

Reports on a recent MMA inset at Edgeborough Prep School from *David Hall & John Mühlemann*



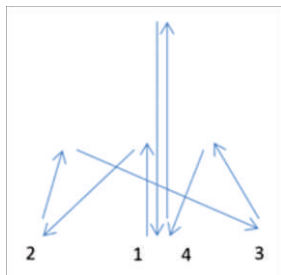
Even with eighteen years of experience (has it really been that long since I was a nervous organ scholar?), it is always good to be reminded of the basics of conducting and to receive some constructive criticism. I had enjoyed Catherine Beddison's session at last summer's

conference at St George's, Weybridge, so I thought I would sign up for this one-day INSET as well. Catherine is Director of Music at Cranleigh Prep School and Chief Executive of Sing for Pleasure.

What I like most about watching Catherine at work is that she leads by example. She has great posture, an engaging happy face and she can teach a four-part round with no verbal instructions whatsoever. What better way to encourage a choir to sit up straight, smile when singing and keep the conversation to a minimum? Catherine's use of gesture extends to singing technique as well. She demonstrated how to achieve good breathing and a full supported sound from a choir with no mention of the diaphragm.

The morning session focused on clarity - "Have you ever heard a musician complain that the conductor was too clear?" I was pleased that Catherine espouses the same conducting pattern that I use: all four beats of the bar on the same horizontal plane.

Positioning that horizontal plane near the diaphragm to encourage a rich vocal sound was a new idea to me. We each had a turn conducting a steady four-beat pattern with cues on various beats of the bar. This allowed us to watch each other's technique. Several of us needed some tweaking! – fingers together, heels on the floor, breathing with the choir, clear ictus (bounce on the beat), confident faces. Another useful exercise was conducting I vow to thee, my country with various restrictions. For this exercise we abandoned the four-beat pattern in favour of spontaneous, expressive gestures - first verse using only the horizontal plane, level with our diaphragm; second verse using the vertical plane from navel to chin; a third verse using arc-shapes. I imagine we all use a mix of these gestures when conducting expansive melodies, but I for one have never stopped to analyse them much. (Then a delicious lunch and a tour of Edgeborough Prep School - thank you, Kate Davies.)



The afternoon was a useful session singing through Christmas repertoire. We sang a selection of sacred works from OUP including new works by Rutter and Chilcott (I ordered copies of Rutter's *El noi de la Mare* and *Colours of Christmas*), some Christmas pop hits from Faber and I took the opportunity to bring some of my own carols and arrangements along.

As always with MMA INSETs, the day was fun and useful, and the conversation over coffee was just as helpful.

David Hall
Director of Music, Twyford School

I clearly remember my first conducting experience; it was in my second year at St. Peter's College, Oxford and I was asked at the last moment to cover for the organ scholar who was feeling rather peaky. I will never forget my sweatiest-ever hour and my only concern throughout that evensong was worrying that the congregation would be able to see the damp patches through my suit.

Since then I have conducted a great deal, largely choral, but some orchestral and a fair amount of chamber music. I am aware of some of my shortcomings (I stand on tip-toe at an anacrusis), but one never really gets to appraise one's technique unless you are committed to recording and self-evaluating. I can't do this; the sight of myself on the screen makes me squirm.

All this leads me to last week, where I attended an absolutely superb conducting masterclass with Catherine Beddison. We each stood in turn (in an intimate and very friendly environment) and conducted the other delegates in a brief demonstration. Catherine then made a couple of gentle suggestions and we tried again. She immediately noticed my tip-toes, but I had never entertained the notion that a downbeat when conducting singers should be placed at diaphragm level, thus giving the beat a grounding that resonates with the singer. This was an epiphany for me and I have already employed it to great effect with my 4 choirs this week.

Each of us learned something from our own and other's experiences, and I would challenge even the hardiest of veteran conductors not to take something away from Catherine's clear and effective approach. I shall definitely be attending her workshops again.

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