

GIA Music Institute 2025

## **The Conductor Still Leads: Reframing Timeless Practices For Modern Challenges**

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*Because “the only thing constant is change,” conductors, teachers, and leaders must sharpen their awareness to expand their creativity in working holistically with others in and through musical performance.*

*Working from a model of a traditional choral rehearsal,  
we will explore ways of helping singers  
ground themselves, broaden their musical skill and awareness, and  
see the interconnections of self and others, music and life.*

### “Still” Leading

- *The Conductor as Leader*: timeless leadership principles applied to our conducting lives.
- But the world keeps moving and impacts the musicians that come into our rehearsal room. And those musicians are *whole humans*; they are more than the labels of “volunteers” or “altos” or “kids” or “professionals . . . .” What does leadership require of us now?

*Human nature wants to give up, but  
leadership nature presses on to learn and grow forward.*

- We continue to adapt, use our creativity and resources to build a powerful, meaningful, and “present” experience (“present” era context and mindfully crafted). Persistence is central to the creative process and always at the core of leadership.

*Wise leaders lead the humans in front of them  
towards the humans they have yet to become.*

***This is Whole Human Leadership.***

## Modern Challenges

### #1 *Speed of Life*

- Fast, constant information; news, tasks, emails, “now” expectation.
- Overbooked schedules=running from one to the next without a buffer. Helpful conveniences encourage us to add more to our schedule because we have “more time;” but this actually *compresses time*; we always feel “late” and time deficient.
- The constancy of speed incites significant physiological changes: raised BP/heart rate, cortisol rush; poor decision making/brain impact (no time between stimulus and response); poor self-care (fast food on the run); no “off” even at the end of the day. Tired but wired.

### #2 *Constant Distractions*

- Alerts, notifications, texts, rapid task-switching (no such thing as “multi-tasking”); scrawl/split screens; overstimulation of the senses, physical pings on your body, and yes, people.
- Inability to disengage, to let go; “just one more email;” phone near you creates anxiety and decreases attention; FOMO and addictive scrolling; impact on self-image.
- Distractions result in brain drain and impact cognitive health, limit our focus and that of our singers. Minimizes our ability to pause, hold space, to still the mind chatter, and “sit with it.” Lead to lack of connection in ideas among areas of one’s life, to feeling segmented in and out of rehearsal. Limits our ability to use our foresight.

### #3 *Widespread Anxiety and Depression*

- All of the above as well as personal challenges, physical health, family situations, trauma, world unrest and uncertainty, means many suffer from fight-or-flight (fear of what might happen) or freeze (giving up, heaviness, hopelessness). Poor self-image and lack of agency are pervasive.
- Trauma is universal. Singers bring all this as they come to our creative work together—we *bring it, too*.

### Our Opportunity for Impact

Modern challenges cause or contribute to negative physiological, psychological and emotional changes in ourselves and our singers that  
***the choral environment can mitigate.***

***By reframing timeless practices, we can shape the ensemble experience to be a***  
 grounding, strengthening, encouraging, and healing force (within our scope of practice, yes, but note that the root of “healing” or “health” is the word “whole”).

We can help musicians develop skills and awareness, through breath, movement, sound, and purpose, so they can know their human worth, reclaim their agency, and build strength for our modern world.

### Timeless Practices

- From *choral pedagogy*—what we already know and do, with creative modification or expansion, cueing, weaving in principles (“grounding” in alignment, e.g.).
- From *somatic practices*—mindfulness, yoga, breathwork, athletics, physiology (breath awareness and impact on mood and energy, e.g.).
- From *psychology, leadership, personal development*—persistence, grit, self-worth, agency, and team building for motivation, personal growth, hope and more.

***“You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop.”***

***~Rumi***

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## The Reframed Choral “Practice”

**Arrive** in this Sacred Space

**Breathe** for Awareness

**Move** to Expand and Ground

**Sound** to Direct Energy

**Connect** to Create with Purpose

## I Arrive in this Sacred Space

- *“Land.”* Pause. Slow down the speed of life. Set the stage for mindful rehearsal.
- *Honor this Sacred Space.* A place of value, where something special happens. Respect. Relationship. Our demeanor and “mirror neurons.”
- *Still the Mind Chatter.* Leave it outside the door for this precious time together.
- *Begin Gentle Movement* (cat/cow; rock side to side; neck stretch; relax eyes, unclench jaw, soften between brows; chair yoga; alignment in seat).
- *Get Grounded.* Sit bones, strength, stability, foundation. Our first “pose” together😊

