

Singing in an ensemble

# The secret of Masters & Apprentices: breathing together

Masters & Apprentices is a unique concert series of young musicians who perform together with very experienced singers. The forms of social and informal learning that were used during the intensive rehearsal period are extremely successful. How can this approach inspire managers, HR professionals and trainers?

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The Masters & Apprentices project is an intensive training program for professional singers who, under the guidance of a renowned conductor and accompanied by a coach, rehearse a demanding program and perform it during a series of high-level concerts. The project is an initiative of vocal coach Geert Berghs. Young singers - the apprentices - stand next to an experienced master and thus naturally acquire the skills that the master has already developed. By working together, the apprentices take over their experienced colleague's expertise, which is difficult to convey in words. After all, ensemble singing involves much more than following the instructions of the conductor and technically singing the correct notes. It is also about the ability to adapt to each other, to form a homogeneous sound and to communicate a jointly felt interpretation.

We suspect that industry, organizations, schools and government institutions can learn from this special program. After all, many organizations use 'internships', 'traineeships' and 'in company' trajectories to prepare new, young employees for a position, but often with varying effects. The following questions are central to this article:

- What do young musicians learn during the cooperation in the Masters & Apprentices program? And how is it for the Masters, to join the Apprentices in this project?
- What makes this approach successful? What roles do the conductor, the coach, the masters and the apprentices have in this approach?
- Which characteristics of this learning environment promote experiments, learning and professional development? Which characteristics are impediments?

- What can managers, HR professionals and trainers learn from the Masters & Apprentices program in terms of organizing, designing and developing educational programs?

## **Method**

To be able to answer our central questions, in November 2018 we held 35 interviews with participants of the Masters & Apprentices program. Based on the outcomes we made a preliminary analysis. We presented this analysis during a round-table meeting with some of the participants of Masters & Apprentices and asked additional questions.

### **What do young musicians learn during the cooperation in the Masters & Apprentices program? And vice versa?**

*Managing one's energy and learning to cooperate in a choir*

In the world of classical music, preparing a concert program is often a tightly organized process, which is led by the conductor. The conductor is familiar with the repertoire and with the concert program and has a clear understanding of how a composition should sound. He uses the rehearsal process to clarify his opinion about the desired end result and works with the singers until he has achieved the desired ideal sound. Young singers, however, also have to cope with practical aspects to which a conductor usually pays little attention, such as developing the discipline to be present on time, following the conductor's instructions without discussion, how to stand and how to manage their energy in such a way that they can physically endure a long, intensive rehearsal period.

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## ***About Masters & Apprentices***

The Masters & Apprentices project aims to offer young musicians, in addition to their training as soloists and conductors, the opportunity to develop their talents in the field of ensemble work at a high level. A second goal is to let young singers experience how beneficial it is for a future soloist career to work in an ensemble, because even for a soloist it is of great importance to keep their eyes and ears open for their fellow musicians. In addition to the musical and artistic aspects, such a project also offers the opportunity to expand one's professional network and thereby improve one's economic perspective. In the Netherlands, Masters & Apprentices has been a successful annual concert series by and for young, professional singers since 2011. During an intensive rehearsal period, twenty young singers (apprentices) work with four experienced singers (masters). The learning process is supervised by a singing coach (Geert Berghs, Amsterdam Conservatory), and the rehearsals and the concerts are led by a renowned conductor. In 2018 the conductor was Daniel Reuss (chief conductor of Cappella Amsterdam). In 2019 the program was led by the Finnish conductor Nils Schweckendiek, chief conductor of the Helsingin kamarikuoro.

### *Preparation and technique*

Ensemble singing also requires a professional attitude, which includes knowing the notes and the text before the rehearsals begin. A choir singer is supposed to do homework and be well prepared when starting rehearsals. In terms of the vocal technique, the singer should virtually already have mastered the concert's program. This requires careful and disciplined preparation. The project participants generally have little experience in this area and they also do not always know how to approach such individual preparation, especially if they are not yet familiar with the repertoire.

