

Jason Paulk, Editor <jason.paulk@enmu.edu>

## A Guide to Improving Student-Led Section Rehearsals

By Felicia Mulé, James Robison, and Ryan Kelly

Many high school and college choirs hold section rehearsals that are directed by student leaders. These sectionals can be very beneficial to choirs. They offer focused opportunities for sections to study their own vocal lines and build singer independence. Student-led sectionals can also generate greater ownership of the music making and *esprit de corps* within sections. Conversely, student-run sectionals can present challenges; productivity can be low, singers' participation reluctant, and leaders' direction heavy-handed or listless.

Most sectionals can improve. Student leaders can employ a number of strategies to help them lead better and understand the needs of their sections. Likewise, teachers can take steps to guide their leaders with greater direction and oversight. This article's goal is to offer both students and teachers strategies for improving their choirs' sectionals so that they are more productive, musical, and unifying experiences for singers.

### What Are Effective Section Rehearsals?

Sectionals can occur in different ways. Conductors sometimes schedule them at the beginning of a rehearsal calendar (i.e., early in a semester) to help sections start learning their parts independently, or they might schedule them in the middle of that calendar to teach part-specific vocal techniques. Sectionals sometimes occur in lieu of a regularly scheduled full choir rehearsal; alternatively, they might be weekly "extra" rehearsals scheduled at another time of day.

Regardless of their frequency, sectionals should have three common goals:

- Sectionals should be productive.

Singers should sing more confidently when they leave. They should not leave the sectional having wasted their time.

- Sectionals should be musical.

Singers should sing more expressively when they leave. They should not leave the sectional simply having "woodshed" pitches.

- Sectionals should be unifying.

Singers should leave feeling a stronger bond with their fellow singers, not feeling disgruntled or discouraged.

Student leaders should recognize they are not professionals yet. Feelings of inadequacy are normal, and it is okay to be nervous about standing before peers and directing them toward more refined music making. They should also remember that humility is important when leading peers, and building relationships with singers during sectionals is important too.

### What Challenges Arise in Student-Led Sectionals?

Student-led sectionals often challenge both the leader and singers.

# Student Times

To improve them, consider the challenges:

## *Challenges facing section leaders:*

- Multitasking

In sectionals, leaders must often play the piano, listen if singers are singing correctly and musically, observe their engagement in rehearsal, and conduct entrances, releases, and articulations. It is a lot to manage if one does not do it regularly or practice sufficiently in advance.

- Minimal piano skills

Section leaders are often appointed because of their vocal expertise and maturity and without regard to their piano skills. Those lacking rudimentary piano skills can enter sectionals with self-doubt and become embarrassed if directing from the piano. They also might play more incorrect pitches than correct ones, undermining the effectiveness of their teaching.

- Minimal preparation time

Conductors sometimes give section leaders minimal advance notice of a coming sectional, leaving the section leader no time to prepare. This can be stressful for those who feel unprepared to lead.

- Inspiring reluctant peers

Singers can resent attending sectionals, sometimes because it is a mandatory “extra” rehearsal or because it is being led by a student peer. Regard-

less, it can be challenging for section leaders to inspire fellow students toward enthusiastic participation in rehearsal.

## *Challenges facing singers:*

- Fear of judgment

In sectionals, individual voices are more exposed. Students who are in their first year in high school, college, or a particular choir can feel very anxious in sectionals. This can also be true of instrumentalists who also sing in a choir. Among senior students and more mature singers, those with less singing experience can be intimidated to go to sectionals, sing confidently, and ask questions. They can have an overwhelming fear of making mistakes, asking “dumb” questions, and being judged by their peers.

- Apathetic singers

Even with a section leader who tries to inspire rehearsal enthusiasm, singers can sometimes be apathetic about rehearsing. Being surrounded by disinterested or disgruntled singers can be very discouraging to singers who want to work hard and participate to their fullest.

