

Module 6

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Beyond Pronunciation: Towards an Adaptive Framework for English Choral Diction

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Beyond Pronunciation: Towards an Adaptive Framework for English Choral Diction

Context & Position

This project will investigate how experienced choral conductors conceptualise, teach and continue to develop English choral diction (ECD) within contemporary multi-genre practice. It will address the research question: How do experienced choral conductors conceptualise, teach and continue to develop English choral diction within contemporary multi-genre practice?

The researcher is a self-employed professional choral conductor undertaking insider research within the wider conducting community. The project will build upon earlier investigations into accent and diction in choral contexts (Truman-Williams, 2025) and subsequent exploration of approaches to teaching contemporary choral diction (Truman-Williams, 2026). Professional experiences working across Canadian and British contexts have raised recurring questions concerning accent, genre authenticity, and stylistic appropriateness, providing the context and impetus for this research.

Existing literature provides substantial technical guidance concerning pronunciation, vocal production and ensemble coordination (Fisher, 1991; Jordan, 1996; LaBouff, 2008), alongside wider scholarship examining relationships between accent, identity and genre. However, comparatively limited attention has been given to how conductors integrate these forms of knowledge when making, teaching and revising diction decisions across diverse musical contexts.

Rather than seeking to prescribe or evaluate a single system of best practice ECD, this interpretivist qualitative study will explore the professional reasoning and decision making of experienced UK choral conductors through semi-structured interviews.

Justification

Established ECD literature provides valuable technical guidance concerning pronunciation, vocal production, intelligibility and ensemble coordination (Marshall, 1953; Fisher, 1991; Jordan, 1996; LaBouff, 2008). Within the British classical tradition, these approaches have historically been associated with Received Pronunciation (RP) and related contemporary models of Southern Standard British English (SSBE). Contemporary conductors, however, increasingly work across multiple genres and musical contexts in which a single pronunciation model may not adequately reflect differing stylistic, linguistic and cultural expectations.

Wider sociolinguistic and popular music scholarship demonstrates relationships between accent, identity, genre, and authenticity (Trudgill, 1983; Coupland, 2011; Duncan, 2017; Gibson, 2024), while vocal research highlights the influence of resonance, blend and

acoustic considerations upon pronunciation (Powell, 1991; Deme, 2014). These perspectives suggest that ECD involves the negotiation of multiple, potentially competing considerations, rather than the straightforward application of established conventions.

Although these areas provide substantial relevant knowledge, comparatively limited attention has been given to how conductors integrate such considerations when making and teaching diction decisions in rehearsal. Similarly, conductor expertise is frequently implied rather than examined explicitly as a process through which professional understanding is developed, justified, and revised through experience.

This project therefore shifts attention from determining which model of English diction conductors should adopt towards investigating how experienced conductors conceptualise, teach, and continue to develop ECD.

Intended Impact

Through exploring conductors' professional reasoning, the study will seek to identify how technical knowledge, accent, genre, vocal considerations, and accumulated professional experience inform diction decisions within differing rehearsal and performance contexts.

The study will adopt a small-scale qualitative design involving experienced UK choral conductors working across varied ensemble settings and musical genres. Semi-structured interviews will provide participants with opportunities to articulate how they approach ECD in practice, including the factors influencing their artistic decisions, the pedagogical strategies through which these are communicated to singers, and the ways their understanding continues to develop through professional experience. Reflexive thematic analysis will be used to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across participants' accounts.

The anticipated impact is both conceptual and practical. Findings may provide a basis for developing a more adaptive account of ECD that complements established technical diction resources by foregrounding the professional judgement involved in their contextual application. Such insights may contribute to future conductor education and continuing professional development by supporting conductors to critically evaluate, articulate and develop their approaches to diction across diverse contemporary choral contexts.

Outlined Intentions

This project will adopt an interpretivist qualitative methodology, understanding professional knowledge as contextual, experiential and socially constructed. Although informed by perspectives associated with Practice as Research, particularly the understanding of professional practice as a site of knowledge generation (Nelson, 2022), the study will not itself constitute Practice as Research. Professional practice will instead provide the context and impetus from which the research question has developed.

Participants will be purposively recruited from the researcher's network of UK choral conductors, with snowball sampling used where appropriate. Participants will have a minimum of ten years' conducting experience, and the sample will seek diversity across

ensemble settings and musical genres. Approximately five conductors will participate in individual semi-structured online interviews of around one hour.

Interviews will explore areas including pronunciation, accent, genre, rehearsal practice, pedagogy and professional learning, whilst allowing participants to describe and reflect upon their individual professional experiences.

Data will be analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (2006; 2019; 2021). Analysis will be primarily inductive, whilst recognising that interpretation cannot be separated entirely from the researcher's professional experience or engagement with existing literature. The aim will be to develop a contextualised interpretation of patterns of meaning across participants' accounts, rather than test predetermined categories or produce statistically generalisable findings.

Ethics and Insider Research

This project will adopt the ethical framework outlined by Costley et al. (2010), with ethical reflection maintained throughout the research process. Ethical approval will be obtained through the university's research ethics procedures prior to participant engagement. Participants will receive an information sheet outlining the study's purpose, voluntary nature and intended use of data before providing written informed consent. Interviews will be conducted online using Zoom and audio-recorded with permission. Recordings and transcripts will be anonymised and securely stored in accordance with institutional data-protection requirements. Pseudonyms will be used in reporting, and participants will retain the right to withdraw in accordance with the approved ethics procedure.

As an experienced choral conductor and educator, the researcher occupies an insider position within the professional field being investigated. This may facilitate detailed discussion through shared professional vocabulary and understanding, whilst also creating risks of assumed meanings, insufficient probing or interpretations shaped by the researcher's own practice. Reflexivity will therefore be integral throughout data generation and analysis.

The researcher's positionality as a Canadian-trained conductor who has lived and worked in the UK for nearly twenty years is particularly relevant. Experiences of accent difference within British choral contexts have contributed to questions concerning diction, authenticity and stylistic appropriateness. Reflective notes and analytical records will be maintained to examine how this professional and linguistic positioning may influence questioning, participant interaction and interpretation.

Personal Learning Outcomes

- Develop a deeper and more critically informed understanding of ECD within contemporary multi-genre practice, particularly in relation to accent, genre, authenticity and professional judgement.

- Develop research skills in interpretivist qualitative inquiry, including semi-structured interviewing, reflexive thematic analysis and critical engagement with researcher positionality.
- Advance professional practice as a choral conductor and educator by critically examining how conductor knowledge is developed, articulated and adapted across differing musical and pedagogical contexts.

Timeline

Pre-Project Tasks

1. Topic Selection & Ethics Form Completion – Jan 1–12, 2026
2. Ethical Approval Submission – Jan 23, 2026
3. Research Question Refinement – Jan 1–23, 2026

Phase 1: Initial Research & Planning

4. Literature Review – Feb 24–Mar 31, 2026
5. Interview Schedule Development – Feb 24–Mar 31, 2026
6. Project Design & Methodological Refinement – Mar 1–Mar 31, 2026

Phase 2: Participant Recruitment & Data Generation

7. Participant Recruitment – Mar 15–May 31, 2026
8. Interview Scheduling – Apr–Jun 2026
9. Semi-Structured Interviews – Apr–Jun 2026
10. Transcription & Initial Familiarisation – Apr–Jun 2026

Phase 3: Data Analysis

11. Reflexive Thematic Analysis – Jun 21–Jul 15, 2026
12. Theme Development & Analytical Refinement – Jul 1–Jul 15, 2026

Phase 4: Drafting

13. Draft Paper Writing – Jul 16–Aug 8, 2026
14. Findings, Discussion & Framework Development – Jul–Aug 2026
15. PowerPoint Presentation Creation – Aug 9–Sep 15, 2026

Phase 5: Final Draft & Presentation

16. Final Draft Writing & Submission – Sep 1–Sep 15, 2026
17. Presentation Preparation & Delivery – Sep 16–Oct 9, 2026

Project Report

Beyond Pronunciation: Towards an Adaptive Framework for English Choral Diction

Introduction

English choral diction (ECD) has traditionally been understood as a technical discipline concerned with producing intelligible sung English through coordinated pronunciation, vowel formation, and consonant articulation (Marshall, 1953; Fisher, 1991; LaBouff, 2008). Within Western classical choral practice, these aims have frequently been associated with prestige accent conventions, particularly Received Pronunciation (RP) and Southern Standard British English (SSBE). Despite its historical associations of elitism, such approaches nevertheless remain valuable resources for textual clarity, vocal efficiency and ensemble cohesion within the classical choral tradition (Marshall, 2026).

