct errors of beginners during rehearsals. But every new participant should receive enough individual lessons with the leader for a complete adaptation. These lessons should include the vocal technique, learning the available repertoire, explanations and recommendations. The leader needs such administrative and musical assistants, who would fulfil his/her demands exactly, without introducing new interpretations. An existence of different influences on the group is inadmissible.

*General and individual discipline.* The general discipline depends on the individual one. A group can do a qualitative work provided every participant feels himself a part of the whole and disciplines himself. A creative work and artistic performance need due tuning and enthusiasm, which cannot be reached without strong discipline of all participants. This is a permanent process, so the leader should struggle permanently against various distracting factors, such as boredom, chatter, loss of interest, etc. (Somebody could think that these issues are obvious, but they are extremely actual in the conditions of Brazil, where people have no habits of respecting time, and where the delay by 15-20 minutes in the beginning of performances, meetings, and so on is a quite usual thing.)

One should not expect immediate results, because every person has individual abilities. However, the best way to reduce the time of learning is to notice even tiny achievements and to encourage them. It is necessary to choose compositions containing clear and expressive programs, related to genuine feelings and ideas, and demonstrating the diversity of real life by means of sounds.

## **Basic principles of work**

Basic principles of education must be exposed and applied in the most clear and understandable form. It is necessary to develop the initiative and creative independent thinking. Every rehearsal is a creative process. The more diverse the forms and methods of teaching, more possibilities for developing creative abilities of learners become available.

One of the first principles is wiping out of musical illiteracy (perhaps, this issue is not actual in many countries, but it is very important in Brazil). Indeed, singing by ear is the same as learning poems by those who cannot read, perceiving the text by ear. One cannot deny that singing by ear develops musical memory, but it is necessary to excite the curiosity of learners to read scores and to count rhythm. This facilitates learning songs or instrumental pieces. Besides, the knowledge of music writing enables singers or instrumentalists to analyze scores and read music texts independently of a conductor, which is not only pleasant for learners, but stimulates further studying and understanding of music.

The learners reveal for themselves sounds of music, and the leader should respect their efforts, encouraging each achievement. The main reaction to any work done by a learner, however small it could be, must be encouragement, approval, and only after this - critical remarks in the most tactful form.

The leader should always control and analyze the process of conducting, insist on an adequate response from participants to the hand gesture, detect and correct errors immediately at the moment of execution. It is necessary to notice achievements of participants and to stimulate them, as well as to struggle against negligence and untidiness.

The basic principle of any rehearsal is to go from an accumulation of musical and auditory impressions to the understanding of them. All musical and theoretical material used in the repertoire should be repeated many times in various forms: exercises, games, singing, improvisations. Every new task helps to discover new sides of already known pieces, to hear and to show new intonations and a new, more profound, understanding. It is very important that all these tasks should be executed with pleasure and imagination.

Rehearsals should be planned in such a way that the emotional strain would increase from the beginning to the end. Moreover, it is reasonable to stop the work exactly at the moment of the highest emotional animation. Then its effect will continue for some time, and the learners will impatiently wait for the next meeting with music. Discussions and analysis are other important elements of each rehearsal. The more profound and impressive an explanation, the deeper will be the interest to music and artistic education and the sooner the final aim will be achieved.

The quality of rehearsals can be evaluated by taking into account the following criteria:

- punctuality;
- emotional dramatic composition;
- integrity of all parts of the rehearsal;
- simplicity in explanation;
- active and conscious work of all participants;
- thought-out and efficient planning and performance;
- diversity of methods of explanation and creative tasks;
- culture of conduct;
- ability to foresee and resolve problematic and conflictin situations;
- summing up and formulating the tasks for the next rehearsal.

### **Lessons of vocal technique and rehearsals as means of putting the theory of music education into practice**

The development of vocal technique consists in

- a) the formation of the correct singing, breathing and the conscious sound extracting position,
- b) learning the notion of the harmonic steps and their interrelations,
- c) the consolidation of concepts of pitch, melody direction, gradual or uneven movement of melody, tone and semitone.