- Overbearing section leader

Sectionals should be learning environments in which singers make, identify, and fix mistakes. Section leaders can verbally identify these vocal faults callously rather than gently. When singers fear making mistakes because they might be demeaned by

and before peers, they are less likely to sing boldly and expressively. Likewise, sectionals are important times for singers to ask questions about the music; if an arrogant leader is dismissive of their questions, singers are less likely to verbalize them, perpetuating ambiguity in the section.

- Minimal productivity

Singers generally come to rehearsals wanting to sing, to sing musically, and to rehearse productively. That morale decreases, however, when a section leader mismanages rehearsal time. Sometimes the mismanagement is because the leader is unprepared; other times it is because they lose focus, over-explain the music, or speak off-topic. This discourages singers and suppresses their potential achievement in rehearsal.

## **How Can Section Leaders Improve Their Leadership of Sectionals?**

Being a good section leader takes planning and practice. The following suggestions for student section leaders are organized by the overarching goals for sectionals introduced earlier.

### **Goal One: Sectionals should be productive**

Factors that contribute to a productive sectional include knowing singers’ needs, determining efficient teaching procedures, listening and responding well, evaluating progress, and effectively managing time. One’s hope should be for their section to return to the full ensemble with greater



confidence because of a well-led, productive rehearsal. Here are some ways to help one lead more productive sectionals:

- Be observant in full rehearsals

In full rehearsals, be alert to one's section's strengths and weaknesses and mark one's music accordingly. Mark passages that are well learned so one does not unnecessarily revisit them in a sectional. Similarly, mark passages where singers are struggling and write helpful reminders in the music's margins of what needs improvement (e.g. "weak entrance," "struggling with language in rhythm," or "wrong pitches"). When the conductor rehearses a difficult passage of music, observe what teaching techniques they use; write techniques one might also use to remember them for a future sectional (Figure 1).

- Practice piano

Piano skills are invaluable to effective section leaders, especially if they lead from the keyboard. Singers often progress faster in sectionals when they sing their part with harmonic context, so it is important to be able to play more than one part at a time. One can sharpen skills by regularly sight-reading vocal lines at a keyboard. Begin with one vocal line; then add a second line that is adjacent in the score (e.g., soprano and alto). Continue with reading two parts that are not next to each other (e.g., soprano and tenor) and work to play three or more vocal lines together.

Figure 1. Johannes Brahms, *Regina Coeli*, Op. 37, no. 3, mm. 49–61. Section Leader's Margin Notes

- Ask the conductor for guidance

In advance of a sectional, be proactive and ask the conductor to recommend what pieces to rehearse, what passages, for how long, at what tempo, with text or neutral syllables, etc. Visit the conductor after the sectional to review how things went and to ask for advice as necessary.

- Study the music

Thoroughly study the music one plans to rehearse. One must enter rehearsal knowing more about the music than the singers in order to

effectively lead them to a greater understanding and execution of it. The score study and preparation will strengthen one's rehearsal confidence and often earn the respect of one's section and foster a rehearsal atmosphere that inspires questions.

- Keep sectionals moving quickly

Nothing erodes singers' collective goodwill faster than wasted rehearsal time. Avoid mindlessly drilling sections. Listen intently and assess when a majority of singers are singing accurately and musically; then, quickly move on to the next passage. Enter-

tain singers' questions with prudence. Questions are important—they can alert a section leader to something he or she missed and provide clarity to confused singers. However, questions can also take over a rehearsal, especially when a leader is teaching with long pauses for thought, and well-meaning singers fill the gap with requests to rehearse material that does not need rehearsing. If singers have questions about trouble spots, address a few quickly and concisely, and proceed with the sectional agenda.

- Encourage singers to practice between sectionals

One of the most valuable ensemble commodities is individual and collective enthusiasm, and sectionals that cultivate a “we're in this together” comradery can inspire students to visit the practice room between rehearsals. Strive to generate this type of enthusiasm in sectionals. Not only will sectional productivity improve with individual practice, but singers will begin to take more initiative and responsibility for their music making and artistic achievement.

