

Listen, Directors

by Ginny LeDoux

We can only be at our best when we have a clear choral image for our choirs. Unfortunately that image is frequently the last or the forgotten part of our pedagogy.

As a young student at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, I will never forget the day Leopold Stokowski came to conduct the choir. I joined other students lining the stairway to catch a glimpse of the famous musician. Suddenly, I saw that famous white head as he ascended the stairs. To my amazement, he stopped directly in front of me and asked if I were a student. I nodded and he admonished me to "Listen, always listen." At that time I didn't realize how truthful nor valuable was his advice.

Rebecca Thompson, former Director of the Los Angeles Children's Chorus, reminds us to teach our choirs by singing to and with them, then backing off to about 50%, and finally, not singing at all. Great advice! How often I find myself singing with the singers, never weaning them from *my* voice, never trusting them to develop their own sound.

When we sing with the choir we can't listen to their sound!

I bring a tape recorder to some of my rehearsals. It has been shocking to play back the tapes. Too often, I hear myself talk talk talk. Far too often, I hear noisy young voices talking. Then, when they sing, I hear a different choir. Not *my* choir! The choir I hear is

nowhere near the choir I want. I hear poor intonation, sloppy pronunciation, and imbalance of voices. Then I realize how little I have been listening.

Many of you are teachers who come to direct after teaching in school all day. Many others work as accompanists, administrators, or in the business world. Often you barely have enough time to fight the traffic, find the choir notebook, set up chairs, and develop a quick lesson plan before the children arrive. As rehearsal begins, you become totally involved with preparing the anthem, settling discipline problems, wondering where the missing children are, giving bathroom permissions, etc. No wonder listening drifts to the bottom of the list!

Well, what sound do you want?

Do you have an aural image of the way you want the choir to sound? Do you collect recordings of exemplary boy choirs, European choirs, and American children's choirs and keep cassettes of such choirs in the car and play them as you rush to rehearsal? Have you tried waking up to their glorious sound as you hurry through the morning routine? For a change, before flopping in front of the TV at night, discipline yourself to experience the beauty of children's voices. Make every effort to attend concerts given by young choirs, whether they are touring church choirs or professional groups.

Encourage your local or nearest Choristers Guild Chapter to hold yearly festivals, if they aren't doing that already. Clear your calendar for such important listening events for yourself and your choristers.

Take time to listen

Allow time in rehearsal to listen to the choral sound being produced. Are the vowels consistent? Are the voices blending? Are choristers producing head tone? Are the children using correct posture and breathing to encourage their fullest vocal potential? Are consonants together and clear? Is rhythm accurate? Are word and

phrase endings held out and finished together? Do the singers start together, with a preparation breath? Is there good phrasing? Are the singers making musical sense of the lines? Are syllables correctly accented?

Not only should *you* be hearing all of these musical ingredients, but you should be coaching your choristers to listen by asking *them* the same questions. Their participation will encourage their musical involvement.

With an aural image of what you want and a commitment to listen during rehearsals you can assist young choristers reach their fullest choral and musical potential. Pledge to bring a beautiful choral image to your rehearsal, coach your singers to new heights, and be the best director you can by listening.

Directors' Listening Reminders

1. Establish a good choral image by **listening** to good recordings, concerts.
2. Record rehearsals and **listen** to yourself and your choir.
3. Sing less and **listen** more.
4. **Listen** for the many choral and musical ingredients you want to hear in your choir.
5. Encourage the singers to **listen** by asking questions and to **listen** to their own critiques.