Contemporary choral practice, however, presents a broader linguistic and stylistic landscape. Conductors may work across classical, musical theatre, jazz, gospel, folk and popular repertoire, each carrying different stylistic, vocal and cultural expectations (Abrahams, 2017; Gibson, 2024). Diction decisions may therefore involve relationships between pronunciation, genre, vocal production, cultural context, textual communication, ensemble sound and singer identity. These considerations can create competing artistic demands for which no single pronunciation model provides an obvious solution.

Sociolinguistic research further challenges assumptions that appropriate diction can be determined through a culturally neutral pronunciation standard. Prestige accents derive their status from social and historical processes (Milroy, 2000), while sung accent may communicate genre, stylistic affiliation and performed identity (Trudgill, 1983; Coupland, 2011; Duncan, 2017; Gibson, 2024). Recent choral research similarly demonstrates historical and regional variation within collective choral sound (Marshall *et al.*, 2024; Marshall, 2026). A choir also produces a collective voice from singers with potentially different linguistic backgrounds, making authenticity a question of negotiation between repertoire-associated conventions and ensemble identity.

What remains comparatively underexplored is how conductors integrate these different forms of knowledge when making and teaching diction decisions. Technical knowledge may establish how sounds can be produced without independently determining which choices are appropriate for specific repertoire or ensembles. Contemporary ECD, therefore, presents questions of professional judgement as well as technical competence.

This study consequently shifts attention from identifying a universally applicable model of best practice diction towards examining the professional reasoning underpinning diction decisions conductors make. It asks: How do experienced choral conductors conceptualise, teach, and continue to develop English choral diction within contemporary multi-genre practice?

The research emerged from the researcher's positionality as a Canadian-trained choral conductor who has worked with British choirs for almost twenty years (Goundar, 2025). Differences between the researcher's linguistic background and those encountered in professional practice repeatedly prompted questions concerning accent, genre authenticity, and stylistic appropriateness. These experiences generated the research problem but are not treated as evidence. Instead, professional practice provides the context and impetus for this practice-based research (Nelson, 2022).

An interpretivist qualitative methodology was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with five experienced UK choral conductors. Interview data was analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, recognising the researcher's active role in interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021). The analysis generated three interconnected themes: Professional Judgement in Context, Responsive Pedagogy, and Reflective Professional Learning.

Together, these themes provide the basis for conceptualising ECD as an adaptive dimension of conductor professional practice whereby technical knowledge operates through contextual judgement, pedagogical action, and continuing professional learning. The resulting framework is conductor-facing and provisional, rather than a universally prescriptive system encompass entire rehearsal culture. It does not seek to displace established technical knowledge, but to examine how conductors determine when, why, and how that knowledge should be mobilised within musical and pedagogical contexts. ECD is therefore approached not solely as a question of correct pronunciation, but as a dimension of adaptive professional practice.

Literature Review

Introduction

English choral diction (ECD) has traditionally been approached as a technical discipline concerned with intelligibility, pronunciation, vocal production and ensemble coordination. These traditions provide an important knowledge base for conductors, particularly within Western classical practice. Contemporary multi-genre practice, however, requires conductors to negotiate diction in relation to broader musical, linguistic, cultural and pedagogical considerations.

This review examines four interconnected areas relevant to contemporary ECD: its technical and historical foundations; relationships between accent, genre and authenticity; the artistic and pedagogical judgement involved in applying diction within choral practice; and perspectives on reflective professional expertise. Bringing these areas together identifies a gap concerning how conductors integrate different forms of knowledge when making, teaching and revising diction decisions across diverse musical contexts.

English Choral Diction: Tradition and Technical Foundations

The development of ECD has been closely associated with Western classical singing. Throughout the twentieth century, pedagogical texts established conventions intended to promote intelligibility, vocal freedom and ensemble unity through coordinated pronunciation. Marshall's *The Singer's Manual of English Diction* (1953) remains an influential contribution, offering detailed guidance on vowel formation, consonant articulation and relationships between spoken and sung English. Fisher (1991) subsequently sought a systematic approach to choral diction informed by research into speech, hearing, and acoustics, whilst Jordan (1996) and LaBouff (2008) integrated diction with wider principles of rehearsal, vocal technique and stylistic interpretation, albeit largely centred around the classical singing tradition.

These approaches establish a technical vocabulary through which conductors can analyse and coordinate sung language. They also recognise that sung English cannot simply reproduce everyday speech. Sustained pitch, tessitura, resonance and ensemble blend may require modification of vowels, whilst relationships between vowel formation and intonation further connect pronunciation with vocal and acoustic outcomes (Powell, 1991; Deme, 2014; Raybon, 2016). Technical knowledge therefore remains fundamental to ECD. However, explaining how particular sounds can be produced does not independently establish why one pronunciation should be selected over another within a particular musical context.

Within the British classical tradition, technical approaches to ECD have historically been grounded within Received Pronunciation (RP) and its modern equivalent, Southern Standard British English (SSBE). Such varieties became associated with educational prestige, institutional authority and classical performance, and have consequently functioned in many contexts as established models of neutral sung English (Wilson, 2017; Marshall *et al.*, 2024).

The apparent neutrality of these models nevertheless requires scrutiny. Sociolinguistic research demonstrates that standard and prestige varieties derive their authority from social and historical processes rather than inherent linguistic superiority (Milroy, 2000). Oram (2019; 2021), researching within the related field of UK actor training, similarly questions the treatment of RP/SSBE as an unmarked form of English, demonstrating how accent training can intersect with questions of identity and linguistic hierarchy. This distinction matters in choral practice. Uniform pronunciation may legitimately support intelligibility and ensemble cohesion, but the linguistic model selected to create that uniformity is not necessarily culturally neutral.

Recent choral research strengthens this challenge. Marshall *et al.* (2024), analysing recordings of Glasgow and Cambridge choirs between 1925 and 2019, demonstrate both

historical change and variation within the standard British choral accent. Features treated as established characteristics of classical choral pronunciation have therefore not remained static. Marshall (2026) further demonstrates that singers' spoken dialects may remain audible within collective choral phonology, including differences between Glasgow and Cambridge in postvocalic /r/ (e.g. pronouncing the /r/ at the end of words like 'butter' or 'waiter'). Choral sound can consequently reflect interaction between local linguistic patterns, prestige conventions and musical practice rather than simply replacing regional speech with a uniform standard.

These findings do not make RP/SSBE inappropriate. Rather, they reposition it as one historically and stylistically meaningful resource among possible approaches to sung English. The conductor's problem consequently shifts from identifying a supposedly neutral standard towards determining which linguistic resources are appropriate within a particular performance context.

Accent, Genre and Authenticity

This problem becomes more pronounced when conductors move beyond repertoire traditionally associated with British classical choral conventions. Sociolinguistic and popular-music research demonstrates that sung accent may communicate musical style, cultural affiliation and performed identity (Trudgill, 1983; Coupland, 2011; Duncan, 2017; Gibson, 2024).

Trudgill's (1983) analysis of British popular singers established that performers may adopt American-associated phonological features that differ from their everyday speech. More recent scholarship complicates any interpretation of this simply as imitation. Coupland (2011) conceptualises linguistic style as a resource through which social and performed identities are negotiated, while Duncan's (2017) analysis of Australian country singers demonstrates relationships between genre conventions and American-associated pronunciation. Gibson (2024) similarly identifies *Pop Song English* as a supralocal norm, suggesting that specific pronunciation features may operate as recognisable stylistic resources across performers with different geographic/accent backgrounds.

These perspectives complicate the concept of authenticity. Potter (1998) demonstrates that popular vocal styles develop recognisable conventions, whilst sociolinguistic accounts suggest that authenticity is not necessarily achieved by reproducing one supposedly original spoken accent. It may instead be negotiated through relationships between genre expectation, linguistic choice, performer identity and audience perception. A stylistically recognisable pronunciation can therefore contribute to authenticity without constituting straightforward linguistic imitation.

