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Once more, with feeling: Conductors' use of assessments and directives to provide feedback in choir rehearsals

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Abstract

In this article Conversation Analysis is used to explore the way that conductors give feedback in choir rehearsals through the use of assessments and directives. Assessments and directives have previously been investigated in some forms of music teaching and rehearsing, although not in choir rehearsals. There is also a paucity of research on the methods by which a conductor may give feedback following an episode of singing by the choir. This analysis is based on 19 hours of choir rehearsal data, involving eight choirs and nine conductors. We show that conductors' feedback turns typically consist of two particular communicative behaviours: assessments and directives, either occurring singly or in various combinations. Assessments explicitly evaluate (positively or negatively) the just-produced singing of the choir, and directives explicitly tell the choir something about how members should sing in the future. However, the data reveal that assessments can also function implicitly to direct how the choir should sing, and directives can implicitly evaluate singing. Assessments and directives can be done in depicted forms (e.g. using sung vocalisations and gestures), as well as verbal descriptive forms. These findings highlight the distinctive ways that conductors produce feedback within rehearsals and some of the particular inferences that choir members need to draw on to understand this feedback, as well as how change and improvement in the choir's singing may be affected on a turn-by-turn basis.

Introduction

The major role of a conductor during rehearsals is to create change in an ensemble's musical performance. This change can be conceptualised as shaping the musical production towards a particular interpretation and/or level of musical quality that the conductor deems adequate for an upcoming performance. In this paper, we analyse how choral conductors act to shape choirs' singing through feedback during rehearsals. Previous research has considered aspects of the conductor's *during-singing* feedback and shaping, achieved primarily through non-verbal means (Wöllner, 2008). However, here we focus on the use of *post-singing* feedback (i.e. conductor feedback after a singing attempt by the choir) and how it is used to shape the choir's performance. This feedback is primarily verbal, although non-verbal features also play an important role, as we shall discuss below.

The study is based on video recordings of choir rehearsals, and uses the qualitative sociological method of Conversation Analysis (CA). CA focuses on the verbal and non-verbal practices of meaning-making that are used in a society, and how people draw on these in order to produce meaningful, coherent talk and non-verbal conduct, such as gesture use (Sidnell, 2010). There is a focus on how utterances within talk can function as particular actions (e.g. greetings, questions), as well as the linguistic and non-verbal forms they can take. These actions may be produced together as sequences (e.g. Schegloff, 2007), where one action (e.g. a question) can 'make relevant' and expectable a responding action (e.g. an answer) from another participant.

To do this form of analysis, naturally occurring social interactions are recorded, the recordings transcribed, and analysis inductively examines the recordings and transcriptions together in close detail. The interactions studied may be informal conversation (e.g. between family or friends), or – particularly relevant here – 'institutional interaction' (Drew & Heritage, 1992) i.e. interaction through which various tasks or work-related activities are enacted (for example, interactions between doctors and patients, teachers and pupils or, as here, conductors and choirs).

Drew and Heritage (1992) note that institutional interactions may display certain distinctive features compared to informal conversation. For example, the types of actions that are produced may be more limited in variety than those seen in conversation. In addition, participants may draw on certain forms of inference when producing and understanding talk in institutional settings. For example, what certain actions 'mean' and what implications they carry may be understood by hearers in specialised ways compared to their use in informal conversation. Similarly, in institutional settings the participants involved can draw on their specialist knowledge of the activity underway (e.g. rehearsing music) to recognise the meanings or implications of utterances and actions that may be missed by those without this specialist knowledge.

In this paper we provide an analysis of certain distinctive features (what Drew and Heritage 1992, p.26, term the 'unique "fingerprint"') of conductor-choir rehearsals, specifically focusing on the post-singing feedback turns of the conductors. We highlight certain specialised features of how conductors talk and communicate in choir rehearsals. In particular, we analyse the types of actions recurrently used by conductors to provide feedback, and the inferences that choir members draw on to understand what the conductors' talk (and other forms of communication) mean, and what it implies for what the choir may be doing next. The focus, therefore, is on uncovering similarities in the feedback methods

employed by nine choral conductors to achieve change. Our aim is not to pass judgement on the quality of conducting, though we will be in the position to investigate the relative 'success' of the feedback in interactional terms, since we can often see how the conductor's response to a choir's post-feedback singing attempt differs from the pre-feedback attempt. Using this form of detailed interactional analysis therefore, it is possible to uncover certain skills displayed by conductors in changing and improving a choir's performance that may be more difficult to capture using less detailed methods of inquiry.

Background

Research on feedback in music-making by conductors

Most of a choral (or orchestral) conductor's work occurs during rehearsals. They aim to convey the expressive meaning of the music to the ensemble (Brunner, 1996), communicate its character (Durrant, 2005) and make it accessible to the musicians (Einarsdóttir & Sigurjónsson, 2010), as well as completing the practical requirements of note-learning. Giving feedback during rehearsals is the process by which conductors achieve these tasks. However, a review of research in choral music education (Grant & Norris, 1998) suggested that there was a general lack of studies on assessment and evaluation.

Negative feedback is important in rehearsals, since it is necessary for improvement, and students rate rehearsal excerpts highly even when they contain mostly disapproval (Whitaker, 2011). However, criticism should be constructive, not destructive; the latter can be demotivating, even provoking singers to leave (Bonshor, 2017). Provided it is constructive feedback, students' enjoyment or performance achievement during music lessons seems to be unaffected by whether comments are phrased as negative feedback or a specific directive for the future (Duke & Henninger, 1998). Positive feedback – which has been less studied – tends to be used less often during rehearsals than negative feedback (Whitaker, 2011), even by as much as half (Cavitt, 2003). However, it is still acknowledged as an important aspect of rehearsing (Thurman, 1977).

