KS3/4/5

# Getting the most out of your rehearsals

by Jonathan James

**Jonathan James** is a freelance music educator and conductor, with over 20 years' experience of rehearsing orchestras and choirs. A former head of performing arts, he is currently completing his PhD in music education.

## INTRODUCTION

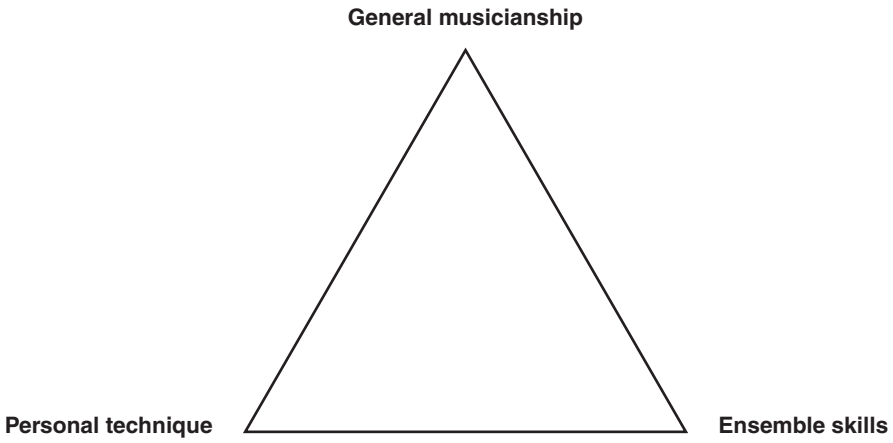
The roots of the verb 'to rehearse' come from the medieval world of farming, and has to do with 're-harrowing' the ground, in other words raking it repeatedly until it's free of stones and snares, ready for the plough.

From time to time, our rehearsals can have a little too much of the 'harrowing', or even of the 'hearse' to them. This resource is about revitalising our approach within a school context. It looks at the principles of effective rehearsal technique across all stages of learning, whether in a choir, orchestra or band.

There are three main aspects covered:

- Preparation of the rehearsal cycle.
- The anatomy of the rehearsal.
- How to lead your musicians.

All three place learning at the centre. How do we conduct a rehearsal that goes beyond 're-harrowing' the piece in hand and improves general musicianship, both in terms of ensemble skills and individual technique? You could represent this intersection as a simple triangle:




Within the context of teaching, this broader premise for the rehearsal needs to be held in mind throughout each portion of the session. The pressure will always be there just to teach the notes and hone a piece for a concert. This is a learning experience in itself, true, but the constant challenge is somehow to eke out more learning on more levels. That is the main concern of this resource.

## PREPARATION

Herbert von Karajan, legendary conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, used to compare rehearsing an orchestra for a concert to preparing a horse for jumping a fence. Once the rider had geed up the horse to the right speed of attack and steered exactly the right line, the key was to relax into the jump and let the horse take over. A successful jump was down to the run-up and preparation.

See *Conversations with Karajan* by Richard Osborne for more insights.

True, that was the Berlin Philharmonic and not your average school band or choir. In reality, we might find ourselves having to do several rescues during the concert itself, and it can even feel like you're lifting the horse

over the fence yourself at times. Part of the skill of a school conductor is dealing with these unforeseeable hiccups with good humour and calmness, and in how swiftly you can get a derailed piece back on track. However, the principle remains true whether in individual or group rehearsal: a successful performance is down to effective preparation.

In this section, we're going to take a step further back and look at how to prepare for a successful rehearsal – how to prepare for good preparation, in a sense. There are three areas to consider: score learning, session planning and logistics.

## Score learning

In a previous resource on conducting (see *Effective Conducting*, *Music Teacher*, June 2016), the emphasis was on how the conductor internalises and communicates the score as a foundation. As a busy teacher, you may have got into the habit of using the first rehearsal to acquaint yourself with the score. The first challenge, then, is to set aside time to really get into the score and to assess what the learning objectives from the piece could be. The rehearsal process has to be primarily for the learners, not for you.

### PREPPING THE REPERTOIRE

The first step is to pick the right repertoire. This can be an arduous task, as you are having to consider not the just the basics of orchestration or vocal resources, but also how to differentiate for individual ability and find material that presents enough interest and challenge to last the rehearsal period – a term, typically – while not digging a hole for the group to fall into.