### **Goal Two: Sectionals should be musical**

For some, sectionals are simply a time to drill pitches and rhythms without regard to musicality. Just as there is never a time one teaches cooking without regard to flavor or driving without regard to safety, there is never a time when it is acceptable to teach pitches and rhythms without regard to musicianship. Singers must sing musically in sectionals. If they do

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not, conductors must use valuable time in subsequent full rehearsals to counteract unmusical singing reinforced in sectionals. Sectionals are more enjoyable when they are spent making music, and they can propel future full rehearsals toward even greater musicianship and learning. Here are ways to help lead more musical sectionals:

- Mark scores well

During full rehearsals, meticulously mark one's music and notate any musical interpretations evidenced in the conductor's gestures or directions. By modeling this practice, one can inspire singers by example, reinforce in sectionals musical goals articulated by the conductor, and help ensure the conductor's interpretive notes are likewise marked in every singer's score.

- Use a piano wisely

When appropriate, use a piano in sectionals to build singers' confidence with passages, harmonies, accompaniments, and other musical lines. However, avoid using it constantly. Rehearse occasionally without a piano to nurture singers' confidence; their singing should be as rhythmically and tonally vibrant with and without the piano. Additionally, piano-playing can obscure faulty singing; listen intently when playing and use unaccompanied rehearsal time to thoroughly assess singers' precision.

- Emphasize musicianship

There is no virtue in rehearsing anything unmusically. Dynamics, tempo, and style are inherent to pitches and rhythms, and if the former are not correctly executed, neither are the latter. A section's musicality will improve if the leader listens, evaluates, and models for them musical singing. Listen for intonation, phrasing, metric accentuation, articulations, etc. Modeling is a very effective means of coaching expressivity; be sure when modeling, however, to model well.

- Be attentive to diction

Proper and nuanced diction is vital to artistry. In most pieces, natural text declamation is important; in these cases, guide singers toward proper syllabic stress. Some singers will have less expertise singing in foreign languages, so review pronunciation to coach them accordingly. For particularly challenging pronunciations, think of creative ways to help singers learn and execute the text accurately.

### **Goal Three: Sectionals should be unifying**

The more unified a choir is, the greater their potential is to create musical art. In sectionals, the time spent working with a small number of singers toward common goals offers good opportunities to build unity and foster positive relationships. The following can help build unity among one's section:

- Lead with humility

Though appointed to lead their peers, student section leaders are learners

themselves; they are teachers-in-training. Strive to develop leadership and rehearsal skills and simultaneously avoid treating singers as subjects to be ruled. Singers are still peers; everyone is equal in the room, and leaders who acknowledge this and are transparent about their own growth as student teachers can facilitate a warm, respectful environment that is conducive to collective music making.

- Create safe and affirming experiences

Sectionals are a time for learning music, developing musicianship, and building ensemble unity. It is impossible to achieve these goals in a judgmental environment; rather, sectionals should be conducive to teamwork. Sectionals should be a safe place for singers to make mistakes and ask questions. When mistakes are repeated, identify how to sing the current passage accurately without intimidating or demeaning the singers. Always answer questions with a kind tone of voice and promote a welcoming environment, particularly toward singers new to the ensemble and those who are less experienced. Also, consider organizing social events outside of rehearsal; these can help establish positive relationships among singers and be very beneficial when held near the beginning of a rehearsal calendar.

- Resolve conflict carefully

Despite efforts to promote positive relationships between singers, conflicts can arise. If one becomes aware of a conflict between members of their

section, try to mediate as a friend and peer. Hold all discussions about this conflict in private—never in a sectional. If the conflict escalates to where it affects how the section is performing, alert the conductor.