Effective error correction in rehearsals occurs when the conductor talks briefly, but with frequent use of modelling (Cavitt, 2003). Modelling – non-verbally demonstrating the music, by clapping, singing or playing, for example – is considered to be an important resource for music training (Duke & Simmons, 2006). However, modelling, as well as other aspects of rehearsing such as facial expression and restarting without new instruction, are all affected by the conductor's experience (Byo & Austin, 1994; Goolsby, 1999; Price, 1992). Research has also emphasised many individual differences between expert conductors however (Whitaker, 2011). Non-verbal communication has been explored by a variety of people (see e.g. Kendon, 2004; McNeill, 1992; Streeck, 2009) and many conductors and researchers have suggested that non-verbal communication, particularly gesture, is more important than verbal feedback in rehearsals (Barber, 2003; Biasutti, 2012; Durrant, 1994; Scherchen, 1929). However, Skadsem (1997) suggests that spoken instructions affect choirs' singing more than gestural changes, and other research proposes that congruency of non-verbal and verbal instruction is most important (Napoles, 2014). In terms of the balance of playing/singing (and therefore non-verbal instruction) and verbal feedback in rehearsals, Yarbrough and Price (1989) considered a three-part sequence: presentation of activity, ensemble response, and conductor reinforcement. Around half of the rehearsal time was spent making music, and one quarter presenting information about the music and giving reinforcement. Much of the remaining time was used giving instructions for restarting. However, this pacing varies widely by choir

and conductor (Davis, 1998). Overall, it appears that although the traditional focus on non-verbal feedback during singing/playing is important, the post-music feedback is also an essential part of the rehearsal process – but one that has been less studied.

Conversation Analysis (CA) research on feedback in music-making: assessments and directives

Conversation Analysis has been used to examine feedback in music settings, including ensemble rehearsals (Weeks, 1996), music masterclasses (Szczepek Reed, Reed & Haddon, 2013), and one-to-one music lessons (Tolins, 2013).

Tolins (2013) used CA to explore a clarinet teacher's nonlexical vocalisations (nonsense syllable vocalisations that demonstrate the music, e.g. *urrrlllliaa*, p. 53) during lessons. Tolins analysed how these depictive vocalisations (Clark, 2016), although semantically empty, were used to do two things: quote the student's previous playing, in order to *assess* certain features, or give a model to *direct* and demonstrate how the music should be played in the future. Inspired by this work, the present paper will focus on the role of assessments and directives in providing feedback within a different music-making environment: choir rehearsals. We analyse the use of assessments and directives in choir rehearsals, alongside other less common feedback mechanisms, and consider their verbal/descriptive as well as their depictive forms.

An assessment is an action whereby a speaker evaluates a phenomenon (e.g. a person or activity; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984). This phenomenon can be relatively accessible to the interlocutors (e.g. a visible object, or some just-sung music) or something not immediately accessible, such as an evaluation of an event experienced in the past (Fasulo & Monzoni, 2009). In Tolins' (2013) paper, the teacher uses non-linguistic speech sounds, prosody and gesture to depict certain features of the music and show, rather than describe, how the music currently sounds. These vocal depictions are used to imitate, emphasise or exaggerate features of the student's playing that the teacher wants to draw attention to and assess.

Directives, the other action analysed by Tolins (2013), are “utterances designed to get someone else to do something” (Goodwin, 2006, p. 515), that is, they make it relevant for the recipient to comply with that directive (Craven & Potter, 2010). In Tolins' clarinet lesson, the teacher's vocalised directives give musical models to the student, instructing them to play an excerpt in a certain way either immediately or in the future. Stevanovic and Kuusisto (2018) also looked at directives in instrumental lessons, suggesting that the way an instruction is worded relates to its position in the ongoing activity, current student cooperation, and the action's priority.

Moving away from one-to-one lessons, Weeks (1996) considered a conductor's feedback in an orchestral rehearsal. He focused on how the conductor corrects the orchestra, drawing attention to what he terms ‘verbal expressions’ and ‘illustrative expressions’ (p.254), the latter being any embodiment of the music, including singing, counting and chanting (again, a form of what Clark, 2016, terms ‘depictions’). Like Tolins' (2013) clarinet teacher, Weeks acknowledges that conductors may give directives – “explanations concerning the desired musical effects” (p.267), sometimes with additional technical guidance – or evaluate previous playing. Weeks notes a particular form of feedback, a ‘contrast pair’, where two illustrative expressions are used: one “embodying the *faulted performed version*”, often with exaggerated

features, and the other “exemplifying *the conductor’s prescribed version*” (p.269, original emphasis).

Another environment where CA has been used to analyse interactions is a musical masterclass. Szczepek Reed, Reed and Haddon (2013) studied the way in which ‘masters’ used directives in this setting, particularly in the form of ‘instructional directives’ (p. 26). Directives were often given in clusters, rather than singly, leading to a situation where performers needed to decide whether each directive should be put into practice immediately following the utterance (a ‘Now’ directive), or at some later time e.g. at the end of the master’s current (often multi-sentence) turn (a ‘Not Now’ directive). The use of assessments is noted, particularly following the first performance, but in this environment the participants do not appear to orient to evaluation in the same way that is found in the rehearsals and music lessons described previously.

Methods

Participants

Eight choirs were involved in the project. All were mixed voices (3- or 4-part), had a background in Western classical choral music, and were engaging in once or twice-weekly rehearsals leading towards a performance. Nine conductors (seven male, two female) led the rehearsals. Conductors and choirs with a range of experience were selected in order to gain a broader understanding of rehearsing across a spectrum of expertise levels. Table 1 summarises the participant characteristics. Choirs (and respective conductors) were labelled using letters A-H.