### *Learning to adapt to a choir*

An important role of learning to sing together is to learn to adapt one's own voice, keeping however its individual character, to the surrounding voices. It is important to learn how one's voice is at the service of creating a new and special harmony. In a musician's training, all the attention is usually focused on discovering and developing his or her personal sound, searching for the most unique expression and strengthening one's own identity. In choral singing, the capacity to conform to the whole comes first.

### *Compliance and obedience*

Ensemble singing also requires learning to accept what the leader wants to hear. The singer's opinion doesn't matter. It is pointless to enter into a discussion with the conductor or with the master to try and influence the desired end result. It is the choir singer's profession to transform the conductor's wishes into sound. This also applies to the master.

Being obedient and docile appears to be an important condition for apprentices. It is an attitude that is at odds with views about shared leadership, co-creation and democratic decision-making about artistic quality. In fact, the choir singer completely surrenders to a form of classical and autocratic leadership. Apprentices who do not take these principles seriously or who find it hard to conform to them make themselves unattractive and stand in the way of an exceptional artistic experience.

### **What makes this approach successful? What roles do the conductor, the coach, the masters and the apprentices have in this approach?**

#### *Upward pressure towards a concert series*

The learning path is not without obligations, as the entire choir works towards a series of concerts. That goal is all-determining and tangible. The participants describe this "deadline" as a noticeable upward pressure towards a finale. The program, the dates and the venues are fixed. They cannot be changed or postponed. Canceling is not an option.

#### *Making abstract goals of the conductor explicit*

The master helps the young singers to translate the abstract goals of the conductor into a vocal-technical approach. For example, a conductor may have wishes and articulate these in a way that is difficult to apply for an inexperienced singer. A master will then give tips and

suggestions based on his experience and expertise. In this way vague goals are translated concretely and explicitly into an audible timbre and expression of the choir.

### *Proximity of the master*

An important role of the master appears to be that he or she is present close to the young singer. The master stands next to and between the apprentices. The master converts the conductor's comments and instructions into sounds in a natural and immediately audible way. Apprentices feel how the masters breathe, how they prepare a tone and with which energy and intensity they use it, in order to subsequently generate volume, form a timbre and move with it. This close-up feeling and experiencing appears to be invaluable to apprentices. There is a form of transfer of expertise that takes place without using words. This process would be disrupted if a master were to give excessive instructions and behave more or less like a second conductor.



*The oldest Master-participant with the youngest Apprentice- participant ever*

### *Consciously opting for instructional learning*

In the rehearsals of the four vocal groups, the four masters work separately with the sopranos, altos, tenors or bass singers on the technical details of the score. During these rehearsals, there is room for explanation and specific instructions. It proved to be particularly valuable for the singers to be able to practice and experiment together. The apprentices expect a direct, personal approach and feedback from the master of their vocal group, which the conductor usually cannot provide. The master contributes a wealth of experience and makes ensemble singing an expertise in its own right, while it usually receives little attention at the conservatory.

### *The role of the conductor*

A good conductor makes it possible for the choir to do something that the individual members have never done before or may not even have considered possible. If they succeed, it is an indescribably important artistic experience. It makes little sense to go

against the wishes of a conductor, who is the absolute leader in terms of goal and result. The goal is therefore set very high and is actually beyond each individual professional. The singers themselves do not have an explicit "yardstick in mind", but they must be able to cope with the singing, they must understand the intention, and they must find the intended result interesting and desirable.

### *The role of the vocal coach*

Participants of the Masters & Apprentices program spend a certain amount of time together practicing, singing and performing a lot. This creates a great sense of togetherness and trust and even a family feeling. The coach, Geert Berghs, plays an important role in this process. He ensures that all participants feel at ease and does not make the work unnecessarily unattractive by burdening the participants with forms that need to be completed, overly long training sessions or unnecessary team outings. The coach has a strong connecting role in the group, performs daily breathing and consonance exercises to shape the group, conducts coaching conversations and organizes joint meals and activities. The coach is responsible for reinforcing the pedagogical objectives of the project. He almost turns the Masters & Apprentices project into a family affair, in a way that is rarely found in a professional choir. The coach also helps to resolve ambiguities and potential conflicts. He is a stable factor in a demanding professional environment.

