

Transforming Conducting: Conducting for Transformation

The love of God, unutterable and perfect,
flows into a pure soul the way that light
rushes into a transparent object.
The more love that it finds, the more it gives
itself; so that, as we grow clear and open,
the more complete the joy of heaven is.
And the more souls who resonate together,
the greater the intensity of their love,
and, mirror-like, each soul reflects the other. –Dante Alighieri

Personal computers, Game Boys, Wii, television, screens in banks, stores, and dentist offices, text msgs, iPod-iPad-iPhone-I, I, I. We stare at two dimensional screens with brains imitating sleep wave patterns, looking and not seeing, interacting but not connecting, surfing and txting, killing aliens and shooting birds on slingshots lightning quick, multi-tasking, and side-by-side with loved ones communicating with others not present.

In our classrooms we are greeted two-dimensional faces, with lightning short attentions, fight to sit still with so little stimulus, too much quiet, and too long to concentrate. Slowly, our passion and desire is wounded as we struggle to connect, to express, to communicate, to be known, and to know. Our gestures become exaggerated and our faces frozen in our desire to motivate or create energy. We are drained. Schools implement new curricular models and teaching practices. Yet the work gets more difficult. We, who have been transformed by the beauty of music, by an inspirational teacher, or by the community of an ensemble, wonder why it can be so difficult to re-create those same experiences.

It is clear that we have been in a track away from traditional models of teaching for over a generation, yet we are losing the battle. However, within the last decade, an amazing discovery in brain research promises to provide a link between science and art, an understanding of how meaningful learning occurs, and how the science of learning can result in emotional knowledge and empathy which expresses itself in connection—with self, others, and music. This discovery is of a particular set of neurons within the motor cortex, called mirror neurons, otherwise known as mind-reading neurons, Dali Lama neurons and other nicknames, as they provide the secret to how we connect with things outside ourselves: empathy.

Steve was a veteran of the war in Iraq. He had lost a limb and yet still felt pain or itching in his phantom arm. Doctors discovered that if he sat across the room from someone he loved with a nurse, and if that nurse asked Steve to show them where his arm hurt on the other person, and if the nurse then massaged that spot, his pain would go away. Mirror neurons are the part of the brain which creates empathy, they remove the skin that separates us. Catching yawns, mothers mirroring their newborns first smiles, young lovers looking deeply into eyes, and magic moments of transformation in choir, all are moments of active mirror neuron building.

Some scientists proclaim that this is “the next big thing,” equal to the discovery of DNA.

We have been transformed, some in choir, some by faith, some by therapy, some by relationship, all with mirror neurons becoming activated. When a mirror neuron fires, we “feel” what the other feels, we “know” what the other is thinking and sensing, we intuit, we connect, we get outside our self. The information is instantly processed, not in a logical, concrete way, but in an empathetic way. We can get students to do before they know, to sense before they understand. Imagine teaching your choir some technique that they can already do! Think of them enjoying and connecting, responding and

feeling, engaging, even before they cognitively can describe what they can do, and imagine how easy the actual cognitive teaching of facts will be to a group of singers who already “know” what you are teaching them. Confidence, joy, energy, engagement, and retention abounds.

As this science develops, it will call into question all of our traditional techniques or teaching and rehearsing, most of which were developed for a nineteenth century audience. Music, and choral singing in particular, can lead the way in the application and revolution of our tried and true methodology, proving that empathy is indeed the doorway into teaching, learning, and assessment. We can never discipline or require a student to learn, we can never motivate enough long term to sustain meaningful learning, but we can always help students connect through the beauty of mirror neurons.

As we transform our gesture from eighteenth century floor-wall-wall-ceiling into a metaphor of the singing voice, as we transform our movements from arbitrary signals of cut-off, louder, or downbeat into movements that demonstrate what the body does to create these sounds, as we transform from conducting music, into communicating the body, the person, the voice, the air, we will connect and engage mirror neurons and begin the process of transformation in our singers. Not only will they do before they know, not only will they connect sensation with knowledge and feeling with information, but they will associate value with learning.

We begin our transformation with gesture, but this science also calls us to transform our pedagogy. Teacher or conductor centered rehearsals in which we spout knowledge to a choir unknowing, leading a process of moving a choir from a void of no sound desperately learning notes and rhythms so that we can begin to add in musicality or tone changes to a singer centered process of holistic discovery as they conduct, analyze, demonstrate, and teach themselves. Question and answer proliferates, demonstration abounds, students teaching each other is commonplace, students moving and conducting with you is the norm, creating new gestures and shared meaning is the goal.

Perhaps most importantly, the transformation impacts us. Perhaps this process begins as a hope to connect and become more successful with our performance, but it ends and is most profound as it transforms us, inside out. The transformed conductor chooses music for different reasons, be it an ongoing narrative or theme for the year, or with an eye on illuminating particular gifts of the choir, and never to fill out a program, or choose the best from a recent reading session. The transformed conductor thinks about music differently, less about how it goes, but how it feels. The transformed conductor takes the techniques of connectedness out of the music, out of the relationships in the choir, and into our lives where the connectedness is most difficult. The transformed conductor recognizes that choral music on its own has now value, but choral music imbued with creating connected communities and singers who feel, express, connect and assess is Essential, with a capital E.

These classes will explore and celebrate that there can be a technique of transformation. We can rejoice that transformation will now longer be a hoped for moment after choir tour, or those once-or-twice-a-year magical, musical moments. Rather, transformation becomes an expectation that the conductor brings to the ensemble, and a joy to behold on a daily basis. Our world is in desperate need for healers and lovers of humanity, as we consider our collective *voca* as teachers and musicians, let us keep in mind that this greater love, this greater understanding is the greater call.