Don't be afraid, if copyright allows, to do your own arrangements of the material to make it more suitable for your group. If the violas need bolstering (and they often do), then consider rewriting a 'violin 3' part to go alongside them. Or divide the alto and tenor lines so that it is less exposing. Perhaps add some embellishments or extra difficulties to the flute part so that your more able players don't get bored. Or expand the percussion parts so they have to jump between instruments and keep alert. For example, devising some xylophone entries for the timpanist is a great way of keeping them on their toes!

All this has the advantage of putting you into the shoes of the players and singers, and considering the piece from their point of view. It's always a good idea to look through the parts themselves with this in mind, as scores can be misleading. How will the trombones feel if half the rehearsal is taken up with multiple rests and the occasional note on a downbeat? Can your young bass singers actually reach that low E? Does your clarinettist actually have an A mouthpiece? Such is the level of detail that you need to immerse yourself in at the early stage of choosing the right piece.

### PREPPING THE SCORE

Assuming you've settled on suitable repertoire, the attention now turns to the score itself. Score preparation requires many passes over the same material, each one searching for new depth. One way of visualising the process is that you are sculpting a sound image of the score in your mind, with the sculpture taking on extra shape and detail with each pass.

The process might start with a recording of the piece, or through reading it at the piano, but it needs to progress quickly to honing the sculpture with just your aural imagination. It's a great exercise in developing the inner ear, to 'hear' accurately what you are reading. Your aim is to have a clear aural picture of what the piece should sound like, and of what you want it to express.

A 'clear aural picture' means, in practice, that you can sing, or at least vocalise or demonstrate in some way, any element within the score. This applies to the expression and direction of a phrase through to its constituent parts, such as a tricky interval to pitch or a problematic rhythm. As a leader, you need to be able to show confidently how the musical language works, and not be dependent on others to interpret it for you. You

might need to consider how you would break down a rhythm and explain it, or be able to sing the notes in a particular chord.

The ultimate aim of the initial preparation for you, as the conductor, is to be able to lift your head up and out of the score right from the first rehearsal. It's easier to listen attentively when you are not trying to read the parts at the same time. And the first rehearsal is the one where the most correction is going to be needed, as well as the most coaxing through visual connection to your musicians and confident body language, all of which come from a solid understanding of the score. To have your head up implies you have memorised the material to some extent.

## WHAT IS THE MUSIC SAYING?

Part of the preparation process is coming up with a vision of the music that you can express to the musicians in their language. As music is metaphor, we need to attend to what it signifies right from the start. It's often tempting to see the rehearsal process as one of getting the notes right first and then layering on the expression of the music. It can be more symbiotic than that, however.

In the score preparation, you can be thinking of what each line and paragraph is expressing, how it makes you feel, and which words and images you will use to reflect that to the players. The expression is not an added layer, but the core of the language. It might be easier, for example, for a singer to sing their high entry more quietly if they connect to the metaphorical quality of the sound – a shadow, or gentle breeze, or distant echo, or whatever you come up with. Thinking through the images you'll use and writing them into the score is an important round of score preparation.

In summary:

- Do you have a clear aural picture of the music?
- Do you know what happens on the next page without turning?
- Can you express what the music is saying on each page?
- Have you identified wider learning objectives?

## WIDER LEARNING OBJECTIVES

On that last bullet point, have you considered the context for the score, and how it will help the musicians' general understanding of music?

- How is the piece typical of its period?
- What does its writing tell us about its composer?

You could create a quick handout to help anchor the students' appreciation of what they're playing or singing, tying in with set works where possible, or at least the 'wider listening' component of the specification. Learning a new work is an opportunity for students to think as composers as well as interpreters, by thinking about the whys and hows of the piece. As the rehearsals progress, so you could plan to cover one distinct element each time.

## PLANNING FROM THE PLAYERS' PERSPECTIVES

It helps to look at each part and anticipate the basics of what the musician will need as an essential scaffolding for their first attempt at the work. This includes marking in:

Consider putting in extra if needed: eg A1, A2, etc

- consistent rehearsal letters.
- bar numbers if necessary.
- bowing – if possible, organise a meeting of section leaders to discuss this.
- breathing and breath marks.
- fingerings, particularly for beginners.
- accidentals.
- expressive elements that need attention, like a *subito piano* or sustained *crescendo.*
- useful cues.
- structural instructions – a *da capo* or extra repeat, for example.

You could also use this opportunity to add some key images that you feel might help, and to anticipate any ensemble issues with timely reminders such as 'Don't rush!', or 'Look up!'. Adding cues is so helpful for encouraging better listening, and for alleviating the burden of counting long multiple rests.

