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Turn loose...allow them to take ownership

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As concert, festival, competition season draws near, once again it occurs to me that I take too much responsibility for the quality of my performing ensembles.

After all, how much singing do I actually do on stage? Unless we perform in the round, the audience does not get to see my face except to smile and take a bow. How many chords do I personally tune and vowels do I accurately shape and consonants do I put in just the right place? None! These things are not my responsibility in performance. The singers

must do it all.

It certainly is my responsibility to see that they have the training over the course of time to execute the technical aspects of music as well as the stylistic and historic perspectives, etc., but at some point the responsibility to carry out the task of “making music” must move from the conductor to the singer.

I find that I need to let loose of my tight controlling grip and turn not only the technical but emotional responsibility of the ensemble over to the singers before a true musical experience can happen for the audience, the singers or myself.

But when and how?

I find that I often wait too long. I rehearse notes, rhythms, vocal technique, diction, expressive devices, etc., and they blindly follow my direction until they arrive at a technical musical product that is pretty good.

We discuss the text, compositional techniques, historical perspective and stylistic characteristics, but when I look at their bodies and look into their eyes, I often do not see engaged souls and spirits.

Until I remove myself from the focal point and allow the singers to listen, think, react and rely on one another, they will not truly take ownership of the music for themselves. Only as I step away will they step forward.

One technique I use to force them to rely on themselves is simply not to conduct. Not even a downbeat. They must listen, sense and react to one another to start together and stay together. They can do it with only a few attempts, and learn a lot about themselves in the process, but only if I give them the responsibility and get out of the way.

Another simple technique is to have them sing with their eyes closed. They must respond to aural stimuli instead of visual.

One simple way to get them to “perform” and also take ownership is to bring a few students out front to listen and watch, then give critique. They will make critical comments back to the ensemble that I often have a hard time expressing, but really need to be aired. When closely monitored, a great deal of learning can take place. It is also beneficial for them to hear their ensemble from out in front on occasion. They do not know what their ensemble really sounds like to an audience and will usually be surprised at how good it actually sounds.

I recall four extraordinary rehearsals in preparation for a very significant performance two years ago. These rehearsals changed the group significantly and they became one as an ensemble.

The music became a part of them and they believed in the music and in each other. These rehearsals happened while I was out of town and a substitute with no musical background or knowledge was left to supervise.

The students did it 100% themselves and they loved it. They could not have gotten to that musical end without all of the time we spent working together prior to those four rehearsals, but I believe they would not have gotten to the same level of performance if I had lead those rehearsals.

That was a unique ensemble. But the concept holds true to different degrees with ensembles of all ages. Choruses could not do much of quality without caring, knowledgeable conductors. But I also believe that choruses can not do their absolute best until the conductors turn the ensemble over to the singers and give them the responsibility and ownership. Only as singers take responsibility for the ensemble do conductors have the freedom to lead them to meaningful musical experiences.

Try letting go and experience what your singers can really do.