

## **“Wow!”-ing Your Audience with Brian Tate**

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Every choir wants to “wow!” their audience. Here are some ideas for more exciting, moving, musical, and memorable performances. These tips and techniques come from my experience in leading gospel and world music choirs, and my background in theatre.

### **The three principles:**

- 1. The “ten times” rule**
- 2. The gesture leads the voice**
- 3. Choir is theatre**

### **The “Ten Times” Rule**

This is what I suggest to singers: *Whatever effect you want to put across to your audience, you need to do it ten times more than you think you need to do it.* We are all familiar with the challenge of diction: if it sounds normal to your own ear, chances are that nobody in the audience can make it out. In singing and making music, we often err on the side of being too conservative. This leads to a common choir issue: what I call “mezzo-itis”, that is; medium fast, medium loud/soft, medium articulation, and so on. Avoid the middle: the middle is boring. Choir can be the most exciting and moving experience imaginable. Expand your sphere of dynamics, phrasing, and articulation and stretch for more extremes. Composers work hard to create contrast, colour, and drama in their music and our job is to make the music come to life.

In rehearsal, I might ask the choir to sing a fortissimo chord as loud as they can, or exaggerate a crescendo, no matter how it sounds. Because they are good musicians, they rarely sing it too forced. The sound most often becomes exciting and free, full of energy and colour. The same holds true of pianissimo.

Most consonants and accents can use the ten times rule. The listener should be able to hear clearly every dynamic, articulation, and phrase

marking that is in the score, without seeing the score. Have your choir “punch” consonants or accents in rhythmic passages and then fall back with the rest of the phrase, exaggerating the “forward-and-back” effect. This will give the music much more groove (whatever the style or period) and prevent the choir from oversinging.

In working toward optimum dynamics and articulation, I find that it is most effective to work with extremes, building what you want from the outside in. What I mean by this is that moving away from the comfortable and familiar is like trying to escape gravity. It’s very hard to do by taking small steps away from the middle. It can be much more effective to start in the outer regions, and then bring the performance back in to where you want it. You can only discover how much is too much (tempo, accents, dynamics, etc.) by going “too far” as you experiment in rehearsal. You will then know just how far you can go before crossing that line - and you can usually go much further than you might think!

Apply the ten times rule to programming as well. Look for maximum contrast in tempi, textures, periods, and styles. Your singers and your audience will love it.

### **The Gesture Leads the Voice**

We know that singing involves the body, but sometimes we can forget how important the whole body contributes to singing. In all my vocal warm-ups and rehearsals I have singers use gesture and movement, walking around the room while vocalizing, and giving the arms and hands life, tracing the phrase with a sweep of the arm - just like we do as conductors. The gesture leads the voice. That is, if you externalize a phrase or articulation, the voice will follow that shape. A simple gesture can help a singer cut through many difficulties in realizing freedom and expression in their singing. The difference in the sound and phrasing is startling and immediate.

Gesture - and singing - involves the entire body. To help singers create a long line in, say, a waltz-like meter, I might have them spread out and dance their part as they sing. It is amazing how singing can become more musical when the whole body is engaged. To create the vocal intensity, try having your singers face each other in pairs, each pressing their hands against the other's hands (think "patty-cake"), leaning forward and pushing as they sing a phrase. Their voices will match the groundedness and intensity of the push.

But what about performance? Likely you won't want your choir dancing their parts down the aisles (or maybe you do - see "the ten times rule" above. I have never heard an audience member complain that a choir was too outrageous!). The point of gesture and movement is that the external movement helps singers internalize the experience, so that they can come from being grounded and use whatever gesture and movement is deemed appropriate in performance.

### **Choir is Theatre**

This is something I learned from studying with gospel choir directors and West African musicians, as well as my experience in teaching voice in theatre. All choir is theatre. And all theatre, at its most fundamental, is story telling. This is exactly what we do as choral musicians - we tell stories; ancient, modern, sacred, folkloric, emotional, dramatic, powerful and moving stories. The challenge is that we sing our stories often in a very intricate way that involves much training, rehearsing, and polishing. It can be easy to forget that all the work we do is in service not only to the beautiful tone, the perfectly tuned chord, the world of vocal color and dynamics - but also to telling the story.

I ask my singers: what's the song about? I want them to be clear for themselves about the story they are telling. If the song is about love, then what are some of the emotions associated with love? The experience of love is very complex:

there is need, fear, jealousy, resentment, and many other emotions that make up what we call love. Songs should be rich with nuance and depth. A well-written lyric is a play in miniature. It takes us on a journey that explores what it is to be human. The deeper you can go into the many aspects of the story and emotions, the more powerful music you can make.

Theatre is also a visual experience. We can enhance the optics for our audiences by having our singers present good "face" - alive, engaged faces that long to connect with the audience. I encourage choirs to make eye contact with the audience whenever possible (as well as watching the conductor, of course!). Varying your staging is always a very effective visual device, not only in processions, singing from balconies, and surrounding your audience, but also in how you can use the setup on the risers. If the text is not too long, a reading of the text before singing can enhance the performance. If you speak to your audience, a gesture that is usually very much appreciated, make what you say personal as well as informative. If you have a piece that the choir knows well (and is off-book with) that doesn't need conducting, take yourself out of the picture and let the choir have the floor. If you approach your programming, rehearsing, and performing as though choir is theatre, chances are you'll find you are using more variety and creativity in your choral art.