A Choristers’ Guide to Keeping Conductors In Line

The basic training of every singer should, of course, include myriad types of practical and theoretical emphases. One important area which is often neglected, however, is the art of one-upmanship. The following rules are intended as guides to the development of habits which will promote the proper type of relationship between singer and conductor.
1. Never be satisfied with the starting pitch. If the conductor uses a pitch-pipe, make known your preference for pitches from the piano and vice-versa.

2. Complain about the temperature of the rehearsal room, the lighting, crowded space, and of a draft. It’s best to do this when the conductor is under pressure.

3. Bury your head in the music just before cues.

4. Ask for a re-audition or seating change. Ask often. Give the impression you’re about to quit. Let the conductor know you’re there as a personal favour.

5. Loudly clear your throat during pauses (tenors are trained to do this from birth). Quiet instrumental interludes are a good chance to blow your nose.

6. Long after a passage has gone by, ask the conductor if your C# was in tune. This is especially effective if you had no C# or were not singing at the time.

7. At dramatic moments in the music (which the conductor is emoting), be busy marking your music so that the climaxes will sound empty and disappointing.

8. Wait until well into a rehearsal before letting the conductor know that you don’t have the music.

9. Look at your watch frequently. Shake it in disbelief occasionally.

10. When possible, sing your part either an octave above or below what is written. This is excellent ear-training for the conductor. If he hears the pitch, deny it vehemently and claim that it must have been the combination tone.

11. Tell the conductor, “I can’t find the beat.” Conductors are always sensitive about their “stick technique” so challenge it frequently.

12. If you are singing in a language with which the conductor is the least bit unfamiliar, ask her as many questions as possible about the meaning of individual words. If this fails, ask her about the pronunciation of the most difficult words. Occasionally, say the word twice and ask her preference, making to say it exactly the same both times. If she remarks on their similarity, give her a look of utter disdain and mumble under your breath about the “subtleties of inflection”.

13. Ask the conductor if he has listened to the von Karajan recording of the piece. Imply that he could learn a thing or two from it. Also good: ask, “Is this the first time you’ve conducted this piece?”

14. If your articulation differs from that of others singing the same phrase, stick to your guns. Do not ask the conductor which is correct until backstage just before the concert.

15. Find an excuse to leave the rehearsal about 15 minutes early so that others will become restless and start to fidget