### **Which characteristics of this learning environment promote or impede experiments, learning and professional development?**

#### *Beneficial characteristics of the Masters & Apprentices program*

A number of elements were repeatedly mentioned as characteristics that make the concert project such a special experience:

- All participants are strongly driven by the desire to make music together at a high level. This presupposes the presence of a conductor with an international reputation and very high ambitions.
- The coach and the conductor compose an attractive program that participants can perform during a series of six to nine concerts on different stages around the country.
- For the young singers it is a privilege to be able to sing not only under the guidance of a top conductor, but also in the presence of experienced experts in the singer's profession.
- The Masters & Apprentices program offers a lot of time for rehearsals, not only with the entire ensemble, but also in separate voice groups, under the guidance of the master, and also with a specialized voice coach.
- A lot of attention is paid to learning to sing together. It is not just a matter of learning to sing the notes and the lyrics together, but above all of working on a common chorus sound, merging with each other's voices, in order to achieve a homogeneous expression.

- It is even a matter of learning how to breathe together. The awareness of joint breathing, noticing this among each other and joining in and becoming part of it is an important feature of high-level ensemble singing.
- Giving up individuality and ego to create something "impossible" as a group appears to be a key characteristic of high-level choral singing. This aspect seems to be at odds with the characteristics of modern professional music practice, in which individual talent often takes center stage.

*Impeding characteristics of the Masters & Apprentices program.*

From the analyses of the conversations with the masters, the apprentices, the conductors and the coach, we can also distil a number of elements that stand in the way of the project's high ambitions.

- It sometimes happens that a master starts behaving like a second conductor. A master who is giving instructions disrupts the learning process that is geared towards developing harmony. This creates a tension that undermines the accepted hierarchy in music practice.
- It sometimes happens that a conductor indicates that he is not satisfied and that a certain passage must sound differently, without showing or indicating how it should be done. This can lead to frustration, because the conductor does not provide a clear solution for achieving the desired result. Attempts at guessing usually aggravate the problem. The master can play an important role here by making a feasible translation of the conductor's wishes based on experience and presenting this translation as an audible solution.
- One of the more or less hidden reasons for apprentices to audition for the project is the hope that the conductor or the master might help them to gain access to one of the few available positions in professional music practice. Apprentices who are too busy with individual profiling and try to stand out for the conductor or the master disrupt the delicate process of ensemble singing, forming a balanced choral sound and merging into joint breathing. In such situations the coach plays an important regulatory role.
- The aim of the rehearsal period is to achieve the desired interpretation and fulfil the conductor's high expectations regarding the ideal sound. It is a continuous process of communicating wishes that are difficult to express, which the singers responding searchingly with sounds. The conductor continues this process – as do the masters during the group sessions - until a satisfactory result is achieved. Due to impatience, time pressure, tension and fatigue, feedback can be expressed in hard and direct comments. This is a difficult practice for young singers, because getting feedback on one's voice feels like receiving criticism of one's soul. It is an important task of the coach and the masters to teach the apprentices how to deal with feedback on their voices.

## What can managers, HR professionals and trainers learn from the Masters & Apprentices program?

Based on the characteristics and the success of the Masters & Apprentices program, it is worth looking for a possible application of this approach in the field of training, learning and development in work organizations. Below are a number of possible lessons.

*Search for a higher goal.* The Masters & Apprentices program unites talented musicians who all have committed themselves to a higher goal: performing a concert series at a very high level, which the singers and the audience experience as a special event. It is not only the conductor's ambition. Consequently, feedback, practicing and being critical of quality are not up for discussion within the group. That is a logical consequence of wanting to perform at one's best to achieve this higher goal together. The participants voluntarily submit to the authority of the conductor and the masters. At the same time, this acceptance of authority only applies to this concert series, and hence it is limited in duration and scope. The aspects of a common higher goal and the limited nature of the chosen hierarchy are worth exploring further in work organizations.