Table 1. Description of participant characteristics (choirs and conductors)

Choir	Choir characteristics	Conductor characteristics
A	Small (15), amateur, workplace-based choir	Professional conductor, some experience, recently completed master’s conducting training
B	Small-medium (25), auditioned, university chamber choir	Professional conductor, some experience, has conducting lessons and teaches conducting
C	Medium-sized (35), adult choral society	School head of music, has conducted the choir for six years
D	Small-medium (25), non-auditioned music conservatoire choir, for master’s-level conducting students. Two students (D1 and D2) led one hour of rehearsal each.	D1 – student conductor, some experience D2 – student conductor, less experienced but 2 years’ private lessons
E	Small-medium (25), auditioned, professional-level	Highly experienced, well-regarded professional

	chamber choir	conductor
F	Large (100+), auditioned, amateur choral society	Experienced, well-regarded professional conductor
G	Medium-sized (30), auditioned music conservatoire chamber choir	Highly experienced, well-regarded professional conductor
H	Small (15), auditioned university chamber choir	University Director of Music, experienced professional conductor

Note. Choir size is approximate, based on video data.

Conductors were recruited through a mixture of opportunity and snowball sampling – for two choirs the first author was a participant-observer, four conductors were known to the first author, and three were recommended by professionals in the field. Six professional conductors were approached but were unavailable to take part. No reward was offered for participation.

Data collection

Rehearsal data was collected because the project focused on the way conductors create change in a choir's singing, and this process of change takes place prior to the performance. In the first phase of data collection (four choirs, five conductors), one rehearsal per choir was video-recorded. In the second phase (four choirs and conductors), we intended to record two rehearsals per choir, two weeks apart, in order to check similarities over time; unfortunately this was only possible with three choirs, due to a change in schedule for one choir. Although difference in the conductors' expertise might be expected to affect their behaviour, none was completely inexperienced, and the focus of the study was on the similarities of methods of feedback-giving, rather than individual differences.

In the rehearsals, one camera was set up in front of the conductor to capture their movements closely; one was behind them, to capture the choir; and one was placed to the side, to capture a view of both choir and conductor. The cameras were left running throughout the rehearsal. In total, just over 19 hours of rehearsal data were filmed.

Transcription, analysis and presentation of findings

The next stage of research involved producing in-depth transcripts of talk, singing, and non-verbal conduct produced by the participants in the recordings. CA uses a particular set of symbols and conventions in its transcriptions (Sidnell, 2010). These aim to capture all relevant verbal and non-verbal features of the interaction to assist with analysis and communicate findings through transcripts within publications. Relevant non-verbal features used in this paper include indications of speed and loudness of talk, and timing features (e.g. overlaps and pauses). Non-verbal descriptions are notated in italics, and video stills are used for clarity to show multimodal aspects of the interactions. In this study, the features of sung utterances were also included in the transcripts, with singing notated using bold font. Other transcript notations used in this paper can be seen in the Appendix.

In the analysis stage, the transcript and videos are analysed together to uncover systematic features of talk and other aspects of conduct that participants use to create and understand

meaningful and coherent interaction. Once a phenomenon has been identified (e.g. verbal assessments), a collection of examples is built up to look at potential systematic features of the phenomenon (Mondada, 2012). In publications, transcript excerpts from these collections are used to provide exemplars and evidence of the systematic features found.

Ethics

Once conductors provisionally agreed to participate, choir members had various ways to ‘opt-out’ if they wished, e.g. being blurred out/pixelated, or positioning cameras so that specific people were out of shot. This use of an opt-out method avoided taking up rehearsal time with paperwork and ensured consent was gained from all singers. Ethics permission was given by the Human Communication Sciences department of The University of Sheffield.

Analysis

The analysis focuses on the main section of the rehearsal activity i.e. where one or more pieces are being rehearsed for a future performance. In terms of turn-taking (Sidnell, 2010), within this phase of the interaction the choir members typically function as one ‘party’ (Schegloff, 2007), acting ‘as one’ to produce a sung, ensemble response. This ‘sung turn’ by the choir alternates with the conductor’s ‘feedback turn’.

It is clear from our data (see Table 2 below) – and consistent with previous literature on interaction in other musical settings (e.g. Tolins, 2013) – that *assessing* and *directing* are the most prevalent actions produced as part of conductors’ feedback turns, and, as such, are the central types of actions involved in shaping how the choir sings. Other actions do occur (e.g. joking, overt teaching), but far less often. This usage pattern of assessments and directives constitutes one way in which conductor-choir rehearsal interaction can be seen to make use of a more limited repertoire of actions than is typically seen in conversation (Drew & Heritage, 1992).

Table 2 gives an overview of the usage of assessments and directives in conductors’ feedback turns, showing the percentage of turns containing assessment(s), directive(s), both, or neither during the main rehearsal phase. Data are taken from one rehearsal involving each choir. A ‘conductor turn’ is defined as talk between two sung responses by the choir (or, occasionally, spoken ensemble response). Feedback given while the choir is singing is not considered in this paper for reasons of conciseness. Assessments may be positive or negative, but only actions related to changing the music are counted (e.g. directives regarding restarting or seating arrangements are not included). However, assessments and directives may not relate to the same phenomenon (e.g. the assessment may focus on one aspect of the singing, and the directive on another).

Table 2. Prevalence of assessments and directives in conductor’s turns during one choir rehearsal (percentages)

Conductor	Conductor turns containing			
	Both assessment(s) and directive(s)	Directive(s) only	Assessment(s) only	No assessment or directive
A	53.45	24.14	13.79	8.62
B	63.83	23.40	6.38	6.38

C	54.35	26.09	15.22	4.35
D (1)	43.14	31.37	11.76	13.73
D (2)	26.47	22.06	32.35	19.12
E	44.32	20.45	26.14	9.09
F	38.16	22.71	28.99	10.14
G	35.79	48.42	7.37	8.42
H	39.66	17.24	32.76	10.34
Average %	44.35	26.21	19.42	10.02

As Table 2 shows, the majority (89.98%) of feedback turns produced by the conductors contain assessments or directives. Often, both actions are used together within a turn, but the turns can also consist of an assessment or directive in isolation. These assessments and directives are the main actions used by conductors when attempting to improve how the choir sings the piece being practised.