- Stay in contact

Communicate with one's section online between sectionals. E-mail and social media can be used to remind singers of practice goals and to encourage them after full rehearsals. Occasional communiqués outside of rehearsals can stimulate students' enthusiasm about the music between rehearsals (Table 1).

### How Can Teachers Help Their Student Leaders Be Effective?

Student leaders are still students. They have a small percentage of their teacher's expertise, and because of this, some conductors avoid having students direct sectionals, perhaps fearing ineffective leadership and a lack of productivity; they might think, "If you want it done right, do it yourself," and only schedule sectionals that they themselves direct. A professional educator can likely rehearse more effectively than a high school or college junior; however, these students are teachers-in-training, and high school and college are perfect times to train young musicians and

future conductors in important listening, conducting, and leadership skills. Through student-led sectionals, many students have been inspired to pursue further training and careers in music education and conducting. When possible, conductors should use opportunities like sectionals to guide talented student leaders toward improving their teaching and leadership skills.

- Choose section leaders wisely

Vocal expertise and conducting skills are important, but they should not be the only factors considered when selecting a section leader. Consider a prospective section leader's potential for leadership in the goals outlined in Part Three of this article. Avoid appointing a section leader with a fine voice but a haughty spirit; they may sing beautifully, but if they sow discord in their section, singers will not unify under their leadership. Likewise, an affable person who is inattentive in full rehearsals or does not sing with finesse will ineffectively lead their singers toward the conductor's musical goals. Look to appoint section leaders who are mature, attentive in rehearsals, vocally proficient, musical, and who, with supervision and assistance, will likely lead others well with gregarious efficiency.

- Help section leaders prepare

Too often, conductors impede section leaders' effectiveness by giving them little time to prepare for their sectional. While a conductor might be so confident in their leaders' skills

**Table 1 - Section Leader's E-mail to Singers**

Happy Wednesday, Altos!

Great rehearsal yesterday—the *Verdi* particularly sounds amazing, with lots of energy and articulation.

Tomorrow during sectionals, we're going to look at *Gaude plaudite*, *In taberna*, *Nicholai*, and *Immorality*—mostly to touch up on a few spots that have been tripping us up in rehearsals. If you can sing through these pieces before sectional, it will help us make the best use of our time and not have to repeat what we worked on in full rehearsal.

By the way, I found a good recording of *In taberna* on YouTube...the percussion is amazing...check out the link attached.

Let me know if there are any questions or if you need help with anything. You ladies have been awesome this semester. Keep up the amazing work!

—Your Alto Section Leader



that they call a sectional without giving the leaders notice, this should not happen regularly. The more advance notice one offers, the more time leaders have to practice piano, check their score markings, practice vocal lines, consider teaching strategies, etc. Conductors should specify an agenda for each sectional. There are times when a sectional might address “trouble spots” raised by the singers in the sectional, but this “free-for-all” should rarely constitute the whole rehearsal. Assign leaders passages to rehearse for most of the sectional to

enable leaders to prepare adequately.

- Be realistic with agendas

Conductors often give section leaders too much music to rehearse with broad instructions to “teach as much as you can.” These agendas are generally ineffective. It is difficult for leaders to prepare adequately without a finite amount of material to teach, and a long list of different passages requires them to devise many strategies to teach them. Likewise, “teach as much as you can” agendas make it

hard for section leaders to effectively pace their teaching; they often lead to rushed rehearsals where material is superficially addressed, leaving the conductor to wonder what was taught and to what extent. Assign a narrower agenda to know exactly what will be taught and to more confidently plan for the subsequent full rehearsal.

- Teach how to pace sectionals

Most section leaders do not manage time well when given just a list of passages to rehearse. Experienced



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conductors can estimate how long it should take to teach several passages of music; student leaders often get bogged down drilling parts without listening for progress and anticipating when to rehearse something else. To help section leaders with this, give them a timed sectional agenda (Table 2). When developing the schedule, estimate how long it will take the leader to teach their assigned agenda while also spurring them toward teaching efficiently; also, be sure to allow time for singers to gather, warm-up, and ask questions.

