

# Ep #61: What Conductors Want

Can't  
wait  
to hear  
you  
with  
Michèle Voillequé

## Full Episode Transcript

# Ep #61: What Conductors Want

Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

Today I want to talk about what happens when humans sing together in a group, and what gets in our way, and what helps that experience be really fun and successful.

I have a handful of students who are in community choruses or sing in a church choir or a temple choir. I myself sing for a church choir. So I hear a lot of stories about what happens at rehearsals and I experience a lot of group rehearsals myself.

I directed a youth and children's chorus for a little over 11 years, so I've got experience on both sides of the podium, as it were. And I just wanna take today to normalize what's going on in the room, or, some of what's going on in the room.

So why I am thinking about this particularly now is because one of my students is in a community chorus and came to her lesson recently, having been at the chorus rehearsal the night before, and came with a story about what happened.

The group she's singing with is working on a big piece of music, it's a requiem. So there's a big part for the chorus, and there's a big part for a big orchestra. There's a lot going on in the score. And they were rehearsing a section, and more than once, she's an alto, the alto section as a whole, wound up about a measure behind everybody else by the end of the section.

And my student was singing and looking at the conductor and was pretty sure that she was doing it right, but could hear that the other singers

## Ep #61: What Conductors Want

around her, that she was not with them, and she was really confused for a moment until after another couple repetitions, it became obvious that the altos as a whole, were not watching the conductor.

Their noses were buried in the score. I don't know, it's kind of early – maybe they should know their music better by now – but it's still pretty early in the semester as it were. Like, they're still learning it, and as a group, they didn't have enough peripheral vision to keep track of the tempo that the conductor wanted to take.

This is the kind of moment where we really, as singers, can get in our own way. Because part of what's going on there with being buried in your score and not looking at the conductor, is the very real desire to not make a mistake, right?

You don't wanna look up from the music because you wanna make sure you do it right. Unfortunately, by not looking at the conductor, you end up not doing it right because you're doing it at the wrong time.

But that desire to want do it right, it runs through everybody and it can really get in our own way.

Also, the desire to not stick out, right, and to sing kind of under your breath, not sing fully because your voice might stick out and then you might get yelled at.

Together with not wanting to stick out by, like, having a voice that's too full or too bright or too flat or too sharp or what, too anything, right, is also not wanting to go first, because what if that's wrong?

And so one of the ways, in this case, the alto section, at least according to the report of my student, the main problem was that nobody was looking at the conductor, and everybody had their own idea of a tempo that was much slower than what the conductor wanted.

## Ep #61: What Conductors Want

But another way that a section can get behind is because nobody wants to go first, and so everybody's waiting to hear what the person next to them sings so that they sing the right thing. Again, coming from this desire to not make a mistake, to let it be perfect.

Unfortunately with that desire to have the pitch right, to have the note right, the note ends up happening at the wrong time, so it's wrong. The note is only right at a particular moment in time. And if you miss that time, eh, it's the wrong note.

This fear of doing the wrong thing, of being the wrong kind of person, right? of sticking out, of getting yelled at, right? this is not just happening in a chorus, right?

This happens from very young in school, like, this is a human fear that has been with us forever. We're herd animals, right? We find safety in groups. And God forbid we stick out or do it wrong.

There is a primal fear of being ostracized.

I've seen this in the choruses that I've been in. I hear this in reports from the choruses my students are in. This is not going away anytime soon, and it's in all environments.

It's in beginning kinds of groups and intermediate experience kinds of groups and advanced groups, it's everywhere. It's just part of being a person, and it's rough.

But I wanna say that in a good chorus, and I don't mean like a fancy chorus, I just mean a good-hearted chorus, a chorus that is led by a kind, compassionate, qualified musician, it's okay to make mistakes.

In fact, rehearsals are the places to make mistakes. This is what I think the conductors want you to know. This is what I wanted my kids to know as a conductor of a youth and children's choir, and this is what the

# Ep #61: What Conductors Want

grownup conductors I know that I've worked with want their people to know.

More than anything, actually, they want to be looked at. They want to make eye contact with you. They want to see your eyes on them because them standing on the podium, waving their arms, that's how we're keeping this whole thing running.

That's how we're making this magic of music happen. Because even if we sing the right notes, if they're at the wrong time, they're wrong.

So, what the conductor wants most is your eye contact, even more than your right notes. Right notes, right behind eye contact, but I'm pretty sure the thing they're gonna want first is eye contact and then the right notes.

And what that means for the singer is that this whole project of singing in a group with a conductor is a whole lot more intimate than maybe we thought.