The remainder of the analysis explores some of the distinctive ways these actions are used by the conductors and certain types of inference that choir members can be seen to be relying on in order to interpret the meaning of the conductor's actions and their implications. It is divided into three sections which reflect the table above: feedback turns which contain both assessments and directives; those which contain directives; and those which contain assessments.

Conductors' turns consisting of both assessments and directives

Combinations of assessments and directives can take various forms, but, for reasons of space, we limit our discussion here to one recurrent one: an assessment followed by a directive. The assessment evaluates in some way the singing that the choir has just produced. The directive which follows tells the singers something about how they should sing in the future (either in the fairly near future, such as in their next sung attempt following the directive, or when they sing on a future occasion). A typical assessment-directive combination in these choir rehearsals can be seen in Extract 1.

Extract 1. 'It's still not together'

- 117 C: so because we're coming in on a- on a vowel
118 make sure that we're- er we're right there
119 but don't- >don't don't< start it with a UH in order to get there
120 not a glottal
121 but really right together
122 and,
123 ((*inbreath, 'beating in' gesture*))
124 Ch: [oh::::[::::: whe-

└ ((one | part of choir comes in a little later than the other))

125 A→ C: └ (yeah) it's still not together.

126 D→ breathe together. a:nd,

127 ((inbreath, beating in gesture))

128 Ch: **oh:::~::~: whe:::~::~:n**

129 **oh:::~::~: whe:::~::~:n**

Note. C = conductor; Ch = choir; A = assessment; D = directive. For other transcription symbols see Appendix

In Extract 1, Choir H is rehearsing *Weep, O mine eyes* by John Bennet, and the conductor has asked for the tenor and bass sections to sing an entry by themselves. As we join the extract, the conductor has just stopped the singers and is instructing them to ensure that they begin at the same time (lines 117-121). After producing an ‘and’, followed by an in-breath with beating gesture to bring them in (lines 122-123), the two parts of the choir begin again, but are still starting at slightly different times (line 124). The conductor’s feedback here comprises an assessment of the singing (‘it’s still not together’; line 125) followed by a directive in imperative form (line 126) telling them to take a breath now in order to achieve a simultaneous singing onset. He then brings the singers in to try the problematic section again (lines 128-9).

The assessment here (line 125) is a negative assessment (Fasulo & Monzoni, 2009). Negative assessments in this context locate some section of the singing which has been, or is currently being, produced, and evaluate some feature of it as problematic or inadequate in relation to the conductor’s judgement of how it should sound. They convey to the singers not only that something is problematic, but what, out of the myriad of possible aspects of the singing (its pitch, timing, stylistic delivery, the singers’ coordination etc.), that ‘something’ is. In Extract 1, for instance, it is the coordinated entry of the singers that is being highlighted as a problem. One aspect of how the entry is located as the problem is that the conductor comes in early, overlapping the first sung word and in effect bringing them to a halt.

The directive here (line 126) is a form of ‘Now’ directive (Szczepek Reed et al., 2013), i.e. the implication is that the choir’s next action should be a sung turn which displays compliance with this directive (i.e. doing what has been asked; Craven & Potter, 2010). It should be noted, however, that in rehearsals, the choir’s actual display of compliance for a ‘Now’ directive is not normally due immediately after the directive. This differs from typical directive-compliance sequences in conversation and some other forms of music interactions, such as Szczepek Reed et al.’s (2013) masterclasses, or Tolins’ (2013) music lessons. In these, a complying party of one person may act immediately following the directive. Here, the complying party (the choir, or parts of it) consists of a number of individuals, so compliance with the directive is due only after the conductor brings the singers in (e.g. lines 126-127).

When an assessment is followed by a directive, the meaning and implications for the choir members of each of the actions can be influenced by the presence of the other. For example,

one feature of a negative assessment in this context is that it implies that the problematic section should be sung differently next time, with the further possible sequential implication that this 'next time' may be in the choir's next sung turn. As seen in Extract 1, in this context a directive can be heard by the choir as further evidence that the problematic section will be required to be sung again since it provides information on how that re-done attempt should be carried out.

Also, what the directive 'means' for the choir can be influenced by the fact that it occurs after the negative assessment. In Extract 1, for instance, the directive in line 126 does not simply tell the singers that the next thing they should do is breathe together; it tells them that they should breathe together in such a way as to 'solve' the 'problem' that was highlighted by the prior negative assessment (i.e. not starting together).

Finally, it can be seen that when a section of the music is sung again following some form of negative feedback by the conductor, *the lack of any overt action/feedback by the conductor* at the comparable point in the sung turn is interpretable in a particular way i.e. as the conductor treating this re-done attempt as adequate for current purposes. In Extract 1, since the conductor overlapped the choir's first sung word ('oh') in line 124 to communicate that the bass and tenor sections were not coming in together, his *lack* of negative feedback at the equivalent point in the re-done attempt (line 128) can be inferred as meaning that he has judged the entry to be coordinated enough for current purposes. Here again, therefore, we see rather particular inferences being used in these rehearsals, that all participants may rely on to make sense of what is happening and what certain actions (or the lack of them at particular points) might mean. At this point in the rehearsal, therefore, the conductor's behaviour suggests to the choir (and to us as overhearing analysts) that his feedback has been acted on successfully – in his judgement, the choir has improved, in the sense that the entry of the two sections is now better coordinated.

A similar set of interactional features can be seen in Extract 2. Here, Choir E is rehearsing Roxanna Panufnik's *99 Words to my Darling Children* (text by John Tavener), and the tenors are practising their part by themselves. The overall activity here is again that of the conductor giving feedback to the choir on a section of the music and thus launching a sequence whereby the choir will end up re-attempting that section of music. In this excerpt there are two rounds of singing/feedback, with the choir singing part of the same section of music three times (lines 374-5, 383 and 392-3). The conductor first directs them on how to produce the vowel of 'your' (lines 376-379) then gives them feedback on raising the pitch (lines 384-389).