However, much of this scholarship concerns individual performers. Choral singing presents a distinctive conceptual problem because a choir produces a collective voice from individuals who may possess different spoken accents, linguistic histories and stylistic experiences. A

solo singer can negotiate a relationship between an individual spoken identity and a performed one; an ensemble has no equivalent single spoken identity.

Direct choral evidence makes this distinction especially important. Marshall's (2026) finding that local spoken phonology can remain audible in collective singing suggests that singers' linguistic identities are not necessarily erased by participation in a choir. Wilson's (2017) study of choral singing in Trinidad similarly demonstrates that choral pronunciation can be implicated in competing language ideologies and cultural understandings of appropriate vocal sound. Questions of choral authenticity therefore concern not only fidelity to repertoire-associated conventions, but the relationship between those conventions and the collective linguistic identity being produced by the ensemble.

Genre cannot resolve this automatically. Genres are historically situated, internally diverse and continually changing through cultural interaction. A pronunciation associated with a particular style may provide a useful performance resource without prescribing a complete accent or universally authentic solution. Conductors may therefore need to decide which linguistic features are stylistically meaningful, how far they should be adopted, and whether their use remains appropriate for the singers and context concerned.

Diction as Artistic and Pedagogical Judgement

The literature consequently identifies multiple forms of knowledge relevant to ECD without offering a single mechanism through which they should be reconciled. Technical literature explains the production and coordination of sung language; sociolinguistics demonstrates that pronunciation carries social meaning; genre research positions accent as a stylistic resource; and direct choral research shows that collective sound may retain relationships with singers' linguistic environments.

One practical tension concerns relationships between accent and vocal production. Vowel formation may need modification according to pitch, resonance, tessitura, blend or intonation (Powell, 1991; Deme, 2014; Raybon, 2016), while pronunciation itself contributes to perceptions of musical style (Gibson, 2024). A linguistically plausible feature may therefore prove vocally inefficient in a particular passage, while an acoustically useful modification may alter perceived accent. Technical, linguistic and stylistic considerations cannot always be optimised simultaneously.

Established choral texts provide substantial guidance for rehearsing pronunciation once an intended sound has been identified (Fisher, 1991; Jordan, 1996; LaBouff, 2008). They provide comparatively less explanation of how conductors select that intended sound when several possibilities may be defensible. This distinction places professional judgement between technical knowledge and rehearsal action.

Pedagogy adds further complexity because diction must be realised collectively by singers with different levels of vocal technique, linguistic experience and stylistic familiarity. A pronunciation choice considered artistically appropriate may require modification in response

to ensemble capability or available rehearsal time. Similarly, a pedagogical strategy effective with a professional chamber choir may not transfer directly to a community, youth or less experienced ensemble. Artistic judgement and pedagogy are therefore interconnected: what is desirable cannot always be separated from what can be communicated and realised effectively.

This does not imply that contextual judgement is unconstrained. Rather, conductors may need to evaluate competing possibilities against technical, musical, linguistic, cultural and pedagogical considerations. Professional authority may consequently depend less on predetermined answers, and more on being able to justify why a particular decision is appropriate for specific repertoire and singers.

Reflective Practice and Professional Expertise

If conductors must reconcile such considerations, expertise cannot simply mean acquiring technical knowledge and applying it in the same way in every situation. Schön's (1983) account of reflective practice provides a useful framework for understanding professional judgement in situations characterised by uncertainty and competing demands. His distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action describes how practitioners may respond to practice whilst it unfolds and subsequently reconsider their experience and decisions.

Choral rehearsals present comparable conditions. A conductor may enter rehearsal with an intended diction choice but modify it after hearing the resulting sound, encountering singers' vocal capabilities or recognising that an initial choice is ineffective. Rehearsal can therefore become a site in which professional knowledge is tested and revised rather than simply implemented. Adaptation does not necessarily indicate insufficient preparation; it may depend upon sufficient expertise to recognise a problem, identify alternatives and evaluate their consequences.

Nelson (2022) similarly emphasises interaction between practice, critical reflection, and conceptual enquiry in professional knowledge generation. Although the present study does not assume that ordinary choral rehearsals constitute Practice as Research, Nelson's perspective helps explain how practitioner knowledge may develop through accumulated experience, experimentation, observation, and dialogue alongside formal education and published resources.

Research specifically concerning conductor development supports this broader concept. Varvarigou and Durrant (2011) conceptualise conductor education through interactions between learners, teachers, repertoire, singers, and sociocultural context. Jansson and Balsnes (2021) describe choral conducting as an ongoing educational project in which competence, professional identity and meaning develop across education, career, and working context. Their subsequent study identifies professional 'turning points' through which conductors reinterpret experience and reshape practice (Jansson & Balsnes, 2022).

These concepts are particularly relevant to ECD because conductors cannot reasonably possess specialist knowledge of every accent, genre or cultural tradition encountered in contemporary practice. Expertise may therefore include recognising the limits of one's

knowledge and knowing when to seek colleagues, specialists or other sources of experience. Such consultation complicates models of conductor expertise based primarily upon individual authority and suggests that professional knowledge may also develop through collaboration and exchange with others.

Reflective practice consequently provides a conceptual bridge between technical knowledge and contextual decision-making. It helps explain how established expertise can remain responsive rather than fixed, and how professional judgement may continue to develop as linguistic, musical and cultural practices change.

Research Gap and Rationale

The literature demonstrates that ECD is shaped by multiple interacting forms of knowledge. Technical pedagogies explain the production and coordination of sung English (Marshall, 1953; Fisher, 1991; LaBouff, 2008); sociolinguistic and popular-music scholarship demonstrate relationships between accent, identity and genre (Trudgill, 1983; Coupland, 2011; Duncan, 2017; Gibson, 2024); vocal research identifies acoustic and physiological considerations (Powell, 1991; Deme, 2014); and recent choral studies demonstrate historical, regional and ideological variation within collective choral sound (Wilson, 2017; Marshall *et al.*, 2024; Marshall, 2026). Research into reflective practice and conductor development additionally demonstrates that professional expertise is situated and capable of continuing revision (Schön, 1983; Varvarigou & Durrant, 2011; Jansson & Balsnes, 2021; 2022).

These perspectives identify many factors capable of influencing diction but have largely developed through distinct disciplinary traditions. Existing scholarship explains technical diction, analyses accent and genre, investigates collective choral sound and examines reflective professional expertise, yet provides comparatively limited insight into how conductors integrate these considerations when making and revising decisions in rehearsal.

A related gap concerns how such judgement is taught and developed. Technical resources contribute substantially to conductor preparation, but less attention has been given to how experienced conductors justify and revise their understanding of diction throughout professional practice, particularly across multiple genres. Accounts of rehearsal often imply conductor expertise without examining how conductors adapt their knowledge and decisions to particular situations.

This study addresses these gaps by shifting attention from identifying which model of English diction conductors should adopt towards examining how experienced conductors work in practice. It asks: How do experienced choral conductors conceptualise, teach and continue to develop English choral diction within contemporary multi-genre practice?

Bringing choral pedagogy, sociolinguistics, vocal research and reflective-practice scholarship into dialogue provides a basis for investigating not only which pronunciation choices conductors make, but the professional judgement, pedagogical negotiation and continuing learning through which those choices are developed and enacted.

Methodology and Methods

Introduction

This section outlines the methodology used to investigate how experienced choral conductors conceptualise, teach and continue to develop English choral diction (ECD) within contemporary multi-genre practice. It explains the philosophical foundations and qualitative research design, participant recruitment, data generation and analysis, and addresses researcher positionality, reflexivity, research rigour and ethics.

The research arose from the researcher's professional experience as a choral conductor working in Canadian and British contexts, where differences in accent between conductor and choir prompted recurring questions concerning diction, authenticity and stylistic appropriateness. Rather than prescribing a single model of correct ECD, the study investigates how experienced conductors understand and negotiate diction within their own professional contexts. It therefore adopts an interpretivist qualitative methodology whereby professional knowledge is understood as contextual, experiential and socially constructed (Walliman, 2005; Nelson, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Research Philosophy and Positionality

This study is situated within an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism understands knowledge as constructed and interpreted through human experience and social interaction, rather than as an objective truth simply awaiting discovery (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The study therefore does not assume one universally correct understanding of ECD. Conductors may develop professionally informed approaches shaped by musical background, training, rehearsal experience, ensemble context and engagement with different repertoire.