*Make use of professional autonomy.* Each singer has a great deal of professional autonomy and expertise, which is necessary for performing together. This expertise is fueled by a strong passion for the profession and by pride in a magical result. Linking this professional autonomy to a common higher goal generates acceptance of authority, without enforcement via control, hierarchical structures or even punishment. The Masters & Apprentices project can be successful because all the participants consider it a meaningful program, to which they are happy to commit themselves for the time being. The goal is not imposed by someone who does not actively participate in its implementation.

*Search for beauty in everyday work.* There is a great deal of beauty in a joint experience of learning, rehearsing and performing. Audiences will also feel it during a concert. They will experience something beautiful and unique. Participants experience it to a much greater extent. The experience resembles a kind of overwhelming "whirl", a kick. The trick for work organizations is to also search for what motivates people to make something beautiful and unique, and to manage that motivation. It probably is the core of pride in craftsmanship.



Foto: Niek van Bruggen



*Sopranos, rehearsal 2018*

*For talented musicians, the bar can be set high.* The conductor has a goal in mind and for that he sets a very high standard. To achieve this, the conductor works extremely hard. It is perhaps even more remarkable to notice how this high goal exerts a great attraction on the participants. Leadership is therefore not only about being able to inspire enthusiasm, but perhaps mainly about using one's expertise to express a jointly supported ambition and working towards this goal without compromise.

*Create a pleasant working environment.* It is remarkable how much the participants benefit from a "hands-on" coach who is present during rehearsals, who supports the participants, helps where necessary and guides them through voice exercises. This coaching entails much more than mirroring, asking questions and offering technical support. The coach also creates a pleasant working environment, paying personal attention to the participants and teaching them to deal with feedback on their voice, which may sometimes be harsh. The coach also takes care to provide the right conditions for a family atmosphere, such as planning lunches, conducting individual conversations, assisting with administrative tasks and organizing dinner before each concert. A pleasant working environment with personal attention, recognition and appreciation makes it easier to work unconditionally towards a top performance.

*Everyone participates 100%.* This principle of active and full participation can be used in many internships and knowledge exchange programs for young professionals. Going to work immediately, using everyone's talents and focusing on the central substantive issue generates the essential feeling of being wanted and needed. This implies saying no to "sneak previews" and to getting to know the work while remaining on the sidelines. Even people with little experience should be invited to get to work immediately on a substantive, meaningful "higher" goal.



## Finally

The lessons of the Masters & Apprentices program seem to suggest that organizing, designing and developing learning pathways can be very successful if the substantive theme really matters, if it is meaningful and fits in with the ambitions, motivations and dreams of young professionals.

If everyone can be made to play, from the outset, an active role in a project in which the participants are really needed, where they feel acknowledged and appreciated and where they can cooperate in a pleasant, safe and caring environment, then the bar can also be set very high, the process of pursuing the goal can be uncompromising, and the feedback on the intermediate results can be direct and straightforward.

Submitting and conforming to the ambitions of a powerful leader - the conductor - is completely acceptable if one has consciously and freely chosen to participate in a project with a desirable higher goal that is completely in keeping with one's own professional identity.

It would seem only natural to use the experience and expertise of masters and coaches who enable young professionals to achieve that attractive goal; not by speaking to them in a patronizing way about what they are doing wrong, but by demonstrating and making them hear and see how it can be done differently, better, more effectively and more beautifully. Without losing themselves, they can deliver performances at a level they didn't think was possible. It is probably the art of learning to breathe together.

### **For further information:**

See Conference paper:

Kessels, J., Berghs, G., & De Jong, T. (2019). *Masters & Apprentices: breathing together A rich learning experience for organizations?*

EAPRIL 2019 Conference, University of Tartu, Estonia. November 26-29.

Round Table: November 27, session A:11

<https://josephkessels.com/kessels-j-berghs-g-de-jong-t-2019-masters-apprentices-breathing-together-rich-learning-experience>