



Rupert Gough  
and the choral  
conducting class

# Can you beat that?

An undergraduate course in choral conducting at Royal Holloway is giving students practical skills for the wider world, writes **Lois Jones**. PHOTOS BY GRAHAM COPLAND-CALE

**I**n the UK, there is a huge amount of choral conducting going on at one level or another, and yet very few people have any kind of training,' says Rupert Gough. 'Compared with other countries, we appear to have an environment where it is seen as normal to learn to conduct choirs through experience more than instruction.'

Three years after his appointment in 2005 as director of choral music and college organist at Royal Holloway College, University of London (RHUL), Gough felt it was time to address this issue: 'Countless music graduates leave university and, at some point in their career, are likely to find themselves conducting some kind of choir, perhaps in a school or a church. Experience

is, of course, a very important part of a conductor's development, but not a substitute for a grounding in basic conducting techniques.'

Gough is speaking from his own experience of having studied both choral and orchestral conducting when a student at the University of East Anglia, which stood him in good stead later as assistant organist at Wells Cathedral and in his present post, in which he has taken the Choir of Royal Holloway to new heights, with major concerts, tours, and recordings on the Hyperion label.

Though the UK has a few conducting courses, these are mostly at postgraduate level, and generally accept only a handful of students each year. With the RHUL

Bachelor's degree structured through modules, Gough felt it was possible to offer training in basic techniques much more widely by instigating in 2008 a half-module course in choral conducting for second- and third-year undergraduates: 'It was intended for 8-10 students but was immediately popular and has always had between 19 and 25 students.'

But why a course specifically for choral conducting, as opposed to simply 'conducting'? 'In a choral setting,' explains Gough, 'gesture is aimed almost exclusively at drawing the best sound and vocal technique from your singers. A lot is based on establishing a kind of physiological connection with your singers that will affect their breathing and, potentially, the shape of

every phrase or note.’

The course lasts for one term only, after which time students have a practical assessment: 10-15 minutes rehearsing a prepared piece with 5-6 singers; and conducting a ‘performance’ of a more contemporary piece with complex time signature changes. Students are assessed on their communication skills as well as gesture. The practical exam accounts for 70 per cent of the marks, the rest coming from an essay and from marking up scores in preparation for conducting them.

Students attend lectures dealing with different aspects of conducting each week, and in practical workshops take it in turns to conduct the rest of the class singing as a choir. ‘This way each student has some individual instruction from me every other week with a choir to conduct,’ explains Gough. Repertoire ranges from the Oxford Tudor Anthem book through to works by Mozart, Bruckner and Parry as the course progresses. Students also learn how to prepare much more complex scores, by composers such as Walton or Britten.

The course aims to ensure that students are fluent with all beat patterns and know how to manage complex time signatures with clear gestures. Common problems, such as negotiating pauses and proper independence of the left hand, are also

addressed, alongside communication skills – given equal weight to conducting – encouraging good body language and verbal instruction. General weaknesses that need correcting are having the head in the score all the time, bad posture, a beat that doesn’t encourage people’s attention, and not listening intently. For many students, one of the biggest developments they have to make across ten weeks is to find the confidence to conduct their peers without nervous habits hampering the delivery of their musical ideas. But they are also encouraged to seek their own experience alongside the course: ‘Usually a number have conducting experience already. Many end up conducting different student groups on campus, such as opera societies or different choral groups.’

It is not difficult to find evidence of how the RHUL choral conducting module has helped its students. Benjamin Gaughran, who graduated with a BMus in 2013, explains: ‘The course helped in my ability to understand the choral voice, lead an effective rehearsal (whether with amateurs or professionals), learn successful score marking tips, engage critically with theory and literature based around choral conducting, and develop my skills and technique in terms of gesture and musicianship. Now, as a graduate who teaches

## Rupert Gough’s top tips for good choral conducting

1. Know the score inside out.
2. Maintain good eye contact with everybody, including when addressing your comments to the choir.
3. Try to communicate everything you want through gesture.
4. Do not talk too much and always be firm, yet friendly and positive.
5. You need a good ear, and the experience and knowledge to fix problems efficiently.
6. Aim to find the elusive balance between confident authority and constant self-evaluation.

music in a secondary school, the skills I developed on that course are invaluable as I work with my school choir. And as a choral conductor outside my school work, I am able to put into practice many of the things I studied at undergraduate level in order to produce a high-ability and technically proficient choir. It would have been harder for me to accomplish such things if I had had to wait to study choral conducting at postgraduate level.’ ■