This orientation is particularly appropriate because the research question concerns how conductors conceptualise and justify professional practice rather than measurable relationships between predetermined variables. Questions of appropriate diction may involve several legitimate possibilities whose significance changes according to genre, singers and performance context. The purpose was therefore not to determine whether participants' decisions corresponded with an external standard of correctness, but to investigate the reasoning through which those decisions became professionally meaningful. Interpretivism enabled differences between participants to be treated as potentially informative rather than as inconsistencies requiring resolution.

Although the study is not itself Practice as Research (PaR), Nelson's conception of professional practice as a site of knowledge generation informed its development (Nelson, 2013; 2022). Professional practice provided the context and impetus for the research rather than constituting the research method.

This distinction became particularly important during the development of the project. Earlier work within the researcher's master's programme explored accent-aware choral rehearsals and generated an initial proposal for an Accent Aware Pedagogical Framework (AAPF). An early design considered presenting this emerging framework to conductors and gathering

responses to evaluate and refine it. Reflexive consideration highlighted a problem: beginning with a researcher-generated framework risked using the researcher's own professional assumptions to shape how knowledge of other experienced conductors was understood. Instead, practitioner experience provided a legitimate basis for identifying the research problem, but not for assuming in advance which aspects of ECD other practitioners would consider significant.

The project was consequently redesigned around the research question: How do experienced choral conductors conceptualise, teach and continue to develop English choral diction within contemporary multi-genre practice? Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to describe their own approaches to diction, rehearsal pedagogy and professional learning rather than respond to a predetermined framework. This represented both a methodological and epistemological shift: practitioner experience generated the original problem, while participants' accounts became the basis for investigating it. The eventual conceptualisation of ECD as adaptive professional practice was developed through analysis rather than through confirmation of the earlier AAPF.

The researcher nevertheless entered the study with existing professional interests in accent, authenticity and stylistic differentiation. Insider status influenced both data generation and interpretation. Shared professional vocabulary and practical understanding enabled detailed discussion of rehearsal practice and artistic judgement, but also created risks of assumed shared meanings, insufficient probing of apparently familiar ideas and interpretations influenced by the researcher's own practice.

Reflexivity was therefore treated as integral rather than as an attempt to eliminate researcher influence. Reflective notes and analytical records were used to consider how professional assumptions shaped questioning and interpretation, while repeated engagement with the research question maintained focus on participants' accounts (Goundar, 2025; Walliman, 2005). One significant reflexive shift occurred when analysis moved beyond the researcher's initial emphasis on accent awareness. Participants repeatedly foregrounded wider processes of contextual judgement, pedagogical adaptation, consultation and professional learning. Recognising this prevented the earlier AAPF from becoming an implicit analytical template and allowed interpretations to develop beyond the researcher's original assumptions.

Research Design

A qualitative design was selected because the study sought to explore professional reasoning, artistic judgement and experience rather than measure predetermined variables. Qualitative research facilitates investigation of practices in which meaning is shaped by experience, context, and social interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018), aligning with the study's interpretivist orientation.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the principal method of data generation because they provided consistency across participants while retaining flexibility to explore individual professional experience (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interview schedule was informed by the research aims and literature review and addressed pronunciation, accent, genre, rehearsal practice, pedagogy and professional learning. Participants received the

same eight broad questions (Appendix A), and follow-up questions allowed them to elaborate, reconsider responses, and introduce examples from their own practice.

This flexibility was important because professional knowledge may be partly tacit and difficult to articulate independently of concrete examples. Participants could move between general principles and recollections of specific repertoire, ensembles or rehearsal situations, enabling exploration of both stated beliefs and the experiences through which those beliefs were understood. Interviews were consequently treated as sites of dialogic data generation rather than neutral mechanisms for retrieving pre-existing information (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Alternative methods were considered. Focus groups might have enabled collaborative discussion but could introduce professional hierarchies and group dynamics while limiting detailed exploration of individual practice. Quantitative questionnaires were less appropriate because the research question required contextualised accounts of professional reasoning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rehearsal observation could have provided evidence of enacted practice, but the present study specifically sought conductors' accounts of how they understood and justified decisions across their professional experience. Observation would provide valuable triangulation in subsequent research.

Participants, Sampling and Data Generation

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit practising choral conductors able to provide information-rich perspectives on the research question (Patton, 2015). Recruitment drew upon professional networks, conducting organisations and UK choral communities, with snowball sampling extending participation beyond the researcher's immediate contacts.

Participants were required to be over 18, resident of the United Kingdom, actively conducting at least one choir and to have at least ten years' choral conducting experience. These criteria ensured substantial and current experience whilst situating the study within the linguistic and cultural context under investigation. The ten-year threshold was intended to support exploration of developed professional judgement rather than establish a universal definition of expertise.

Five conductors participated, representing varied educational backgrounds, stylistic specialisms and ensemble contexts, including children's, community, classical and multi-genre choirs. The sample size should therefore be understood in relation to the study's purpose rather than as an attempt to represent a wider population numerically. Each participant contributed an extended, information-rich account of professional practice, enabling detailed comparison both within and across interviews. Diversity was sought to create opportunities for convergence and contrast: shared patterns could be examined across differing contexts, while divergent accounts could illuminate the contextual nature of professional judgement. Consistent with the interpretivist design, analytical depth was prioritised over statistical generalisation.

Five individual interviews were conducted online using Zoom, providing an accessible means of engaging with geographically dispersed participants. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded and transcribed with consent. The semi-

structured interview functioned as a guide rather than a fixed script, enabling participants to develop issues arising from their own experience. The researcher's professional familiarity with specialist terminology supported detailed dialogue whilst requiring continued reflexive attention to the effects of shared assumptions upon questioning and interpretation.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Interview data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (2006; 2019; 2021). RTA was selected because it enables interpretation of patterns of shared meaning, whilst recognising the researcher's active role in knowledge production, aligning with the study's interpretivist orientation.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six phases: familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up. These phases were recursive rather than linear, involving movement between transcripts, codes, developing themes and the research question throughout analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021).

Recordings were transcribed verbatim and transcripts read repeatedly. Initial observations and analytical reflections were recorded during familiarisation. Coding was primarily inductive rather than organised through a predetermined theoretical codebook, with relevant material coded broadly across areas including decision-making, pronunciation, pedagogy, professional learning and rehearsal practice. Initial coding remained inclusive to retain close engagement with participants' accounts.

Inductive analysis was not understood as theory-free. Interpretation was necessarily informed by the research question, professional positionality and prior engagement with literature. In RTA, researcher subjectivity forms part of the analytical process rather than contamination to be eliminated (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021).

Codes and supporting extracts were organised into analytical records (Appendix B), providing a working account of analysis whilst remaining open to revision and reorganisation. During theme development, codes were compared across participants to identify patterns of shared meaning rather than simply identifying frequently occurring topics. For example, material concerning genre, accent, authenticity and vocal considerations initially appeared as distinguishable topics but increasingly appeared to share an underlying concern with how conductors determined what was appropriate within context. These codes contributed to the development of Professional Judgement in Context. Similarly, material concerning explanation, collaboration, adaptation and consultation was interpreted through the broader organising concept of Responsive Pedagogy.

This movement from topic-based coding towards organising concepts was important because the themes needed to address the research question rather than merely summarise interview content. Candidate themes were repeatedly checked against coded extracts and complete transcripts to assess whether they captured coherent patterns whilst retaining meaningful distinctions between them. Theme boundaries and names were revised during this process.

Themes were therefore actively developed through interpretation rather than treated as categories that independently 'emerged' from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021). The final analysis produced three overarching themes: Professional Judgement in Context, Responsive Pedagogy, and Reflective Professional Learning. Each represents a pattern of shared meaning concerning ECD as a context-sensitive dimension of professional practice.

Reflexivity continued throughout analysis through documentation and reconsideration of analytical decisions. The researcher's initial professional interest could have privileged accent-specific material; repeated engagement with the complete dataset instead highlighted pedagogical responsiveness and continuing professional learning as equally significant. This provides a concrete example of how reflexive scrutiny influenced theme development rather than functioning solely as a general statement of researcher awareness.