This annotation of parts can, of course, be tedious and time-consuming, but it will save so much time in rehearsal and allow space for you to meet the wider learning objectives.

## REHEARSAL FIRST AID KIT

'Professionalism begins with a pencil.' Perhaps it doesn't, but a pencil does go a long way. Having a box of 2B pencils in the rehearsal is essential (sharpened and usable), together with a consistent encouragement to use them and to take the time to mark in observations as they are given. There needs to be a firm expectation set around this, that students will mark as they go and not rely on their memory.

Which other small bits and pieces come in useful in a general rehearsal?

- Rubbers
- Sellotape
- Rosin
- Spare reeds, strings, mutes, beaters, etc
- White marking tape for showing position on fingerboard
- Drum key for tuning the kit
- Tuning fork or pitch-pipe for singers
- Recording device

You can add, no doubt, many more items to the list above from your own experience. It's useful to create a 'first aid kit' like this for your rehearsals that you can take around and keep regularly stocked up. Again, it's all about anticipation.

The room itself also needs to be prepared, and time allowed both to set the space and to reset it to its former state. We know this, and yet we often let it slip during the course of the term. Arriving in a well laid-out rehearsal space is so critical, though, for setting the tone and expectation of the session. If possible, draw up a roster for which student will take responsibility for this task each week. A seating plan may also need to be communicated in advance, particularly for earlier rehearsals.

## PLANNING THE REHEARSAL CYCLE

Notice the emphasis on the word 'cycle' here. The rehearsals need to follow the equivalent of a loose scheme of work, acknowledging that there will be the usual three phases to incorporate:

- Familiarisation with the material.
- Detailed work.
- Performance preparation.

Let's look at these in turn, without breaking down the session content too much, as this will be covered in the next section.

The first stage necessitates time for read-throughs and getting a sense of the 'mountain to climb' (although you might wish to reframe that). It's so important that everybody in the room has a sense of the piece as a whole: its overall structure, the points of most tension, and how the musical narrative holds together. The tendency is to go into detail section by section and then join the whole together. Keeping the analogy of a mountain walk, the musicians need to know the map of the journey at all times, and to have a clear sense of where the summit is.

The second phase is where you look at the technical, expressive and ensemble issues in more detail. This needs the most space in your scheme of work. It can involve sectionals, peer mentoring and allowing time for deconstruction and reappraisal with recordings, if possible. A well-placed recording session can be extremely motivational for everybody involved to have a reality check and assess where they are on that route to the summit. This is the period where listening skills can be sharpened, and individual technical issues can be addressed.

The final phase leads up to the concert and will incorporate dress runs and polishing up performance etiquette. However experienced the student, they need to practise how to walk on to the stage, how to hold their poise

as they wait for the downbeat, and how to receive applause and bow together at the end. A good performance can be quickly undermined by a sloppy bow (or equivalent acknowledgment) with some players sheepishly avoiding the task, or giggling and chatting with their neighbour and otherwise detracting the attention from the group as a whole. Basic stagecraft like this should be considered at the same fundamental level as a tuning a group; it's part of the ABC, not an afterthought.

In summary:

- Show them the mountain.
- Keep the summit in sight at all times.
- Have the kit you need for the journey.
- Allow enough time for getting into the detail, and for this to be student-led where possible.
- Attend to performance etiquette: workshop it, gameify it, make it important.

So, the planning is complete. You have your ten-week rehearsal cycle mapped out, your first aid kit is stocked and ready, and, most importantly, the parts are marked up and the score has been internalised, and you're bursting with ideas and a strong musical vision for the pieces. We can now look at the tactics of the rehearsal itself.

## ANATOMY OF A REHEARSAL

Let's say you have an hour to rehearse, and that the space is fully set up by the time you need to start, with all students in place and ready to sing or play. It's a dream scenario, maybe, but let's assume it for now.

The hour could typically be split as follows:

| Activity | Time |
|---|---|
| Announcements and tuning | 5 mins |
| Warm-ups | 5 mins |
| Play-through | 10 mins |
| Detailed rehearsal | 30 mins |
| Final play-through | 10 mins |

The balance of timings will shift according to which part of the rehearsal cycle you're in, but arguably any rehearsal should contain all the elements above in some form.

### Setting expectations

Let's return to the dream scenario above, where all the students are dutifully in position and waiting expectantly for your first instruction. It is actually possible, but only if:

- you and a student set-up team have arrived early to set out chairs, battle with recalcitrant stands, find parts and put out pencils.
- the students take responsibility for arriving early enough to get their instruments out and ready for tuning right at the appointed hour.

