

Musical Performance Correction in an A Capella Musical Rehearsal: A Cappella Rehearsal at Berklee College of Music

Starr Desmond

Berklee College of Music

Introduction:

This paper explores methods of error detection and correction during a rehearsal of one of Berklee College of Music's A Cappella groups. Specifically, this paper focuses on the structure of *Musical Performance Movement Correction Sequences*. These are distinct from other types of error correction in spoken interaction because, as Weeks (2002 p. 360) points out, "even though the musicians are aware of troubles, they aim to produce a performance situationally adequate for the bulk of the audience...the musicians feel a strong pressure to "keep going" and make the best of it rather than to stop and try again". Unlike conversational repair and correction in conversation (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977), musicians cannot simply stop, repair, and start over at every error. Musicians can try to do corrections in the moment by listening and adapting to the rest of the ensemble, or they can keep going and then address the issue after the performance (Weeks 2002). This paper explores how errors are addressed after a practice performance in a rehearsal setting, where participants use a delayed sequence of correctional feedback. For this research project, two hours of video and audio data were recorded featuring an A Cappella rehearsal, with the informed consent of all parties.¹ A collection of video clips were created and analyzed using ethnomethodological video analysis (Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff 2010) and conversation analysis (Sidnell 2010). The data were transcribed for analysis using Jeffersonian transcription (Hepburn & Bolden 2012) and non-vocal action was transcribed using some of Mondada's (2018) conventions for multimodal annotation.

This paper focuses on the initial performance run through and the correctional feedback that highlights the moments of *Musical Performance Movement Errors*. In this A Cappella rehearsal setting there are seventeen members, and the two members providing the correctional feedback in the clips below are the two musical directors who we will call Mackenzie and Phillip. For the purposes of this analysis, a short introduction to A Cappella and Musical terminology is necessary. A Cappella is a type of music where solo voices, or group voices sing without instruments. There are different voice parts,

¹ See IRB Protocol "Berklee Studies of Social Interaction in the Arts", 04/20/2018

divided up by vocal range (the amount of pitches/notes a singer can produce). In order from highest pitched voice to lowest pitched voice these include: Soprano, Mezzo, Alto 1, Alto2, Tenor 1, Tenor 2, Baritone, Bass. The Soprano through Alto 2 voice parts are typically sung by women, and the Tenor 1 through Bass voice parts are typically sung by men. In contemporary A Cappella (as in the case analyzed here) there is usually a beatboxer/vocal percussionist. A beatboxer functions as a human drum kit, producing multiple percussive sounds with their voice/mouth/throat. The kind of musical terminology that is often used in correction feedback in this type of music includes intonation (pitch), dynamics (volume), articulations (the way in which a note is sung: short, long etc.), and rhythm (timing).

In our qualitative inductive analysis, we identified two major categories of error: *Performance Movement Error*, which relates to how the group moves while they sing - in other words, their stage performance, and *Musical Technical Error*, which relates to vocal technique and adherence to the musical score. This paper focuses on the interactional details of *Performance Movement Errors*, and specifically on one method of error detection and correction discovered in this environment, which we term *Correction Implicative Praise*. It is worth noting that the various types of error that appear in this setting are not entirely independent of one another. For example, at several points in the video data, *Musical Technical Errors* necessarily involve *Performance Movement Errors* and vice versa, since “[musical] notation is normally used in a prescriptive mode – the composer’s score being used as a guide to performance” (Weeks 2002 p. 360). The following section of this paper analyzes three examples of *Performance Movement Error*.

Performance Movement Error:

The first example of Performance Movement Error is at the start of the first run through of a medley the group is practicing. The group is in their assigned spots in the arc.



Figure 1 (Group in arc, shown above, start time in clip 00:12).

The group in Figure 1 is about to start a mock performance of the show they have coming up later that week. In that show the group will be holding microphones. In this clip the music director/beatboxer Phillip, in the grey shirt, speaks and gives a correction about holding up mics - or at least pretending to in this case. The man in the black shirt on the far left, Leo, will then ask a question about whether he has his 'mic' in the correct hand.