Research Rigour, Trustworthiness and Ethics

Within interpretivist qualitative research, rigour concerns credibility, coherence and transparency rather than claims of objectivity or exact replicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Trustworthiness was supported through sustained engagement with participant accounts, reflexive scrutiny and systematic documentation of coding and theme development. Analytical records provided a traceable account of movement from interview material towards thematic interpretation. Their purpose was not to suggest that another researcher would necessarily reproduce identical themes, but to make the interpretative process sufficiently visible for its coherence to be evaluated (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021).

Rigour also depended on ensuring that the different parts of the methodology worked well together. The research question, interpretivist position, semi-structured interviews and RTA were chosen because they were appropriate for the study and complemented one another. The conclusions drawn from the analysis were also limited by the type of evidence collected. Interviews provide insight into how participants understand and describe their professional practice, but they do not provide direct evidence of what happens in rehearsals. Being clear about this distinction helps to show both the value and the limitations of the findings.

Purposive recruitment across varied choral contexts enabled contrasting professional perspectives to inform the analysis. The study does not claim statistical generalisability. Its contribution is a contextualised interpretation of five experienced UK conductors' accounts, with potential transferability dependent upon readers' assessment of relevance to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical approval was obtained through the university's research ethics procedures before recruitment. Participants received an information sheet explaining the study, voluntary participation and intended use of data before providing written informed consent. Interviews were recorded with permission, and recordings and transcripts were anonymised and stored securely in accordance with institutional data-protection requirements. Pseudonyms are used throughout the dissertation, and participants retained withdrawal rights in accordance with the approved ethics procedure.

These methodological choices establish the scope of the claims that follow. The findings represent an interpretative account of how five experienced UK conductors conceptualised,

taught and continued to develop ECD within their professional contexts. They should not be understood as universal rules for choral conducting practice.

Findings

The analysis generated three interconnected themes: Professional Judgement in Context, Responsive Pedagogy, and Reflective Professional Learning. Together, these themes illustrate how participants approached English choral diction (ECD) not as the straightforward application of fixed pronunciation rules, but as a context-sensitive dimension of professional practice. The findings presented below examine how conductors described making diction decisions, translating those decisions into rehearsal practice, and continuing to develop their professional understanding over time.

Professional Judgement in Context

The first theme, Professional Judgement in Context, captures participants' understanding of ECD as a matter of professional judgement shaped by the specific context, rather than the application of fixed diction rules. Participants described diction decisions as based upon multiple, sometimes competing considerations, including repertoire, genre, textual meaning, vocal production, ensemble characteristics and performance context.

Participants commonly began with musical and textual context rather than pronunciation in isolation. Participant A described repertoire as the starting point for decisions about accent and articulation: "You choose the music... You think about where it comes from... You think about who would have sung it, and you try and match that genre to the way in which you use diction and accents." Participant D similarly described beginning with the text before considering its relationship to musical style:

"I look at the words first, without the music. Who wrote the words? When were they written? What genre is it? How would I pronounce them if I was speaking? Then I look at the music. How would I pronounce them when they're being sung, in relation to the style and the genre of the music?"

These accounts position diction within a broader process of musical interpretation. Textual meaning, historical context and musical style were not described simply as factors that modified an otherwise fixed pronunciation model; they contributed to participants' judgements about which pronunciation was appropriate in the first place.

Genre was particularly influential. Participants resisted applying a single pronunciation model across contrasting repertoire, instead treating accent and diction as stylistic resources. Participant B described performing *Bring Me a Little Water* using an American pronunciation because "it's an American... African American song, and that feels right." Participant D similarly observed that "if we're doing some jazz, it makes no sense to sing it in RP." However, stylistic appropriateness was not understood as requiring straightforward imitation. Participant E emphasised the importance of the choir retaining its own artistic identity: "We

make a choice. It doesn't need to be that we sing it the way that they sang it. We can take our own identity and feel pride in that."

Participants' accounts therefore presented authenticity as something to be negotiated rather than reproduced automatically. Awareness of the cultural and stylistic origins of repertoire informed diction choices, but this could sit in tension with the linguistic and artistic identity of the ensemble performing it. Authenticity in choral performance was therefore not represented simply as fidelity to an assumed original pronunciation, but as a judgement concerning how far stylistic conventions should be adopted, adapted or resisted by a particular group of singers. This suggests a distinctively collective dimension to authenticity: conductors were negotiating not only how repertoire might appropriately sound, but also whose linguistic and artistic identity the resulting performance should represent.

Musical and vocal factors further shaped these decisions. Participant C identified "the colour of vowels and blend" as a primary consideration, describing their starting point as "just trying to make it singable." Participant A similarly suggested that musical priorities could sometimes supersede diction concerns, stating that "if I had a guiding principle, it would be rhythmic accuracy rather than diction." These accounts suggest that participants did not see diction as an end in itself. Instead, they judged linguistic and phonetic accuracy by how well it supported broader musical and vocal goals. A pronunciation appropriate in speech could therefore become less appropriate in singing if it compromised rhythmic integrity, resonance, blend or vocal production. Professional judgement involved determining not simply whether a pronunciation was technically defensible, but whether it contributed effectively to the musical outcome within a particular performance context.

The singers themselves also formed part of the context whereby diction decisions were made. Participants recognised that choirs brought existing accents, listening habits and musical experiences into rehearsal, meaning that ensemble diction did not begin from a linguistically neutral starting point. Participant B, for example, described singers arriving with pronunciation habits acquired through listening to commercial recordings. Conductors were therefore intervening within existing stylistic practices already chosen by members the ensemble. The appropriateness of a diction choice depended not only upon repertoire or stylistic convention, but also upon the singers being asked to realise it.

This contextual approach was particularly evident in participants' treatment of RP/SSBE. Participants questioned its status as a universally neutral form of English whilst recognising its continuing stylistic relevance within parts of the classical tradition. Participant B regarded RP as appropriate for most classical repertoire, but rejected its use as a general standard. Participant D went further, suggesting that describing an accent as "neutral" could function as "code for correct." Within these accounts, RP/SSBE was treated as a pronunciation resource whose appropriateness depended upon repertoire and context rather than as an unmarked default.

Underlying these considerations was a conception of expertise based on judgement rather than certainty. Participants did not consistently present professional authority as possession of a single correct answer. Instead, they described evaluating alternatives, discussing possibilities and, where appropriate, making decisions collaboratively. Participant E encapsulated the ambiguity involved: "There is no right or wrong... It's artistic grey." However, this 'artistic grey' did not imply that diction choices were arbitrary or equally

defensible. Participants' accounts suggested that professional judgement operated within constraints established by repertoire, genre, textual and cultural context, vocal production, ensemble characteristics and artistic intention. Professional Judgement in Context therefore describes a form of accountable flexibility: professional authority rests not upon possession of universally correct answers, but upon the quality of the knowledge and reasoning through which contextual decisions are made.

Responsive Pedagogy

The second theme, Responsive Pedagogy, concerns how participants translated artistic decisions about ECD into rehearsal practice. Rather than describing diction teaching solely as the transmission of fixed pronunciation rules, participants discussed adapting their approaches to repertoire, singers and the practical circumstances of rehearsal.

A central feature of this approach was explaining the reasoning behind pronunciation decisions. Participant D stated, "I normally give a reason ... I don't want them just to take it from me." Participant B similarly described involving singers in aspects of decision-making: "What do you think? Should we do it like this? ... It isn't always what we impose as leaders; it often can be more of a collegiate decision." These accounts suggest that diction teaching involved developing singers' understanding as well as shaping pronunciation. Explanation made aspects of the conductor's professional reasoning visible by connecting technical instructions to their broader musical or stylistic purposes. Collaboration could extend this process further by allowing aspects of interpretation to be negotiated with the ensemble rather than solely determined by the conductor. Responsive pedagogy therefore involved variation not only in what conductors taught, but also in how authority and understanding were distributed within the rehearsal process.