*\*Bridge from outer world to inner world, outer life to this musical experience.*

## II Breathe for Awareness

- *Breathe to Notice What Is.* Soften gaze/close eyes. Awareness without judgment; mindfulness (present moment, today at this time), acknowledge what is.
- *Develop Sense Awareness.* What do you hear, see, smell, taste, feel? From judgment to discernment.
- *Change your State.* Inhale for more energy. Exhale to calm. Impact on nervous system. Take what you need. Agency. Effort and ease, balance. Apply later to singing breath practices.
- *Set an Intention.* Rehearsal plan or broader. Here is where we are for this hour and what our main focus is today. What do you need from this hour today? This time is your gift to yourself.

*\*Calming, balancing, grounding, connecting to self and others and the work. Ability to make change, have an impact. You matter and are valued.*

### III Move to Expand and Ground

- *Stand and Explore.* Flowing rotation. Free spinal tension (sedentary life). Natural, mindful movement as physical metaphor and *ahimsa*.
- *Connect Breath to Body.* Side arm lift and breathe; breath starts the action. Visualize expansion, where do you feel it (balloons on back body?). Inhale to expand, exhale to release. Make space in body and in mind. Find muscle memory here to transfer later.
- *Use Cross Body Movement.* Brain benefits of cross body activity (right arm, left foot, etc.). Regain “sense-ability;” get into your body more; (energy through fingertips, shift weight left/right, shoulders away from ears).
- *Build your Body Architecture.* From the ground up (security, roots). Put weight where heel meets arch. Extend arms overhead (hope, possibility) as you “ground down to lift up.” “Golden thread,” skull back into hand, space in the spine for breathing.
- *Flow, Balance, Focus.* Sun Salutations. Make this your own, adapt; you know your experience. *Dristi* (where you put your attention matters).

*\*Build strength, accomplishment, body awareness, sense awareness.*

*Experience nuance, in the “now” experience. Singers personalize movement, own their readiness for rehearsal.*

#### IV Sound to Direct Energy

- *Hum* (then change to vowels). 12321 (humming impact on the nervous system). Explore physical metaphor.
- *Increase Energy and Change Style*. Vi vi vi vi va 12345/5/54321 (arched hands, bounce, staccato). Start to work with sections, TB-s then SA-s. Roles we play, relationships in music (who is more important now?).
- *Ground Down to Lift Up*. Yah, yah, yah 5-3-1 descending. Gesturally “lift” the bottom note. Maintain energy integrity even in low register.
- *Expand Range and Performance*. Scale to the 9<sup>th</sup> with style and dynamic changes. Lots of gesture possibilities! “Third eye” for accuracy in the highest and softest iteration. Sing from your feet!
- *Discern and Re-Set*. Unison “oo” slide over 8 counts, use hands on “dimmer switch.” Notice what you did, don’t just go on auto-pilot!

*\*Play, flow, explore, FUN, brain work (novel, with a purpose, do-able).  
Physical metaphor to connect body and mind, “feel” musical ideas.*



## **V      Connect to Create with Purpose**

- *Teach in Context.* Connect ideas, relationships, text, arc of the piece, experience, sense-ability. Whole/Part/Whole.
- *Creatively Persist.* In challenging moments, re-establish breath and body. Persistence as the path to excellence. We are strong and have done hard things before 😊 Unify the breath in the room.
- *Focus Attention.* Recall third eye, physical metaphor, “dimmer” activity.
- *Experience the Sound, Notice the Impact.* “What changed, what did you notice?” Mindfulness, ownership, agency, connection to self and others.
- *Shape the Phrase to a Point of Arrival.* Brain interest (novel, with a purpose, and do-able).
- *Remember our Greater Purpose.* A culmination, not cessation, of rehearsal (John Dewey idea).

*\*See the importance of everyone’s roles and our connection to one other:*

*Who has the attention now, who needs something now?*

*Expand that out to see the value of each human in this room, on this planet.*

*Namaste. Singing for the Greater Good.*

*We are in the business of good!*

***“Stop acting so small. You are the universe in ecstatic motion.”***

***~Rumi***

## Question & Answer Opportunity and Wrap-Up

Check out my related work:

- *The Conductor as Leader: Principles of Leadership Applied to Life on the Podium.*  
<https://giamusic.com/resource/the-conductor-as-leader-book-g7071>
- Forward Motion video course on *The Conductor as Leader*, available for grad credit or CEU credit. <https://www.fwdmotion.org/sp-ramonawis-conductorasleader>
- “Breath, Body, and Being: A Yoga-Inspired Choral ‘Practice.’” *Choral Journal*, October 2021, Volume 62, Number 3. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27109969>
- “Incorporating Yoga into Choral Classrooms and Rehearsals.” CuedIn, J.W. Pepper blog. <https://blogs.jwpepper.com/incorporating-yoga-into-choral-classrooms-and-rehearsals/>
- ChoralNet blog, “The Conductor as Yogi.” (Regular posts since 2020)
- “Physical Metaphor in the Choral Rehearsal: A Gesture-Based Approach to Developing Vocal Skill and Musical Understanding.” [https://acda-publications.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/choral\\_journals/October\\_1999\\_Wis\\_R.pdf](https://acda-publications.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/choral_journals/October_1999_Wis_R.pdf)
- *Gesture and Body Movement as Physical Metaphor to Facilitate Learning and to Enhance Musical Experience in the Choral Rehearsal.* Northwestern University, 1993, Ph.D. dissertation. <https://sites.northwestern.edu/cseme/center-for-the-study-of-education-and-the-musical-experience/alumni/dissertations/ramona-wis/>

Other resources to check out:

### **Music and Mind**

- Renee Fleming, *Music and Mind: Harnessing the Arts for Health and Wellness.*  
<https://a.co/d/dHegI98>
- Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross, *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us.*  
<https://a.co/d/4ZQCroE>

### **Yoga and Singers**

- Linda Lister, *Yoga for Singers: Freeing Your Voice and Spirit Through Yoga.*  
<https://a.co/d/jhGEUtz>
- Heather Lyle, *Vocal Yoga: The Joy of Breathing, Singing, and Sounding.*  
<https://a.co/d/haCSXjv>
- Nicolai Bachman, *The Path of the Yoga Sutras: A Practical Guide to the Core of Yoga.*  
<https://a.co/d/5G1PpRt>

### **Breathing and the Nervous System, Anxiety, Depression, and more**

- Andrea Zaccaro et al, “How Breath-Control Can Change Your Life: A Systematic Review on Psycho-Physiological Correlates of Slow Breathing.”  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/human-neuroscience/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00353/full>
- Johns Hopkins on Diaphragmatic Breathing.

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/all-childrens-hospital/services/anesthesiology/pain-management/complimentary-pain-therapies/diaphragmatic-breathing>

- Sarah Whitten, “Over Breathing and the Singing Body.”  
<https://sarahwhitten.com/over-breathing-and-the-singing-body/>
- Bruno Bordoni *et al*, “The Influence of Breathing on the Central Nervous System.”  
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6070065/>
- Banafsheh Amiri and Erika Zemkova, “Diaphragmatic breathing exercises in recovery from fatigue-induced changes in spinal mobility and postural stability: a study protocol.”  
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10340528/>
- A. Maya Kaye, “The Power of Humming: A Simple Technique for Stress Reduction and Inner Calm.”  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-compassionate-brain/202410/the-power-of-humming>
- Harald Brüssow, “What is health?” <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3917469/>

### Music and Social Prescribing

- UK Music, “The Power of Music: A plan for harnessing music to improve our health, wellbeing and communities.” <https://www.ukmusic.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Power-of-Music-Report-Final-Pages.pdf>
- Akshay Bhanshaly, “The Wonders of Group Singing.” Social prescribing of choir.  
<https://bslm.org.uk/the-wonders-of-group-singing-bslm-social-prescribing-sig/>
- Singing for Health Research Project 2023-2025  
<https://www.singingforhealthnetwork.co.uk/sh-research-project>

### Brain and Choir

- Jeanette Skowronek *et al*, “The Mere Presence of a Smartphone Reduces Basal Attentional Performance.” <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-36256-4>
- A Song for the Mind: A Literature Review on Singing and Cognitive Health in Aging Populations. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11940398/>
- 4 Ways Choir Singing Improves Your Brain  
<https://www.interkultur.com/newsroom/world-of-voices/details/news/4-ways-choir-singing-improves-your-brain>

### What I’m reading now:

- Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. <https://a.co/d/gWQ8ftI>
- Chris Hayes, *The Sirens’ Call: How Attention Became the World’s Most Endangered Resource*. <https://a.co/d/erEat3i>
- Arielle Schwartz, *Applied Polyvagal Theory in Yoga: Therapeutic Practices for Emotional Health*. <https://a.co/d/bG0MnoU>