Extract 1 (00:03-00:24 Mic Hand Correction Video - use link to view video online)

10 *PHIL: A Cappella sho::wcase.>Whatever this one is for< .hh (laughs)
 11 (0.1) On The Vox, Ya:y! ↑ We all wa[lk out. Super] cool. >awesome<
 12 [Wo::oho::o!↑]

13 (0.1)
 14 Then this happens .hh (laughs)

15 (0.1)

16 *LEO: (gives starting pitch of song)

17 (0.2)

18 *PHIL: Oh. Mics.

19 (0.1)
 20 %Groups Hands%----move upward towards face----,,,,,,
 21 (whole group has a hand up pretending to hold a microphone)

22 *LEO: >Right< or left hand?

23 (0.2)
 24 *PHIL: >Right hand.<

25 (0.2)

26 %Some of the Groups Hands%- - switch to right hand,,,,,,,,,,,,,
 27 (whole group as right hand up)



Figure 2: (Group with hands up 00:20)



Figure 3: (Leo asks Phillip question 00:20)



Figure 4: (Whole group has right hand up 00:24)

In this clip there are two clear examples of *Performance Movement Error*: the first when the group put their hands into 'mic' positions, and the second when Phillip answers Leo's question about which hand to 'hold the mic'. In *Figure 1* the group starts off without their hands in a microphone-holding position. Phillip initiates the correction in line 22 with "Oh. Mics.", and the group move their arms into mic-holding positions (see *Figure 2*). There are a few details of this sequence of paired actions that show us this is an error correction rather than simply an instruction to the group. Firstly, Phillip's "Oh. Mics." occurs after he has already given the starting pitch of the song, so it effectively delays the beginning of the group singing. Secondly, the "oh" preface suggests an act of "remembering", or a "change of state" (Heritage 1984), from forgetting to remembering. So when Phillip says "Oh. Mics." in line 22, it is both an initial *instruction*, but delivered in the position of a correction to an existing course of action (starting to sing). When the group moves their hands to their faces, this is the second pair part to the instruction, but whereas their other movements (especially during the performance) are highly coordinated, this is done hurriedly, in an uncoordinated rush, one arm at a time.

This leads to the next correction sequence between Phillip, Leo and Austin in lines 27-29. The correction is initiated when Leo asks "Right or Left hand?" line 27 (see *Figure 3*). Phillip answers with "Right hand" line 29. On the face of it, this question-answer sequence does not constitute a correction. However, after Phillip says "Right hand" Austin switches his mic hand from left to right (see *Figure 4*). Austin's hand movement treats Phillip's answer to Leo's question as an opportunity to do a self-correction. This shows how in this large group interaction, the participants constantly monitor each other's behaviors for clues as to how to adjust their performance movements in response to the actions of others.

The next example of *Performance Movement Error* further unpacks the way error correction works in this kind of seventeen member performance group. Error Correction in a large group must use different tactics in providing constructive criticism than might be appropriate in a smaller, more intimate group. In this kind of large group settings, criticism must be delivered carefully, especially when it involves a delicate instrument such as the human voice, which can be sensitive to stress. In a large group it becomes more conspicuous to single out individuals for their errors in a public way. One way to provide constructive criticism, then, is via a method we term *Correction Implicative Praise*. This method is useful when an Individual gives praise first, in order to then correct an error, while avoiding singling out individuals for specific criticism.

Before explaining how this functions in relation to the data extract below, it is worth briefly describing Pomerantz' (1978) conversation analytic findings about the social norms relating to compliment-giving and compliment responses. The normative response to a compliment is a "dismissal" or a diminishment of the compliment, for example, if someone were to compliment one's new sweater, the "preferred" response (as she terms it) would be to say something like "oh this old thing", whereas the

“dispreferred” response would be to accept or enhance the compliment “oh yes, don’t I look amazing”. This kind of dispreferred response would contravene the general social norm against “self-praise” or self-directed compliments. Similarly, in her related research in this area, Pomerantz (1984) discovers a kind of symmetry to “assessments” and responses to them. Whereas it is “unmarked” to give compliments to others (e.g. “you look well”), self-praise and other-criticism are both “dispreferred”, and participants often hesitate, delay, laugh, or stumble in their speech when doing them.