Extract 2. 'It's a little flat still'

374 Ch: you::::::::::r tru::::::::::e se::::::::::lf i::::::::::s
 375 go::::::::::[::::::::::d
 376 C: |very first note
 377 the your
 378 can you sing it an o vowel
 379 make sure it's nice and on the bright side

380 here's the notes

381 Ac: ((no┘tes))

382 C: ┘and
 ┘((('beating in' gesture))

383 Ch: **you:::::::::::::r t┘ru:::::::::::::e**

384 A→ C: ┘it's a little flat still

385 A→ **you:::::::::r**

386 D→ **you:::::::::┘ ::::::r**

387 Ac: ┘((notes))

388 D→ C: just bending it up

389 D→ °yo°

390 Ac: ((notes))

391 C: (h)┘and go
 ┘((('beating in' gesture))

392 Ch: **you:::::::::::::r tru:::::::::::::e se:::::::::::::lf i:::::::::::::s**

393 **go::::::::::::: d**

Note. Ac = Accompanist

As in Extract 1, the conductor's feedback in the part of the extract that we will focus on here (lines 384-389), takes the form of negatively assessing followed by directing. Again, the verbal negative assessment ('it's a little flat still'; line 384) highlights a particular aspect of the singing as problematic (the pitch). Like Extract 1, this negative assessment is produced in overlap with the choir's singing, marking the problem (being flat) as being already evident in the first word ('your') and in effect bringing them to a halt in order for that problem to be worked on.

As seen in Extract 1, the meaning and implications for the choir members of the negative assessments and directives are each influenced by the presence of the other. Here, for example, the directives (again, in a form of 'Now' directive), provide further evidence to the choir that the problematic section will be required to be sung again, since, by providing a possible 'solution' to the 'problem' identified by the negative assessment, the directives provide information on how that re-done attempt should be carried out. Finally, the lack of negative feedback from the conductor during the re-done sung attempt (lines 392-3) is interpretable by the choir as showing that the conductor is now judging the previously highlighted problem to have been resolved by her feedback i.e. the singing is no longer flat.

A difference between this extract and Extract 1 is that both one of the assessments (line 385; Fig. 1), and two of the directives (lines 386 and 389; Fig. 2) take the form of sung depictions (i.e. 'showing' the action through singing; e.g. Emerson, Williamson, & Wilkinson, 2017). The version of the problematic part ('your') is sung flat by the conductor (line 385), whereas those in lines 386 and 389 are sung at the correct pitch. In addition, the conductor depicts the difference visually by raising her hand and head as she sings the second version. This can be seen in Figures 1 and 2. As such, this contrast pair (Weeks, 1996) allows the singers to both hear and see what they have been doing incorrectly followed by a model of what they should be doing instead. Conductors' sung and/or gestural depictions (either in isolation or, as here, in combination with verbal assessments and/or directives) are commonly used in these rehearsals. They constitute an important means for conductors to provide feedback, since they allow the choir to directly experience some aspect of the singing that the conductor judges problematic, and/or a version by the conductor of how the singing should be done (Emerson, Williamson & Wilkinson, 2017).



Figure 1. Sung depiction of 'your' functioning as a negative assessment (line 385)



Figure 2. Sung depiction of 'your' functioning as a directive (line 386)

While negative assessments allow for an implication that the choir may be required to re-attempt the just-sung section in the next turn, positive assessments have the opposite sequential implication i.e. they can be heard as conveying that the just-prior attempt was adequate (at least for current purposes) with the implication being that that section will not be required to be produced again in the choir's next turn.

This can be seen in Extract 3, where a positive assessment is followed by a directive (lines 152-155). Choir G is rehearsing the *Benedictus* from Antonín Dvořák's *Mass in D*. In the just-sung section, the basses have a rising line that the conductor wishes to grow, so as to push the music forward.

Extract 3. 'The early part of that was lovely'

- 144 Ch: do:.....mi:.....[ni:.....
- 145 C: [alright thank you
- 146 [altos can you come in a bit
[((LH pulls in towards his left side))
- 147 (1.0)
- 148 you're an awfully long way away from me
- 149 [(5.5)
[((C: LH beckons, smiling; Ch: moving chairs towards C))
- 150 alright (0.4) good
- 151 um: thank you very much
- 152 A→ the early part of that was lovely
- 153 A→ basses it works [s:0 well when you do that
[((LH sweeps forward))
- 154 erm er a- in the er middle of page sixty
- 155 D→ so lots of that please er when we- when we go through that

Following a sung attempt by the choir (line 144), the conductor stops them and, after requesting that the alto section come a bit closer (lines 146-148), he produces positive assessments of the just-sung section (lines 152 and 153-4). These positive assessments, and the directive that follows them (line 155), differ in a number of ways from the negative assessments and directives seen in Extracts 1 and 2.

When the positive assessments are produced, it is not heard as implying that the just-sung turn will require another attempt in the choir's next turn. This implication is then strengthened by the fact that, unlike Extracts 1 and 2 where the negative assessments were combined with a form of 'Now' directive, the positive assessments in Extract 3 are followed by a 'Not Now' directive (line 155), encouraging the choir to retain these aspects of good singing practice for future use in general.

As such, the interactional relationship between the assessment and directive is different from that seen in Extracts 1 and 2. For instance, in this context the directive (line 155) does not have the function of assisting in rectifying a problem identified by the prior assessment. Rather, here it makes explicit what is implicit in the positive assessment i.e. that the choir should retain and continue those sung features that the conductor has evaluated positively.