Music education goes in parallel with various subjects of musical and pedagogical cycles: solfeggio and music theory; peculiarities of the work with vocal organs; correct singer position, facial expression, clear articulation and enunciation; acquaintance with music history and diverse musical genres.

It is not very important that at the beginning the knowledge of music and musical writing can be short and even chaotic. It is much more important to awake the first interest and to inspire the confidence in a real possibility of learning to control the own voice, to sing and to play scores in a

short time. Combinations of certain components of different methods (diagrams and drawings, visual aids and the mute keyboard, rhythmical and musical scores in combination with games stimulating creative imagination) result in an easy mastering of the material and in an unabated interest to the subject during the whole education process. Besides, they help to use vocal organs correctly, cultivating habits of singing in a free and easy manner, in coordination with impressive hand motions and facial expressions, thus achieving genuine artistic performance and clear articulation.

To begin singing is not easier than to pronounce the first words, especially for those who sing a single sound and do not feel a pitch difference. No creative process is possible without mutual understanding and friendly relations between all those present, otherwise the most interesting and clear things would be rejected as wrong or doubtful. It is important to put questions with correct intonation and to listen to answers with attention, not to thrust one's opinion on others and not to speak in a haughty manner, but to try to imbue one's mind with mutual interests and to become allies. Special attention should be paid to timid or disabled persons, because they need strong support more than anybody else to overcome shyness and diffidence.

The work should be aimed at the permanent development of:

- the vocal organs and the ability of using them, expressed in the clarity of intonation;
- muscular freedom, plastics and high-quality artistic mastery;
- feelings of harmony and rhythm;
- reaction;
- a melodic and harmonic ear, memory, the skill of making music solo and in an ensemble;
- senses of form, style, and the observation of phrasing, as well as habits of hearing music;
- an emotional responsiveness and the skill of expressing an attitude to music;
- a general musical culture, mental outlook, and artistic taste.

### **Various types of activities during the rehearsals**

The main objectives are to develop in learners the ability to think, to help them understand and like musical art and to know how to transmit musical images through special creative tasks. This facilitates mastering the note reading, correcting false intonations and training the voice, as well as reducing stress in the vocal organs and developing muscular freedom.

Each rehearsal should captivate the learners with its continuous dynamical development, putting first and foremost the development of abilities to perceive and create music. It must combine the studying of new material, entertainment, and the permanent creative process. It is knowledge and skill that make perception and execution of music more profound and complete. Every knowledge or skill should come to learners in a vivid form, connected with real actions. All new concepts must be correlated and easily understood due to their character and the manner of exposition.

The leader should be active and animated during the whole rehearsal. Creativity and wit diversify rehearsals, so each episode can include elements of game, improvisation, creative work, and transformation (however, one should not speak too much, in order not to tire the audience). The work cannot be productive if participants are tired, therefore the leader should permanently change tasks, alternating difficult exercises with simpler ones.

For this purpose, one should use various musical games, movements, and other forms of activity, which give a possibility to relax and, simultaneously, pursue certain pedagogical goals, such as the motional coordination, training of attention, development of musical ear, rhythm and mutual understanding between participants.

### **An analysis of the principal components of work**

**The organization process** is the only part of the work, when leaders can consult with participants, taking into account their proposals and ideas concerning the schedule and the choice of repertoire. It is necessary to motivate the choice, making compromises in the case of dispute. When participants know the reasons of the choice of some musical composition and agree with this choice, they study music with great attention, pleasure and understanding. But if leaders dictate their will, the participants work without interest, and some professional conflicts can arise. Also, discussing the organization problems, the participants can plan, together with the leader, both the principal directions of their activities and the concrete details, such as the schedule of

performances, regulations of rehearsals, different cultural events and joint rest. It is necessary to establish good contacts with the most active and experienced participants, which have authority with the others, not forgetting to encourage shy persons and rebuff presumptuous ones.