Participants also adapted their expectations and rehearsal strategies to the capabilities and experience of individual ensembles. Participant C summarised this pragmatically: "You do have to work with the people you have at the end of the day." Participant A similarly acknowledged that an ideal outcome was not always necessary or achievable, observing, "It's not quite everybody doing it right, but it's good enough." These comments suggest that responsiveness involved conductors judging the level of intervention that was appropriate and productive for a particular ensemble. Accepting an outcome as 'good enough' did not necessarily indicate an absence of standards, but could reflect a professional decision about the relative value of further correction within the wider demands of rehearsal. Pedagogical effectiveness therefore depended upon what singers could realistically achieve, the musical significance of the issue, and whether additional rehearsal attention was likely to produce sufficient benefit.

Participants described conductor authority in similarly flexible terms. Although conductors remained responsible for artistic direction, their authority was not seen as absolute, but as something shaped through their interactions with others. Participant E stated, "You have to go back to understanding that you serve them. You aren't the boss. You don't know everything. You serve them." This conception of authority as service creates a useful tension with the conductor's continuing responsibility to shape an ensemble's artistic outcome. Serving singers did not necessarily mean relinquishing artistic direction; rather, participants'

accounts suggest that direction could be exercised through responsiveness to what the ensemble required to achieve that outcome. Participant A, likewise, described professional judgement as including restraint from unnecessary intervention. Expertise also involved judging when to direct, when to explain or collaborate, and when further intervention might be unnecessary. Responsive pedagogy consequently positioned authority as an adaptive professional responsibility.

Participants also recognised limits to their own expertise and described seeking external knowledge when working with unfamiliar repertoire. Several referred to specialists, native speakers or experienced practitioners rather than assuming authority over traditions with which they were less familiar. Participant E described this approach when discussing Turkish repertoire: “When we sing a Turkish song ... we get a Turkish person up ... ‘Go make us a sound.’ Then we try and mimic that sound.” Although this example concerns repertoire outside the English-language scope of the study, it illustrates a broader professional behaviour relevant to participants’ approaches to ECD. Consultation was presented as a means of recognising the boundaries of the conductor’s own expertise and accessing knowledge more appropriate to a particular linguistic or stylistic context. Professional authority could therefore include knowing when not to rely solely upon one’s own authority.

Responsive Pedagogy therefore describes the process through which contextual artistic judgement was translated into rehearsal practice. Participants described teaching through explanation, adaptation, collaboration, consultation and selective intervention, balancing artistic intentions with the capabilities and needs of their singers. Responsiveness did not represent an alternative to professional authority or artistic standards, but shaped how those were enacted within particular rehearsal circumstances.

Reflective Professional Learning

The third theme, Reflective Professional Learning, captures participants’ accounts of expertise as continually developing rather than constituted by a fixed body of technical knowledge. Participants described professional understanding as shaped through experience, experimentation, engagement with others and reflection. Expertise was represented not simply through what conductors already knew, but through their capacity to recognise uncertainty, seek further knowledge and adapt practice over time.

Participants openly acknowledged areas in which their knowledge or confidence remained incomplete despite substantial conducting experience. Participant A reflected, “I don’t feel quite rounded as a musical director because I’ve got this one bit missing. If I want to do a pop song, I don’t do it that way.” Participant D similarly recognised a stylistic expectation without necessarily possessing the confidence to realise it, stating, “I ought to do this in an American accent, but I don’t feel confident.” Participant B expressed a comparable desire to extend their understanding of stylistic authenticity: “There’s so much I can learn as to how to sound more authentic. That should translate to choirs as well.”

These accounts suggest that professional expertise was not understood as complete mastery of every possible diction or stylistic context. More significantly, participants demonstrated an ability to identify boundaries within their own knowledge and confidence. Recognising uncertainty enabled participants to identify where further learning, investigation

or external expertise might be required. Within these accounts, expertise was represented not by the absence of uncertainty, but by the capacity to recognise uncertainty and respond to it as a legitimate feature of professional practice.

Professional development was also described as extending beyond formal education and published guidance. Participants referred to learning through colleagues, specialists, native speakers, recordings, observation and accumulated conducting experience, particularly when encountering repertoire or stylistic practices outside their established expertise.

Reflection formed another part of this process. Participants described listening to and evaluating practice, reconsidering established assumptions and modifying approaches in response to experience. The interviews themselves also sometimes prompted explicit reflection. Participant C observed, "Thinking about accents hadn't really occurred to me ... I shall listen to them differently, I think." They later described the interview as "CPD for me," while noting that conducting could be "a very solitary thing." Participant B similarly commented that the discussion had "opened my eyes to things I hadn't really thought about ... or ever said out loud."

These comments require a distinction between participants' accounts of reflective professional practice and reflection prompted by taking part in the research. They do not show that the same level of reflection routinely occurred outside the interviews. However, the fact that experienced conductors recognised previously unspoken assumptions through professional discussion suggests that some aspects of their knowledge may usually be taken for granted, only becoming more conscious when they have an opportunity to explain and reflect on their practice. Participant C's description of conducting as "a very solitary thing" is significant in this respect, since it points to a potential tension between the reflective demands of professional practice and the opportunities available for conductors to undertake that reflection collaboratively. Within the interviews, dialogue at times stimulated participants to become more conscious of their own assumptions and practices.

Participants also described continuing professional learning as necessary because the object of their expertise was itself subject to change. Participant D observed that "RP itself is changing all the time" and described being "constantly listening." Such comments indicate an awareness that pronunciation, musical styles and performance expectations are not static. Professional learning therefore involved responding not only to gaps in individual knowledge, but also to changes in the linguistic and musical contexts within which that knowledge was applied. Expertise in ECD was therefore represented as necessarily provisional, requiring conductors to remain attentive to change rather than relying indefinitely upon previously acquired knowledge.

When discussing professional development more broadly, participants placed particular value on practical and collaborative forms of learning. Written resources contributed to their knowledge, but observation, discussion, demonstration, listening and shared musical experience were also presented as important means through which understanding developed. Professional learning in ECD was therefore not understood solely as the acquisition of information about pronunciation or stylistic convention, but developed through opportunities to hear, observe, discuss and apply knowledge within musical and professional contexts.

Reflective Professional Learning therefore captures a pattern in which conductor expertise was understood as provisional and continually developing. Participants' accounts connected professional learning with recognising uncertainty, articulating and reconsidering established practice, engaging with other sources of expertise and revising approaches in response to experience and changing contexts. Continuing professional learning consequently formed part of expertise itself, supporting conductors in recognising the limits of existing knowledge and adapting their professional practice as linguistic, musical and pedagogical circumstances evolved.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings identify three interconnected aspects of how experienced conductors understood and approached English choral diction. Professional judgment in context captures how participants considered musical, stylistic, linguistic, vocal, and ensemble needs rather than simply applying fixed diction rules. Their accounts suggest that adapting to the particular context did not mean that decisions were made without clear reasons. Expertise involved weighing up different possibilities and being able to justify what was appropriate in each situation. Responsive pedagogy describes how these judgments were put into practice in rehearsal through explanation, adaptation, collaboration, consultation, and knowing when to intervene. Reflective professional learning describes expertise as something that continues to develop over time. This involved recognising uncertainty, drawing on the knowledge of others, questioning familiar ways of working, and adapting practice as language, music, and performance expectations change.

Although presented separately, these themes were interconnected within participants' accounts. Reflective professional learning informed the knowledge available for different situations, while professional judgement shaped pedagogical decisions about what to prioritise and how to intervene in rehearsal. Experiences arising through rehearsal could in turn expose uncertainty, challenge existing assumptions or generate further reflection and learning. Their relationship can therefore be understood as recursive rather than strictly linear: what conductors knew informed how they judged and acted, while the consequences of those actions could subsequently modify what they knew and how they approached future situations.

Taken together, the findings suggest that participants' approaches to ECD involved more than the application of technical pronunciation knowledge. Technical understanding remained important, but its professional use was mediated through context specific judgement, pedagogical responsiveness and continuing reflection. Across the three themes, expertise was characterised by the capacity to make informed and accountable decisions, enact those decisions responsively with certain ensembles, and reconsider existing knowledge in response to experience, dialogue and change. ECD consequently emerged from participants' accounts as an adaptive dimension of conductor professional practice in which knowledge, judgement, pedagogical action and reflective learning continually informed one another. The following Discussion examines these relationships in dialogue with the existing literature and considers their implications for understanding contemporary ECD and conductor expertise.