In this environment of correcting the behavior of others, as we see below, Phillip comes up against several conflicting “preferences”. On the one hand, as one of the music directors, he has the task of correcting the performance of the group. On the other hand, he has to manage the interactional “dispreference” of either self-praise or, relatedly, other-criticism. This is not an easy task given the size of the group. Being corrected harshly, or being humiliated in front of the group might be counterproductive, and will not help correct the given error. The voice is very delicate and personal instrument, so one must be careful when giving criticism to avoid counter-productive stress. In *Extract 2* Phillip provides constructive criticism about the group’s *Performance Movement* by first giving himself praise as a method of delivering a delicate criticism: a form of *Correction Implicative Praise*. He draws a contrast between his stage presence and the other members who have less “energy”. His self praise aims to get the group to perform with more bodily movement and emphatic facial expressions.

Extract 2 (00:00-00:33 Correction Implicative Praise Video - follow link to online video)

16 *PHIL: Also I go CRAZY over there.

17

18 *MAC: Yeah! You do.

19

20 *JAX: >He was going hard<

21

22 *PHIL: I go ABsolutely Cra::zy and everyone should be on that level.

23

24 *MAC: Yeah!

25 *PHIL:[NOt to say that I am the best. But like (0.1)]

26

27 *JAX: >But I'm the best< (laughs)

28

29 *PHIL:You should be (group laughter) NO but you should be CLOSer to that! I

30 know I go <EXtr:a> crazy because it's in a beatboxer DNA >to do it<.



Figure 5 (Phillip points to his spot on line 16, 00:03)

31 Eli also got that comment from Ross. >It's in our blood<.
 32
 33 *MAC: TAYLOR was doing ↑ >really well< to::o!↓ Taylor was getting really
 34 into it. So like- follow them ↓ I am guilty of not doing that, but I
 35 have no excuse.
 36

When reading the transcript above (*see Extract 2*) Phillip gives constructive criticism of the groups movement by praising himself: “I go crazy over there...I go absolutely crazy and everyone should be on that level” (Extract 2 lines 16 and 22). Phillip’s self-praise, is still a dispreferred action, as we can see from his turn in line 25 where he partially retracts it by saying “NOT to say that I am the best”. However, this diminished self-praise is done to avoid the other (and perhaps more problematic) dispreferred action of directly criticizing the group in order to change their performance. When looking through the performance run through, the change Phillip is aiming for can be tracked by comparing his movement to the movement of the rest of the group. Phillip’s hands and arms are constantly moving in contrast to the rest of the group whose arms stay relatively static by their sides (*see figures 6-21 below*).

Figures 6-9 (Phillips movement throughout Ooh Ma Yeah Performance Video)



Figure 6 (Ooh Ma Yeah Performance at 00:28)



Figure 7 (Ooh Ma Yeah Performance at 00:34)



Figure 8 (Ooh Ma Yeah Performance at 00:46)



Figure 9 (Ooh Ma Yeah Performance at 00:53)

Figures 10-13 (Phillip's Movement throughout Castle On The Hill Performance Video)



Figure 10 (Castle On The Hill at 00:08)



Figure 11 (Castle On The Hill at 00:12)



Figure 12 (Castle On The Hill at 00:28)



Figure 13 (Castle On The Hill at 00:38)

Figures 14-17 (Phillip's Movement throughout Dynasty Performance Video)



Figure 14 (Dynasty at 00:07)



Figure 15 (Dynasty at 00:19)



Figure 16 (Dynasty at 00:25)



Figure 17 (Dynasty at 00:47)

Figures 18-21 (Phillip's Movement throughout Good Things Performance Video)



Figure 18 (Good Things at 00:16)



Figure 19 (Good Things at 00:22)



Figure 20 (Good Things at 00:31)



Figure 21 (Good Things at 00:44)

When looking through *Figures 6-21* above, the contrast between Phillip's hand movements and the other members of the group is clear. Jax, Mackenzie and Steven (*identified in Figure 6*) move far less than Phillip (*also identified in Figure 6*). When Phillip praises himself, and attaches an instruction "I go absolutely crazy over there, and everyone should be on that level" (Line 22 Extract 2), he criticises Jax, Mackenzie and Steven through this contrast and explains that he wants them to move more energetically.