**The repetition process** is the most tiresome and labor-consuming. The leaders must demand the participants to accept their requirements and directives without discussions. Their words must be the law for everybody. However, it is necessary to explain the purpose of each repetition. It is not allowed to repeat without a concrete aim. Every participant must understand artistic merits of the compositions under study and reproduce them through the performance. The main objective is to excite in the public the feeling of artistic satisfaction. This can be achieved, if after *every* rehearsal *every* participant feels moral satisfaction and joy. It is important to distribute correctly the rehearsal time between studying, repetition and consolidation. If too much time is spent for repetition, a group can lose interest to fixing results, and participants will respond passively or even will not respond at all. If the leader leaves some complicated musical pieces without due attention, it will be very difficult to clean and correct them in future, as soon as participants get accustomed to executing music with errors. For this reason, it is worth altering the repetition moments with other kinds of activities, changing complicated parts with simpler ones, and to give new tasks during each rehearsal, in order to achieve positive results without boredom and irritation of musicians.

**Moments of execution.** It is important to pay due attention to the process of perceiving music, from understanding the composers' ideas to the aspiration for transmitting this understanding through music execution. Musical pieces must be executed in the exact accordance with the original texts. The conductor may only change and correct something with great care, respecting the composers' works. People feel music individually and wish to execute compositions according to their own tastes. But conductors cannot follow performers: they must be always ahead of them, foreseeing all eventual changes in rhythm, tempo, dynamics, etc. The difference between conductors of instrumental or vocal groups and soloists consists in the form of motivation of some steps: a soloist can perform different things intuitively and without any explanation; but the group leader must explain to all participants, why he/she wants to make exactly this or that thing. The conductor must convince the participants in his/her interpretation, achieving the non-formal execution with creative thinking.

Each instrumentalist or singer has possibilities to correct the form, dynamics and nuances in the process of studying, but the conductor must begin to study a musical piece with participants having already a plan of the final execution in the head. If the leader discovers some errors in the form, nuances or general performance during the rehearsal, he/she must prepare the ways of correcting the errors for the next rehearsal.

**The efficiency of conducting** strongly depends on the personality of conductor: his/her purposefulness, manual technique, plastics, mimics, body expression, influence of look, exact words, attention to all participants during the rehearsal. The process of preparation to every rehearsal is the home task: the leader must foresee all difficulties of the score which could emerge during the rehearsal. Nowadays the leaders of musical groups have possibilities to hear the scores using computer facilities, trying various keys with different times and different combinations of voices and timbres. This can facilitate the preparation of every rehearsal, helping to find difficulties and the ways to overcome them. A group will respond to conductor's demands, if these demands are well-thought and definitive, and the conductor's gesture is clear.

The next moment – **interconnection and correction** – follows from the preceding one. The conductor must possess two types of musical hearing during rehearsals or performances: the "strict" hearing – which serves to determine every wrong note of every person, and the "wide" hearing – which is necessary to hear the general score at the same time. The efficiency of work depends on the attention of the group: if participants work with concentration during the whole rehearsal, the leader has a possibility to correct errors quickly and without difficulties. For this reason, it is necessary to train and teach participants attentively, beginning from the first rehearsals. On the other hand, it is impossible to correct errors if the leader has no clear and understandable technique of conducting and if he/she works without expression, imagination and enthusiasm. In order to execute a composition in the best way, taking into account all its specific features, -- dynamics, timbre, expressiveness, -- the conductor should work up each tact of the play, analyzing its musical form, harmony, literature text, phrasing, time and deviations from it. It is necessary to choose practical methods of conducting corresponding to the specific character of

the piece, to clarify conductor's own attitude to the music images, and to find the ways of simplifying the difficulties arising.

For an effective execution it is necessary **to prepare the group psychologically**, explaining that the emotional excitation is a normal process, so that one should not fear that emotions would spoil the execution. At the time of performance, the agitation will transform into rising spirit which helps to execute music in the best way possible.

### **Conclusion**

The methodology exposed is based on my experience of almost 30 years of work with different groups of amateurs and professionals in Moscow. During the past six years, working with different groups of amateurs in Brazil, I had many possibilities to show and apply my methods in different regions of Brazil and in some national and international events. I have contacts with leaders of various groups, and all of them confirm that using these methods, they achieved positive results very quickly, that their professional work becomes simpler, and the climate inside each group was significantly improved.