Conductors' feedback turns consisting of directives

In the combined assessment-directive feedback turns seen in Extracts 1 to 3, there was a fairly clear ‘division of labour’ between the two types of actions. The assessments evaluated something about the singing turn by the choir and the directive told the choir what to do in a subsequent attempt (either the next singing turn or at some later time). Here we highlight another feature of directives in these feedback turns; namely, that when they occur alone (i.e. without an accompanying assessment) they can have a dual role. They may function as both a future-oriented directive (as in Extracts 1-3), but also as an implicit negative assessment/evaluation of the just-sung turn.

Two examples of this phenomenon can be seen in Extract 4. Choir B is rehearsing *Psalm 121* from Howell’s *Requiem*. Just before this extract starts, the choir has reached a general pause. The conductor brings the choir in for the next bar in line 478.

Extract 4. ‘Subdivide the upbeat’

- 478 C: ((*inbreath, beating in gesture*))
- 479 Ch: **「The::::: Lo::::rd shall prese:::::rve-**
 L((*Varying start times on ‘the’ from different singers*))
- 480 C: ((*stops beating, LH 1st finger and thumb close*))
- 481 D→ subdivide the upbeat
- 482 ((*inbreath, ‘beating in’ gesture*))
- 483 Ch: **The:: Lo::::rd shall prese:::::rve thee::::::**
- 484 **from a:: 「:::::ll e:::::vi:: 「::::l**
 L((*Some singers early | on ‘evil’*))
- 485 C: L ((*stops beating*))
- 486 D→ once again (.) subdivide that upbeat
- 487 ((*inbreath, ‘beating in’ gesture*))
- 488 Ch: **The:: Lo::::rd shall prese:::::rve thee::::: from all::::: e:::::vi:::::l**
- 489 **Yea::::: it is e:::::ven he:::: that shall kee:::::p my sou:::::l**

In response to the choir’s sung turn in line 479, the conductor produces an imperative-form directive in line 481 (‘subdivide the upbeat’) regarding the choir’s timing on its entry, where different singers began the first word – ‘the’ – at varying times. The choir’s subsequent attempt at the same section is responded to with a very similar directive (‘once again – subdivide that upbeat’ in line 486). This refers to a similar timing issue (on ‘evil’). The

implicit backward-facing, negative assessing of the singing which is part of both these directives is evident in the fact that in order to comply correctly with the conductor's directive the singers have to infer from the directive that (a) something is problematic about their prior sung turn and (b) which element of their singing is being highlighted as an issue. That virtually the same term is used to point out problems with two different words in two different sung turns demonstrates the type of inferential work the choir must do to uncover from the directive what the problematic element is that they should remedy in the next attempt.

The sequential context within which the directive is produced is part of what gives it its negatively-evaluating implication. It is apparent in these rehearsal data that conductor feedback turns regularly refer back to what has just been sung and forward to what to do next. In Extracts 1-3 it was seen that these two functions can be performed explicitly by the two actions of assessing and directing. In cases such as Extract 4, where only a directive is produced, the assessment of the prior singing can be inferred. If the directive is, as here, a form of 'Now' directive that makes relevant another sung attempt and highlights something that should now be done (e.g. 'subdivide the upbeat'), the implication is that this action is addressing something about the last sung attempt that was, in the conductor's judgement, inadequate (i.e. the tacit assessment is a negative assessment).

A second feature contributing to the sense of implied negative assessment is that in each case the directive cuts off the singing mid-flow, similar to the way conductors' talk overlapped with the singing in Extracts 1 and 2. Here, rather than the conductor's overlapping talk stopping the singing, it is done by the conductor gesturally moving out of 'conducting mode' through, for example, stopping the beating gestures (lines 480 and 485).

As discussed in relation to Extracts 1 and 2, the fact that in the final re-sung attempt here (lines 488-9) the conductor does *not* produce any display that the singing is inadequate (i.e. with a negative assessment or directive), implies that he is judging this attempt to be adequate and that the timing problem he previously identified has been resolved successfully for current purposes.

A similar example is seen in Extract 5, where conductor D1 is rehearsing Johannes Brahms' *Nachtwacher I*. A sung turn by the choir (line 850) is responded to by the conductor with a feedback turn in the form of a directive with no accompanying explicit assessment of the singing (line 851), initiating a sequence where the choir tries the same section again.

Extract 5. 'Make sure the /x/ of each is on the third beat'

- 849 C: ((*inbreath, beating in gesture*))
- 850 Ch: **tra::::g (.) ei::::n (.) Na::::cht (.) wi::::nd (.) eu::::ch**
- 851 D→ C: yeah make sure the- the /x/ of each is on the third beat there
- 852 let's do it again?
- 853 **mm mm mm**
- 854 ((*inbreath, 'beating in' gesture*))

855 Ch: **tra::::g (.) ei::::n (.) Na::::cht (.) wi::::nd (.) eu::::ch**

Note. /x/ = IPA for ch as in the Scottish ‘loch’ (and here the German ‘each’)

The directive (‘make sure the- the /x/ of each is on the third beat there’) functions to tell the choir where a specific syllable should be placed. As with Extract 4, the directive makes relevant the singers’ compliance in the choir’s next turn, and also implicitly negatively evaluates the prior sung turn (i.e. that the ‘ch’ of ‘each’ was not produced at the correct time).

Extracts 4 and 5 have demonstrated another way that conductors use feedback to change the choirs’ singing. In addition, it can be noted that using directives alone allows a negative assessment, which can potentially be heard as a criticism, to be implied rather than explicitly stated by the conductor (cf. Kent & Kendrick, 2016).

Conductors’ feedback turns consisting of negative assessments

The previous section showed how a directive alone, without an assessment, can have a dual role – explicitly as a directive, but also implicitly as a negative assessment. In this section, we show a similar dual-function when the conductor’s feedback consists of a negative assessment without a directive. In this case, the negative assessment functions explicitly as a backward-facing action that evaluates (negatively) something about the choir’s singing, but also carries an implicit directive function, therefore having implications for the choir’s singing in a subsequent sung turn (cf. Fasulo and Monzoni, 2009).