This means you have to set the clear expectation that it is a team responsibility to start punctually and make the most of the time. It should be the same as a sports session. They can't arrive on the pitch in school uniform and expect to be given time to change while everybody else is already doing their stretches. A music rehearsal requires the same corporate discipline, with everybody doing their bit not to let their section down.

### ENCOURAGING PUNCTUALITY

The same tactics apply as for a classroom setting: incentives often work best. Can you offer an appropriately musical award to the section that shows the best attendance and punctuality?

- Tickets to a show?
- A performance opportunity?
- A workshop with a visiting artist?

Failing that, there are always certificates or chocolate…

## Tuning

The tuning process is a great opportunity to bring a calm focus to the start of the session. Whatever their age, musicians need to realise that tuning cannot be skimmed over, and that to play with out-of-tune instruments is like going to war without a shield. It will be very exposing very quickly.

### TONE AND TAI CHI

Consider a 'tai chi' approach to tuning, where everybody tunes with a Zen-like calm, listening intently to their sound and feeling in no rush. It's an exercise in generating a lovely tone as well. Rather than scratching and scraping to find the A, see it as an important first connection to the sound, and to striving for quality.

String players need to use long, slow bows and listen out for the pure vibration of the 5th when the notes are acoustically in synch. Wind players need to play sustained quiet notes and really check the octaves and tuning throughout the instrument, allowing for some alterations as it warms up. Timpani should ideally be tuned before the session.

Tuning will happen section by section, and can be helped when starting from the bass upwards, or at least starting with the instruments that have the most difficulty hearing themselves in the general melee.

Iván Fischer and the Budapest Festival Orchestra still, at the height of their profession, use a chorale to check ensemble tuning at the beginning of every rehearsal. Is there an equivalent piece that your players or singers can memorise and use to focus their intonation?

Singers also benefit from time taken to tune 5ths and octaves together, *organum* style, before adding the tricky 3rd and then shifting the chord up and down.

### THE MAIN OBJECTIVE

All of this is about sending a clear message that tuning *matters*, and that attentive listening is required right from the start of the rehearsal. For beginner ensembles, the students will inevitably need help tuning their instruments (and extra time needs to be allowed accordingly), but they can be encouraged to comment, at least, on what's flat or sharp.

Electronic tuning devices can detract from reliance on the ear. Relative intonation is more useful.

## Warm-up

Choirs will have a standard set of exercises to warm up the voice, loosen the shoulders and neck, and activate the diaphragm, tongue and jaw. It can be fun for students to lead this process, or even introduce warm-up ideas of their own.

### MAKING IT RELEVANT

Whether instrumental or vocal, a warm-up should ideally incorporate a passage from the piece you're about to work on. It could be something that has challenges for diction or tuning, or a faster passage that needs staccato articulation, for example. The important thing is to keep it short and see if it can be looped easily. Avoid the temptation for this section to evolve into a bigger analysis, as this can be saved for later.

### WIDER OBJECTIVES

Every musician needs to attend to the basics of their posture, breathing, articulation and tone control. Can you divide these up strategically over the rehearsal cycle, and isolate a different element each time?

## The play-through

The initial play-through will have more weight at the beginning of the cycle, to aid familiarisation of the piece as a whole, or at least a substantial section of it. Once the players have got through the initial sight-reading and perhaps the slight panic of any challenging passages, you can immediately help them on the re-pass to be proactive in identifying issues to work on.

### EXPRESSION AS CORE, NOT A LAYER

The objective of a play-through, initially, may be just to sort out the nuts and bolts, and get the notes right. However, as soon as possible, try to give a sense of the expression of the piece, the story it is telling, and how its structure works.

- What can you say about the work that will help your students connect to it and be excited to work on it?
- Can they guess the narrative of various sections?
- Can the spot the climaxes and tension points?
- Can they make up an alternative ending?

## The detailed work

This can be a really fun part to the rehearsal if the pace is kept high and you're able to differentiate successfully. You need to avoid any one section being idle for too long. Some of this can be sorted through having timely sectionals, even if they are just 20-minute break-out sessions to address a specific issue. If, however, you need to keep them in the same space:

- Can students be tasked with looking at a specific fingering, or breathing, or any other silent exercise while you work on another section?
- Can you give them specifics to listen out for, comment on and perhaps correct from the section you're working on?
- Can you ask one of them to have a go at conducting?