Discussion

Introduction

While the Findings identified three interconnected themes—Professional Judgement in Context, Responsive Pedagogy, and Reflective Professional Learning—the discussion argues that these are best understood as interdependent dimensions of a broader form of conductor expertise.

The literature review demonstrated that existing scholarship has largely approached ECD through pronunciation, phonetics, vocal production and stylistic convention. These perspectives make important contributions to choral pedagogy but provide comparatively limited explanation of how conductors integrate musical, pedagogical, linguistic and cultural considerations when making decisions in rehearsal. By foregrounding the accounts of practising conductors, this study shifts attention from pronunciation systems towards the professional reasoning through which diction knowledge is interpreted and enacted.

The central argument is that ECD can be more usefully understood as an adaptive professional practice than solely as a technical system of pronunciation. Diction remains an essential component of conductor expertise, but functions as one resource among several that conductors draw upon in response to repertoire, singers and performance context. This does not imply that all diction choices are equally appropriate or that established pronunciation knowledge is unnecessary. Rather, professional expertise lies in determining when, why and how such knowledge should be applied or adapted, communicating those judgements through responsive pedagogy, and continuing to refine practice through reflective professional learning.

Reconceptualising English Choral Diction as Adaptive Professional Practice

The principal contribution of this study is its reconceptualisation of ECD as an adaptive professional practice. Foundational pedagogical texts have traditionally concentrated on vowel formation, consonant articulation, intelligibility and established pronunciation conventions, particularly within Western classical singing (Marshall, 1953; Jordan, 1996; LaBouff, 2008). Such resources remain important because they provide conductors with technical knowledge and a vocabulary through which sung English can be analysed and rehearsed.

The findings do not challenge the value of this technical tradition. Instead, they demonstrate that technical knowledge alone does not explain how the participants make artistic decisions. Their accounts frequently began with considerations of genre, text, historical or cultural context, vocal production, ensemble capability and communicative intention rather than with selection of a predetermined diction systems. Diction consequently emerged as one component of a broader musical interpretation.

This distinction shifts attention from the production of sounds towards the judgement through which those sounds are selected. Technical literature can explain what pronunciation features are and how they may be produced; participants' accounts highlight an additional

set of questions concerning when, why and to what extent particular features should be used. The same technical knowledge may therefore support different artistic outcomes according to repertoire, ensemble and performance circumstances.

Participants' discussions of authenticity illustrate this particularly clearly. Previous scholarship demonstrates that accent can function as a marker of genre and musical identity (Trudgill, 1983; Coupland, 2011; Duncan, 2016; Gibson, 2023). The findings support this relationship: participants recognised that particular pronunciation features could contribute to stylistic affiliation and that applying RP indiscriminately across genres could undermine stylistic communication. However, they did not generally understand authenticity as requiring complete imitation of an original or culturally associated accent.

Participant E's assertion that a choir could "take our own identity and feel pride in that" is significant in this respect. It suggests that authenticity in choral performance may involve negotiation between the stylistic or cultural identity associated with repertoire and the collective identity of the ensemble performing it. This complements Coupland's (2011) understanding of accent as a creative resource whilst extending the question of authenticity into a specifically choral context. Unlike a solo performer, a choir brings together multiple singers whose spoken accents, musical experiences and linguistic identities may differ from one another, as well as from those associated with the repertoire. Authenticity therefore cannot necessarily be understood solely as the individual reproduction of a stylistic model. It may also involve a collective artistic judgement about how far particular linguistic features should be adopted, adapted or resisted by a specific ensemble. The conductor's task becomes one of evaluating which features contribute meaningfully to the intended performance while negotiating the relationship between repertoire identity and choir identity.

The findings similarly reinforce literature distinguishing spoken from sung pronunciation. Research demonstrates that vowel production is affected by resonance, tessitura, blend and other acoustic demands (Powell, 1991; Deme, 2014; Gibson, 2024). Participants described comparable considerations, sometimes prioritising rhythmic integrity, vocal freedom or ensemble sound over close reproduction of spoken pronunciation. Diction was therefore understood as serving musical and vocal communication as well as linguistic intelligibility. A modification that moves away from an expected spoken pronunciation may consequently remain professionally appropriate when it enables the diction to function more effectively within singing.

This does not mean that contextual appropriateness permits unrestricted choice. Moving away from a universally applicable pronunciation model changes the basis upon which decisions are evaluated rather than removing evaluative criteria altogether. Participants' judgements were informed and constrained by genre, text, cultural and historical context, vocal production, ensemble identity, singer capability and communicative intention. An adaptive approach therefore requires conductors to justify choices in relation to relevant circumstances rather than solely through conformity to a predetermined pronunciation standard.

This distinction between adaptability and arbitrariness is central to the proposed reconceptualisation. Adaptive practice depends upon knowledge. A conductor cannot make an informed decision about whether to retain, modify or reject a pronunciation convention without understanding the convention and the implications of available alternatives.

Technical competence consequently enables adaptability rather than being displaced by it. The flexibility identified through the findings can therefore be understood as accountable: where several possibilities are available, professional responsibility lies in the quality of the knowledge and reasoning through which one is selected.

The findings therefore reposition the conductor within discussions of ECD. Where several artistically defensible possibilities exist, expertise lies not simply in identifying a correct pronunciation but in evaluating competing artistic, linguistic, vocal, pedagogical and practical considerations. ECD becomes a professional practice in which technical knowledge is mediated through contextual judgement.

Expertise as Professional Judgement

If ECD is understood as adaptive practice, the nature of the expertise required to enact it becomes important. Participants demonstrated knowledge of pronunciation, vocal production and stylistic convention, but rarely characterised expertise as straightforward application of predetermined rules. Instead, their accounts emphasised evaluating competing considerations and determining what was appropriate within specific circumstances.

This exposes a limitation within technical approaches to diction without diminishing their value. Traditional texts explain how English may be sung and provide detailed resources concerning vowel formation, consonant articulation and stylistic production (Marshall, 1953; Jordan, 1996; LaBouff, 2008). Such knowledge is fundamental but does not independently determine which available pronunciation should be selected in a particular musical situation. The findings therefore suggest a distinction between possessing technical knowledge and exercising professional judgement through that knowledge.

Participants' decision-making involved balancing considerations that could conflict. Linguistic accuracy might compete with vocal production; stylistic affiliation with ensemble identity; historical convention with contemporary audience expectation; artistic aspiration with what singers could realistically achieve. The relative importance of these factors changed according to repertoire and rehearsal circumstances. Expertise consequently involved interpreting relationships between priorities rather than optimising one criterion in isolation.

This understanding corresponds closely with Schön's (1983) account of professional practice. Schön argues that practitioners routinely encounter situations characterised by uncertainty, complexity and competing demands for which technical solutions alone are inadequate. Professional expertise therefore requires judgement in circumstances where established knowledge does not prescribe a single course of action. Participants' descriptions of ECD demonstrated comparable processes: expertise did not eliminate uncertainty but provided resources through which uncertainty could be navigated.

Importantly, participants did not consistently present uncertainty as professional failure. Several openly identified limitations in their own knowledge or confidence and described seeking further information through specialists, native speakers, colleagues, recordings or rehearsal experimentation. Recognition of uncertainty could therefore initiate professional enquiry.

This suggests an important distinction between certainty and expertise. A conductor who immediately asserts an answer may not necessarily demonstrate greater expertise than one who recognises that the available knowledge is insufficient and seeks an informed alternative perspective. Within an adaptive model, professional confidence may involve knowing how to investigate uncertainty rather than claiming complete knowledge across every repertoire and stylistic context. Expertise therefore includes an awareness of its own boundaries.

Participants' treatment of RP/SSBE illustrates contextual judgement particularly clearly. Sociolinguistic scholarship challenges the notion that prestige accents are linguistically neutral (Milroy, 2000; Oram, 2019; 2021). Participants' accounts broadly reflected this critique but did not consequently reject RP/SSBE. Instead, they repositioned it. Within some classical repertoire, it remained a legitimate stylistic resource; in other contexts, participants considered alternative pronunciation choices more appropriate.

This is an important distinction. Replacing an assumption that RP is always correct with an assumption that RP is always inappropriate would merely substitute one inflexible rule for another. The findings instead support a contextual approach in which RP/SSBE is evaluated alongside other possible pronunciation resources. Expertise lies in understanding its stylistic associations and deciding whether those associations serve the intended performance.

