



Figure: The Conductor as a Prism

Unsuccessful conductors often:

- Stare continuously at the score
- Distract the audience by over-conducting
- Hide behind the music stand or reading glasses
- Undercut the group's confidence with (unintentional) negative facial expressions

What If You Can't Memorize Every Detail of the Score?

You don't need to understand every piece at its deepest theoretical and textual level to understand what your tasks are as the conductor in performance.

In an ideal world, one would conduct every score from memory, knowing every note, dynamic, word, and articulation by heart. Many of us have colleagues or mentors who uphold this “gold standard” of conducting. They do this so as always to be looking at their group. Members of the ensemble then get more from looking at their conductor than from staring at their music. Conversely, if every time a singer looks up, their conductor is looking down, that singer will instinctively hide in the music. A successful conductor is present, confidently guiding the group’s narrative.

The best way to memorize a score is to understand it. This does not mean that you need a graduate degree in music theory; indeed, very few of us “understand” Britten’s *War Requiem* or other similarly complex masterpieces. I like to use a method of score preparation I call *charting*. It is not musical analysis in the traditional sense. Rather, it is a way to analyze the score by asking the question, “What do your gestural tasks need to be when you conduct this piece in performance?” Charting helps you work on the whole picture until there is enough time to work on its parts. It helps you with rehearsing the macro before the micro.

There is no one right way to chart a piece. Your charts are for your own use and will be personal to what you need as a conductor. The whole point of spending the time to make these charts is to be able to better understand, and then memorize, the important conducting gestures of a piece. Decide what details you need as the conductor to best make this happen and how you can best represent them to yourself.

I begin by creating a first chart of the macro events that occur in the piece. Then, I make additional charts as needed, each with a greater level of detail. Finally, I try to memorize the chart with the most detail so that I can look at my group while conducting the entire piece. The following pages will walk you through the steps I use for charting, including a specific example of charting the choral work *Bogoroditse Devo (Ave Maria)* by Sergei Rachmaninoff.

How to Make a Successful Conducting Chart

Don't give your choir too many details at first! Teach them the macro events, and how to sing the climax of the piece. That's enough at the beginning.

1. Make a simple chart of the macro events, mapping out the bare bones of the piece - the places in the score where your choir needs your help as "traffic cop." In other words, where does your choir really need you?
 - Climax
 - Tempo changes
 - Key changes
 - Time signature changes

2. Make a second, more detailed chart with other larger events, such as:
 - Phrases
 - Sections (A, B, C, etc.)
 - "Tent poles" that mark the most major events
 - Entrances, cues that will be needed, etc.

3. Make a third and final chart, adding even greater detail:
 - Dynamics
 - Brackets to indicate phrase length
 - Any other important details you need to remember.

Template:

*Make Chart #1:
What Are the
Macro Events?*

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Worksheet:

*Make Charts #2
and #3: What Are
the Other
Larger Events?*

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Using a Conducting Chart

As you begin teaching a new piece, you will inevitably want to look at the score for reference. However, as your ensemble becomes more proficient with the music, I suggest the following steps:

- Stop using the score and conduct from the chart.
- Then, look at the chart less and less.
- Eventually, memorize the chart.
- Finally, throw the chart away, remove the music stand, take off your reading glasses, and look at your group.

6. Choral Seating with Orchestral Accompaniment

It is best to organize the singers so that they are in closest contact with the instruments that are doubling their particular part. For example, if the 1st violins are doubling the sopranos, and if, as is usually situated, the 1st violins are on the conductor's left, then so also should the sopranos be on the conductor's left, behind the violins.

One important consideration is the necessity of placing the choir physically above the orchestra. Typically, the orchestra is on the floor, though some instruments in the back may be on low risers. If the first row of singers is also on the floor, the singers' sound will have to fight its way through the orchestra's sound. It is much better if the singers can be raised substantially over the instrumentalists, allowing the choral sound to fly unimpeded over that of the players.