- Suggest teaching techniques

Supplement a written agenda with suggestions on how to teach material to help leaders manage their limited time and learn useful teaching strategies (Table 2). For example, if the leader is assigned to teach notes and rhythms for a passage, one might suggest eliminating text and teaching the passage on a neutral syllable. Or if the leader is to help singers increase the tempo of a passage with complicated text, one might suggest a sequence where singers speak the text in rhythm at a slow tempo, sing it in the slow tempo, speak it in rhythm at a faster tempo, and then sing it in the faster tempo. The few minutes it takes for the conductor to write these

suggestions can enable singers to accomplish more and help leaders learn valuable teaching skills.

- Meet with section leaders

Perhaps the second greatest benefit of a sectional happens when conductors visit with their leaders following the rehearsal. Ideally, conductors and section leaders would converse in person following every sectional. Conductors should ask probing questions such as:

How did rehearsal go?

Was anyone absent?

**Table 2 – Timed Sectional Agenda with Teaching Strategies**

3:00 p.m.-3:05 p.m.	Gathering and warm-up
3:05 p.m.-3:15 p.m.	<i>Gaude plaude</i> (Perucona) Sing mm. 86-end. Revisit any tricky spots. Listen for crisp, clear, and confident singing. Sopranos, make sure both S1 and S2 parts are solid. Altos, ensure pronunciation is correct in m. 86.
3:15 p.m.-3:23 p.m.	<i>In taberna quano sumus</i> (Močnik) Sing stanzas 4 and 5. Note any struggles with text or pitch. Make sure S2 and A1 pitches are confident in mm. 32-33. Slow tempo down to double check individual parts in mm. 36-end. Then go back to performance tempo, making sure everyone is confident before moving on.
3:25 p.m.-3:35 p.m.	<i>Nicholai presulis</i> (Anon) Sing at performance tempo (c. 88/dotted-quarter) on syllable “ta,” ensuring there are no wrong notes or rhythms. Use remainder of the time to put text to the music.
3:35 p.m.-3:40 p.m.	<i>An Immorality</i> (Copland) Briefly rehearse m. 107-122, ensuring accents and unstressed syllables are distinct, with round vowels.
3:40 p.m.-3:45 p.m.	Questions/Requests In the last 5 minutes, answer questions or revisit passages as requested by the singers.



Do you feel the sectional was successful?

Did you have any challenges teaching?

Do you think the singers felt a sense of achievement when they left?

Was the timed agenda helpful?

Were you able to accomplish everything on the agenda?

Were singers energetic and engaged?

What passages of music still need work?

What could help you better prepare for the next sectional?

The goals for this conversation are: it helps the conductor plan for the next full rehearsal, it helps them monitor singers' progress in sectionals, it prompts section leaders to evaluate their teaching, and it provides an opportunity for conductors to counsel section leaders and steer their approach to future sectionals. Student leaders are still students—and short conversations like these help them grow to be stronger leaders.

- Cultivate multiple capable leaders

Though it is customary to maintain the same section leader for an entire year, it can be beneficial to appoint different leaders each semester. Not only does this enable multiple students to gain the experience of

preparing for and leading rehearsals, it also puts experienced leaders back in the ensemble, able to exemplify energetic, musical singing.

### Conclusion

Conductors are ultimately responsible for successful sectionals. By teaching their student leaders how to lead better sectionals, singers will likely achieve and enjoy their time more in full choir rehearsals. As an extension of the conductor, section leaders who elicit healthy and expressive singing and cultivate peer relationships will similarly provide

their singers with a unifying, musical experience that will encourage them to continue singing with enthusiasm and refinement. 

Felicia Mulé is a senior music education and music performance major. James Robison is a junior music education major. Both study at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Ryan Kelly is associate director of choral activities at West Chester University. rkelly@wcupa.edu.



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