### WHAT ARE ENSEMBLE SKILLS?

Any detailed section of a rehearsal will attend to the following issues in some way, which can be seen on a continuum between the technical and the expressive:

- Balance
- Blend
- Tone and intonation
- Unity of pulse
- Unity of articulation and attack
- Rhythmic precision
- Combined intent and vision

These can be put on a whiteboard or be on permanent display in the rehearsal venue, so that you and the students can methodically refer to them and discuss how to improve them together. Pounce on opportunities for students to own the process.

### SOME TACTICS

Especially as the term progresses, try and involve the musicians in improving their levels of analysis and diagnosis. What went wrong and why? How can they correct it?

One correction technique is to reverse the problem, and to deliberately play the passage 'wrong' so that the corrected version is made all the more clear and memorable. If you need the strings to play more off the string, for example, ask them to play legato first and then do the opposite, to hear the difference.

The middle lines in an orchestral or vocal texture are often those that get most easily overlooked. Some of your rehearsal can be dedicated to highlighting them, getting everybody to play along and altering their dynamics so the inner workings are brought to the fore and laid bare.

As with individual practice, sometimes it can be productive to start a piece at the end and work backwards, or pick a distinct section before threading it all together. Avoid the default practice of starting at the beginning.

> Play 'spot the motif' as a regular game, encouraging the musicians to write in cues accordingly, or at least pencil in who has a key idea at any particular point. Encourage them to connect visually with that section as they play.

To really bring the focus onto the ear, an occasional 'silent rehearsal' can work well with maturer groups. Ideas to be corrected can be demonstrated on the instrument rather than verbalised, and a sign language used to designate where you're starting from or what general area you're addressing – with a whiteboard as back-up for when the charades break down.

If you have time within the term, then another fun exercise is to swap seats or even roles within the ensemble, to enable a different and illuminating perspective. Within the strings, make sure different people get the chance to lead the section at various points, to avoid hiding in the back desks.

### SING AND CLAP

Throughout, don't be afraid to ask the musicians to put their instruments down and to use traditional classroom techniques of singing, vocalising or clapping to work on embodying a rhythm or coping with an awkward melodic line. As ever, slow the tempo down until the problem can be overcome by everybody in the room.

### FIX IT!

Finally, with any problem you identify, either as conductor or as a group, try to ensure it is actually fixed and not just glossed over. The ensemble needs to hear that they have got better through the work, and that you've found a way of getting to the root of the problem, whether technical or affective, and of solving it. It can be demotivating to have the same problems recur each rehearsal without ever finding an effective solution.

> The overarching learning goals here are:
>
> - Active listening
> - Self-correction
> - Improved ensemble skills

## Final run-through

This is a great opportunity to underline what good work has been done in the session. It can also be used to set the bar for the next rehearsal. Instead of playing safe, try and incorporate a run-through of a section at concert tempo, filled with the drama and emotional commitment you will want. Give them a sense of what is yet to come and what the piece is really about: a chance to see the wood for the trees.

### TAKE-HOMES

In an ideal world, you would set passages or technical issues that need attention between one rehearsal and next, giving clear take-home tasks for personal practice. Where it may be unlikely for all but the keenest students to really take this on board, you can cascade the issues to the instrumental and vocal teachers who can incorporate some of the material in their one-to-one sessions. Your aim is to make the connection in the student's mind between their personal practice and their ensemble commitments.

# LEADERSHIP STYLE

Throughout this resource, the emphasis has been on facilitating student participation in their own learning. This is ultimately a question of leadership.

As you'll know from your own experience, singing or playing an instrument can be quite a vulnerable activity, and one where egos can easily be bruised and self-confidence quickly sapped. There are a few general principles to bear in mind here:

- Keep it about the music and not the person.
- Use 'we' more than 'I'.
- Praise and reinforce good practice, wherever you find it, but…
- Don't give false praise. Save the 'great!' and 'excellent!' for when they count.

With older students, you're looking for a model of co-leadership, and you need to think of ways for them to share responsibility rather than relying passively on instruction from the podium. Aim for quick-fire questions that keep everybody alert and contributing, without allowing the pace to sag through getting too embroiled in conversation. They need to be playing and singing more than talking.

As pointed out in a previous resource, 'maestro' means 'teacher'. Your identity on the podium might subtly change as you take charge of the flow of a rehearsal, but ultimately the same values and principles that you hold as a teacher are still in play. You will need to find that balance between facilitation and direction, and how to make each session as inspiring as the last. An effective rehearsal is not just one where the playing or singing has improved, but when everybody in the room knows *why*.