Extract 6 provides an example. This is a later moment (see Extract 2) in Choir E’s rehearsal of Roxanna Panufnik’s *99 Words to my Darling Children*. This time, the sopranos are practising their part.

Extract 6. ‘That first ‘your’ sounds a little bit under’

523 Ch: **you::::::::::r tru:::::::::: [::::::::::e**
 524 A→ C: [er that first your sounds a little bit under (.)
 [((stops beating))
 525 A→ tiny tiny fraction
 526 [a:nd go
 [((‘beating in’ gesture))
 527 Ch: **you:::: [::::r tru::::::::::e [se::::::::::lf**
 528 C: [((smiles)) [se:::::
 529 Ch: **i::::::::::s Go:::::::::: [::::::::::d**

Here the conductor's feedback is a negative assessment (lines 524-525) suggesting that the singers are slightly flat on the word *your*. With no directive relating to the music, it is this negative assessment which implicitly tells the choir how to re-do this part of the piece differently (i.e. by raising the pitch of the note). The conductor's positive assessment (line 530) of the subsequent attempt suggests the sopranos have successfully understood her negative assessment in this way and responded to it as they would have done had it been a directive. As with Extract 3, the positive assessment implies this re-done attempt is now adequate for current purposes and that a further try will not be elicited at this point.

A similar example is seen in Extract 7, where Choir B is now rehearsing *Domine Jesu Christe* from Maurice Duruflé's *Requiem*.

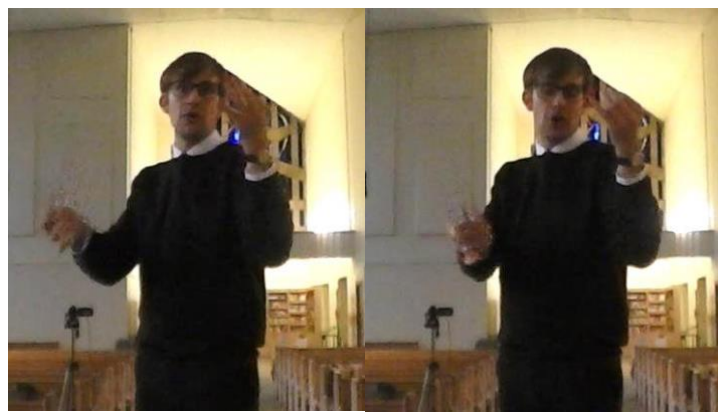
Extract 7. 'It's just a fraction late from some of you'

- 538 Ch: **li:.....bera:..... ea:.....s de o:.....re:.....**
- 539 **leo::ni::s**
- 540 C: good
- 541 A→ can you hear how that last quaver
- 542 A→ especially the four four bar
- 543 A→ it's just a fraction late from some of you? (.)
- 544 A→ [de o:..... [re:..... [e-e
 [((beating)) [((slowed)) [((leans forward, continues beating))
- 545 A→ if that's late then we're stuck
- 546 [li:
 [((LH points forwards))
- 547 after two?
- 548 's a D flat
- 549 [one two!
 [((('beating in' gesture))
- 550 Ch: **li:.....bera:..... ea:.....s de o:.....re:.....**
- 551 **leo::ni::s**

Here, it is the negative assessments in lines 541-545 that that are of interest. The first negative assessment (lines 541-543) is verbal, in the form of an interrogative ('can you hear...'), evaluating the choir's timing (a moving quaver on 're' of 'ore' being produced late). A second negative assessment follows, in the form of a depiction (Emerson et al., 2017; Tolins, 2013) where the conductor demonstrates the choir's 'faulty version' (line 544) by exaggeratedly slowing up on the problematic note as he sings and conducts (this slowing up can be seen in Figures 3-9). This depiction functions as a negative assessment by *showing* the singers what was wrong, rather than *telling* them (Clark, 2016; and see Extract 2) – a relatively common method used by conductors to clarify a subtle point they wish to correct. The conductor provides a reason for why this timing issue would be a problem (line 545), before eliciting a further attempt (lines 546-549). There is no directive here to make explicit what it is about the music that should be sung differently. Rather, it is the negative assessment that tacitly carries these directive functions, with the choir inferring from the negative assessment what to do differently.



Figure. 3. 'de'



Figures 4-5. 'o:.....'

Figures 3-9. Sung depiction of 'de ore' functioning as a negative assessment (Extract 7, line 544).



Figs. 6-7: 're:.....' (slowed)



Figures 8-9. 'e-e'

Conclusion

A good conductor must drive and shape the performance of their choir members during rehearsals and there has been much research interest over the years in what form these highly skilled behaviours take and how they produce change in the choir's singing. This is the first paper to address these issues using detailed interactional analysis. We used Conversation Analysis, a technique embedded deeply within the communication sciences, to document and describe in detail the different ways that conductors provide post-sung feedback to their choir members. Across 19 hours of choir rehearsal data we identified two key communicative behaviours that are central features of the conductor's feedback: assessments and directives.

On some occasions assessments and directives are clearly distinct and are applied in a way that their individual functions are explicit (Extracts 1-3). However, a directive alone can also implicitly assess the singing – we found examples of this when conductor's intended to deliver negative feedback (Extracts 4 and 5). Similarly, a negative assessment can also be understood as implicitly directing that a further attempt should be produced, and what the choir should do differently to improve on the previous attempt (Extracts 6 and 7). As such, choir members draw on particular forms of inference (Drew & Heritage, 1992) to interpret what their conductors' communicative actions (or lack of actions) may 'mean' or imply within the rehearsal in terms of both the conductor's opinion of what the choir has just sung what she or he is implying should happen next.