This correction procedure also shows evidence of the problem of self-praise. Phillip begins to retract his self-praise by saying "Not to say that I am the best. But like (0.1)" in Line 25, then Jax picks up the end of Phillip's turn by saying "But I'm the best" then proceeds to laugh. By responding to Phillip's with a "But" conjunction, as if they are competing, then laughing, Jax points out the inappropriateness of Phillip's self-praise teasingly. Then In line 29 Phillip again works to dispell the "dispreferred" self-praise by also praising Eli - another beatboxer by saying, "You should be (group laughter) No, but you should be closer to that! I know I go extra crazy because it's in a beatboxer DNA to do it. Eli also got that comment from Ross. It's in our blood" (Lines 29-31) (*Eli identified in Figure 20*). When Phillip praises Eli, he shares his self-praise around, attributing it not to himself personally, but to the category of "beatboxers". The way he invokes "beatboxer DNA" as an explanation for their energy further diminishes the problem of self-praise by attributing it to their "nature" rather than any voluntary effort or praiseworthy personal virtue. Furthermore Mackenzie collaborates with Phillip's contrastive criticism by helping him both with the praise, and in managing the problem of self-praise. First she agrees with his initial self-praise by saying "Yeah" in Line 24, to the suggestion that "everyone should be on that level", then she participates in sharing the praise by praising Taylor (*identified in Figure 7*), and by criticizing herself. This accomplishes the dual goal of diminishing the problem of Phillip's self-praise while demonstrating to the group that even she - their co-musical director - is "guilty" of lacking energy and has "no excuse". Phillip, Jax and Mackenzie collaborate to implement the correction using *Correction Implicative Praise*, starting with observing the correct behavior, then working together to diminish the potentially problematic implications of "dispreferred" actions such as self-praise and other-correction.

Summary and Conclusion:

This paper has focused on error detection and correction in a musical setting. It explores the social interactions found in large rehearsal groups, and how correctional feedback is accepted and rejected. The type of error that was forced on was *Performance Movement Errors*, through the use of transcripts, screenshots of recorded video data. This conversation analytic study of correction identified *Correction Implicative Praise* as a new method for using of praise to deliver sensitive correctional feedback. Future work on this phenomenon could explore its variations in a range of musical performance settings, and could explore whether it is similar in its structure and use in everyday interactions.

Bibliography:

Heath, C., Hindmarsh, J., & Luff, P. (2010). Video in qualitative research: analysing social interaction in everyday life. London: Sage Publications.

Hepburn, A., & Bolden, G. B. (2012). The Conversation Analytic Approach to Transcription. In J. Sidnell & T. Stivers, *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis* (pp. 57–76). Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.

Heritage, J. (1984). A change-of-state token and aspects of its sequential placement. In M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 299–345). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mondada, L. (2018). Multiple Temporalities of Language and Body in Interaction: Challenges for Transcribing Multimodality. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 51(1), 85–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351813.2018.1413878>

Pomerantz, A. (1978). Compliment Responses. In J. Schenkein, J. Schenkein (Ed.), *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction* (pp. 79–112). Elsevier BV. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-623550-0.50010-0>

Pomerantz, A. (1984). Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 57–102). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tolins, J. (2013). Assessment and Direction Through Nonlexical Vocalizations in Music Instruction. *Research on Language & Social Interaction*, 46(1), 47–64.

Weeks, P. (2002). Performative error-correction in music: A problem for ethnomethodological description. *Human Studies*, 25(3), 359–385. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020182018989>

Schegloff, E. A., Jefferson, G., & Sacks, H. (1977). The Preference for Self-Correction in the Organization of Repair in Conversation. *Language*, 53(2), 361–382. <https://doi.org/10.2307/413107>

Sidnell, J. (2011). *Conversation analysis: an introduction*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.