Maybe we thought we're gonna go to a chorus rehearsal and we're gonna sing with a bunch of other people, and, so nobody's really gonna hear me. It's not like a solo thing, and I'm not gonna stick out, and I'm gonna be with my friends and it's gonna sound good. And we're gonna, you know, we're gonna make nice music and we're gonna have a good time.

And I don't need to take a big emotional risk. It feels less emotionally risky than like going to karaoke or going to an open mic where it's just me, right? This feels safer.

And in some ways it is safer, but I have to tell you what the conductor wants the most is your eye contact.

Part of the reason people don't give the conductor their eyes is because they're buried in their scores and they wanna sing the right thing. But I

# Ep #61: What Conductors Want

think more than that, we are afraid to look at the conductor because it's so intimate. It feels so vulnerable. And it's something to get used to.

So, here are some strategies for doing that, 'cause it is scary to look at the conductor.

But you don't have to look at the conductor in the eyes. You need to look at the conductor's hands, maybe. I often find myself looking at the conductor's collarbone or sternum – focusing on the center of their upper body, and I can see the hands with my peripheral vision, but I'm like mostly looking at their body.

Sometimes I'm looking at the conductor's ear. Sometimes I'm looking out at the audience. I'm looking out at the exit sign. I am looking at, seeing somebody I recognize in the audience, but I can still see the conductor's hands in my peripheral vision, and so I'm staying engaged.

I, myself, I rarely look the conductors squarely in the eye, but my eyes are up and the conductors can see that I am engaging with them. And what I can tell you from being on the other side of the podium for, from being on the podium, as the conductor myself, that for me creates such a sense of safety.

It's very calming because I know that I'm not up there waving my arms all by myself looking like a fool. Conductors also don't wanna look ridiculous, right? They want the group to sound good. They're sticking out because that's their job is to be the one moving their arms, waving a baton, keeping everybody together.

But when they do their job well, they're not sticking out. They're like actually in the middle of it all, bringing the music out of the people they're conducting.

So the whole project really goes better when we can all be brave enough to give one another our honest attention.

# Ep #61: What Conductors Want

That doesn't mean don't ever look down at your score. Of course, do that. 'Cause remember the second thing they want are the right notes at the right time.

But the process of making music together as a group, singing together as a group, requires us to be open and available for everything that's happening.

We need to see with wider eyes maybe than ever before. We need eyes that can see the score and the conductor at the same time. We need ears that can hear what we are singing and also how it fits in with the other parts.

We need a heart that can feel steady and grounded and supportive, and also open to hold all of the music that's being made, and to keep us in a good, strong, solid, grounded place.

So it's a lower risk endeavor. It's maybe lower risk than karaoke, lower risk than soloing at an open mic, but it's a higher risk, I think emotional thing.

It's a different emotional thing to be in a chorus, week after week, rehearsing with the same people Getting over your little irritations with each other, figuring out where it's best to stand so that you can hear what you need to hear, so that you can see over the people in front of you.

Even if it's not a religious choir, it really is a spiritual experience. It's a process of being present with yourself and present with the group and hopefully also present for the conductor.

And then, when you perform, you bring all of that to the audience. And, as an audience member, which I have been way more times than I can count, it's so rewarding to see people's faces and to feel the connection that the singers have with the conductor.

# Ep #61: What Conductors Want

And to hear the result of it, to hear the resulting music just feel so coherent and so compelling, and so honest, so sincerely performed – there's really nothing better.

And again, it doesn't matter the level of the chorus, how complicated the music, how technically proficient everybody is – that's not the thing that moves me. What moves me is the connection that I can feel and witness between the participants.

So I'm not able to go to all of my students' concerts. I wish that I was. But, it's fantastic work and I'm so glad that they are sharing their voices with the community in those ways.

This is a bit of a shorter episode today because really, I just had this, I don't know, did it sound like a rant to you? I just wanted to get that out so thank you for indulging me, and I, I hope it's helpful.

I have another episode about choral singing, and it's about why, private lessons are good for choral singers, which, if this was interesting for you, you might also check out that episode. It'll be in the show notes.

I'd love to know if you're singing in a chorus, what you observe as you're doing that, and, if this was helpful.

Thank you so much for listening.

If you enjoyed today's episode, please rate and review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. Every positive review helps new people find the show. Subscribing ensures you'll learn about new episodes as soon as they come out. If you have a question about singing or speaking or being, please send me an email at [letters@mvmusik.com](mailto:letters@mvmusik.com).

That's letters at M as in Mary, V as in Victor, M U S I K.com. Transcripts and show notes are available on my website. You can subscribe to my newsletter there, too. *Can't Wait to Hear You* is

**Can't Wait to Hear You** – a podcast with Michèle Voillequé



# Ep #61: What Conductors Want

produced in conjunction with Particulate Media. I'm your host, Michèle Voillequé. I can't wait to hear you.