Assessments and directives are used by conductors in ways that, we argue, are rather specialised compared with their use in conversation and other institutional contexts. One such specialisation concerns the sequential implications of assessments for the other party in the interaction. For example, a negative assessment by the conductor can imply that the next thing the choir will be doing is re-attempting what they have just sung. Such sequential implications have not so far been identified by research into the typical uses of assessments in conversation. For example, the weather may be negatively assessed as 'dreary' or a previously-attended party positively evaluated as 'fun' (to use two real-life examples from conversational talk reported in Pomerantz, 1984). In those circumstances, however, there is no evaluation of what the other participant in the conversation has just done and no implication that they should re-attempt something. Rather, conductors' assessments appear to share some features with the use of assessments in some other contexts, where those assessments that are used to evaluate what Fasulo and Monzoni (2009) termed 'mutable

objects', that is phenomena that can foreseeably be changed in some way. Fasulo and Monzoni (2009) discussed the example of negative assessments by tailors evaluating a piece of clothing in the workshop of a clothing business, where the assessments were understood not only to be evaluating the clothing, but also proposing that it be altered/changed in some way. The conductors' assessments in our data display similar future-action implication properties – that the negatively-assessed phenomenon under discussion should be changed. At the same time, however, the conductors' assessments have an important difference to those of the tailors in that that what is being evaluated in the rehearsals is not a physical object (which may be altered – or not – at some future date), but rather an embodied activity involving another co-present party (i.e. the choir's just-sung attempt) that must be acted upon immediately by that party. As such, assessments used by conductors appear to have distinctive properties linked to the particular context in which they are used.

Directives also have a distinct, specialised function in this choir rehearsal environment, in that they implicitly orient to something that occurred earlier (i.e. in a prior sung turn). A somewhat similar use of directives has been observed in other contexts, including in conversations between family members or friends (Kent & Kendrick, 2016). This type of directive, which Kent and Kendrick term 'accountability oriented imperative directives', instructs someone to perform an action, but also implicitly treats that person as accountable for not having already done it. For example, a parent's directive to 'sit quietly and ask nicely' to a child reaching across the table for a biscuit tells the child what to do next, but also treats them as accountable for not performing the action in the desired way originally (Kent & Kendrick, 2016, p.8). While displaying some similarities to the accountability oriented imperative directives discussed by Kent and Kendrick (2016), the conductors' directives are also different in that they are not treating some prior action as being *absent*, but rather as being *inadequate* for current purposes, with the directive eliciting a re-try of that prior attempt.

One other way in which the conductors' use of assessments and directives is distinctive concerns how these actions function as 'feedback'. Indeed, what this analysis of conductors' communication has highlighted is that 'feedback' is rather too simplistic a term in this context, since in these conductor turns there are elements of both 'feedback' (communication about what the choir have done) and 'feedforward' (communication about what the choir should do), with both these functions sometimes being enacted simultaneously through one utterance (e.g. Extract 4, line 481). In this way, these conductor turns set in motion a type of activity which is similar to what has been described in the conversation analysis literature as a retro-sequence' (Schegloff, 2007). In a retro-sequence, one participant's action makes relevant another's responsive action, while simultaneously treating something that occurred in the interaction as the source of that action. A common form of 'retro-sequence' in interaction is an action known as 'other-initiation of repair' (Schegloff, 2007), which is typically used when one person has a problem hearing or understanding another. For example, when one person says 'sorry?', this 'other-initiation of repair' response treats as its source something the participant has said – the item that was not adequately heard or understood. It also simultaneously makes relevant an action from that participant (e.g. a re-stating the problematic phrase to clarify its meaning). In choir rehearsals, the conductor's feedback turn can simultaneously evaluate the choir's just-sung turn, while also directing how that just-sung turn should be re-attempted to improve it. Like 'other-initiations of repair', one participant acts on what another participant has previously said/done and makes relevant from them a form of re-doing. However, in the case of the conductor's feedback turns, the re-doing is not being requested in order to clarify *meaning* (as is commonly the

case with other-initiations of repair) but rather has an *aesthetic* purpose i.e. to shape the singing of the choir towards a form that the conductor judges acceptable or preferable.

Taken as a whole, the lens of conversation analysis has allowed us to draw on findings about human interaction in general to uncover how conductors' communicative actions (assessments and directives) are central to the creation of a particular artistic outcome: the resulting public musical performance by the choir. The data demonstrate the inherent skill of the conductors in creating change within rehearsals through shaping the choir's singing towards the conductor's envisaging of how it should be for the public performance. Although our data do not permit an understanding of how this unique form of interaction develops or is trained, we are in a position to speculate on its situational antecedents and skill requirements. Firstly, a conductor's musical ability allows them to hear one or more features of the choir's singing (e.g. tempo, pitch, phrasing etc.) that they judge as in need of improvement. Then, their multi-sensory interactional skills enable them to make use of timing (e.g. overlapping the ongoing sung turn), different actions (e.g. assessments and directives), and forms of these actions (e.g. gesture, modelling) to communicate what they wish to be done differently, how, and when (e.g. often in the next sung turn). The application of conversation analysis that we present here therefore has implications for a better understanding of how these conductor skills may be taught or improved. Through uncovering some of the implicit practices or conventions that conductors use in producing their talk and embodied communication, and which choir members need to be aware of in order to interpret what the conductors mean, it becomes possible to begin making these practices more explicit and, therefore, teachable.

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Appendix

Conventions for Conversation Analysis transcription notation (Sidnell, 2010), and notation used specifically within this paper.

>ah<	Faster than normal talk
AH	Louder than normal talk
°ah°	Softer than normal talk
<u>ah</u>	Emphasised syllable
ah-	Cut off syllable
ah:::	Lengthened syllable
(h)	Laughter within talk
(.)	Micropause
(0.2)	Pause in seconds
?	Rising intonation
.	Falling intonation
,	Continuing intonation
[]	Simultaneous occurrence
Ah	Sung utterance
C/Ch/Ac	Conductor/Choir/Accompanist
LH	Left hand