Professional judgement also extended into practical rehearsal considerations. Participants frequently balanced artistic aspirations against singer capability and available rehearsal time, sometimes accepting outcomes that were not technically ideal but were considered musically sufficient. Such compromise should not necessarily be interpreted as reduced standards. Participant A's description of an outcome as "good enough" instead illustrates the prioritising function of professional judgement: conductors must decide where limited rehearsal attention is likely to produce the greatest musical benefit. The relevant professional question is therefore not always whether further correction is possible, but whether it is sufficiently valuable within the competing demands of rehearsal.

This also complicates conventional understandings of conductor authority. Participants retained responsibility for artistic direction but described consultation, collaboration and restraint as legitimate components of that responsibility. Participant E's conception of the conductor as serving rather than simply controlling the ensemble is particularly significant because it does not remove the conductor's obligation to make artistic decisions. Instead, it reframes authority as a responsibility exercised in relation to singers and musical purpose. Service and artistic direction need not therefore operate as opposites. Authority may be demonstrated through knowing when firm direction is necessary, but equally through knowing when to explain, collaborate, seek expertise, adapt an expectation or refrain from unnecessary intervention.

Professional judgement in ECD can therefore be understood as simultaneously artistic, technical, pedagogical and relational. Pronunciation systems remain essential resources, but expertise lies partly in determining how those resources should function within the realities of specific repertoire and ensembles. The resulting flexibility is not an absence of standards, but a form of accountable professional judgement in which choices remain open to justification and evaluation.

Beyond Pronunciation: Teaching as Responsive Practice

If professional judgement concerns how conductors arrive at artistic decisions, Responsive Pedagogy concerns how those decisions become collective musical practice. Participants described teaching ECD not simply as correcting pronunciation but as communicating and realising musical understanding through rehearsal.

This broadens traditional conceptions of diction pedagogy. Established choral texts understandably emphasise techniques for developing consistent pronunciation, vocal production and ensemble clarity (Fisher, 1991; Jordan, 1996). Participants did not reject these aims, but situated them within broader musical purposes. Pronunciation was valuable because it contributed to textual communication, stylistic interpretation and ensemble sound rather than simply because uniform pronunciation represented an end in itself.

Explanation was particularly prominent within participants' accounts. Rather than relying solely upon conductor authority, several described giving singers reasons for pronunciation decisions or inviting discussion about possible interpretations. Such practices positioned singers as participants capable of understanding the musical rationale behind technical instruction. Explanation therefore did more than facilitate compliance: it made aspects of the conductor's professional reasoning available to singers and allowed technical instructions to be connected to their musical, stylistic or linguistic purposes.

This does not remove the conductor's responsibility for artistic leadership. Participant B's description of decisions as sometimes "collegiate", for example, does not imply that every rehearsal choice must be decided democratically. Similarly, Participant E's description of authority as service does not require the conductor to relinquish responsibility for the ensemble's artistic direction. Rather, the findings suggest that professional authority can accommodate dialogue without disappearing. Leadership may involve deciding which choices require clear direction, which benefit from explanation or singer input, and which may legitimately remain open to negotiation.

This positions responsive authority as more complex than either directive or collaborative leadership alone. The conductor remains accountable for the musical outcome, but the means through which that outcome is pursued can change according to repertoire, singers and rehearsal circumstances. Authority is therefore enacted through judgement about how to lead, rather than demonstrated simply through the certainty or frequency with which instructions are given.

The need for ensemble coordination also does not require pedagogical uniformity. Choral singers ultimately need to coordinate aspects of pronunciation, rhythm and vocal production, but participants described varying the means through which that outcome was achieved. Rehearsal strategies and expectations were adapted according to experience, capability and confidence. Responsive pedagogy therefore concerns pursuing coherent artistic intentions while recognising that identical teaching approaches may not be appropriate for every ensemble (Smith *et al.*, 2016).

Participant A's acceptance that an outcome could be "good enough" is particularly revealing. At first sight, this might appear to contradict the pursuit of technical excellence. Within the

wider context of participants' accounts, however, it represents professional prioritisation rather than necessarily a lowering of standards. Conductors work within finite rehearsal time and must continually decide which musical issues warrant further intervention. Expertise may therefore include recognising when additional diction work is unlikely to produce sufficient musical benefit to justify its rehearsal cost. Pedagogical responsiveness consequently involves judging not only how an issue should be taught, but how much intervention that issue warrants relative to other musical priorities.

Participants' consultation with specialists and native speakers further develops this relational model of expertise. Contemporary conductors may encounter musical and linguistic traditions outside their own training. Assuming complete authority in such circumstances could produce less informed artistic decisions than seeking appropriate expertise. Consultation can therefore function as professional responsibility rather than evidence of deficiency. Professional authority may include recognising when not to rely solely upon one's own authority.

There is also a cultural dimension to this responsiveness. Pronunciation choices can engage with identities associated both with repertoire and with singers themselves. Sociolinguistic critiques of prestige pronunciation remind conductors that language choices are not always socially neutral (Milroy, 2000; Oram, 2019; 2021). Participants' questioning of linguistic neutrality, alongside their willingness to seek external knowledge, suggests awareness that artistic decisions may carry implications beyond technical ensemble sound.

The present study cannot establish whether the pedagogical approaches described by conductors were experienced similarly by singers. This distinction is important because the evidence concerns conductors' understandings of explanation, collaboration, adaptation and authority rather than independently generated singer perspectives. Nevertheless, participants' accounts indicate that ECD pedagogy involved negotiation between artistic intention, singer capability and professional relationships. Responsive Pedagogy therefore represents one of the principal ways in which contextual judgement is enacted, whilst remaining a conductor-facing account of those pedagogical relationships.

Expertise as Reflective Professional Learning

The third dimension of the adaptive framework concerns how professional judgement and pedagogy continue to develop. Participants described expertise not as accumulation of a finite body of technical knowledge but as an ongoing process shaped by experience, enquiry, collaboration and reflection.

This aligns with Schön's (1983) conception of the reflective practitioner. Some participant accounts suggested processes comparable with reflection-in-action, in which an intended approach was reconsidered in response to what occurred during rehearsal. Others described subsequent listening, evaluation or reconsideration more consistent with reflection-on-action. The value of Schön's distinction here is not to claim that participants consciously employed a formal reflective model, but to provide conceptual language for the iterative relationship between action, evaluation and adaptation evident in their accounts.

This process is particularly important because professional judgement draws on experience, but experience alone does not necessarily produce expertise. Its value depends partly on whether practitioners reflect on outcomes and are willing to reconsider previous assumptions. Participants' descriptions of experimentation, critical listening, and changes in practice suggest that experience contributed to their professional growth when it led to new understanding.

Nelson's (2013; 2022) work provides a complementary perspective. Although neither the participants' professional practice nor the present research becomes Practice as Research simply because reflection occurs, Nelson's recognition of practice as a potential site of knowledge generation is relevant. Participants described learning not only through formal education and published literature but through rehearsal, observation, experimentation, listening and professional dialogue. Professional learning in ECD was therefore not solely concerned with acquiring additional information. It also involved developing the capacity to interpret and enact knowledge within situated musical practice.

The interviews themselves provided an interesting example of this process. Several participants commented that the discussion caused them to articulate assumptions they had not previously considered explicitly. These comments should be interpreted cautiously. They cannot demonstrate that comparable reflection routinely occurred outside the research encounter, and some of the reflective material was clearly co-constructed through interaction with the researcher.

Nevertheless, this is methodologically and conceptually significant. It suggests that professional knowledge may remain partly tacit or habitual until practitioners are required to articulate it. The interview therefore did not simply retrieve an entirely pre-existing body of knowledge; in some cases, it provided a context through which participants examined their practice differently. This is consistent with the interpretivist methodology and reinforces the potentially dialogic character of professional learning.

Participant C's description of conducting as "a very solitary thing" adds a further dimension to this finding. If aspects of professional knowledge remain implicit until they are verbalised and examined, limited opportunities for professional dialogue may restrict one means through which such assumptions can become available for reflection. The present data cannot establish the extent to which conductors routinely experience insufficient opportunities for collaborative professional development. However, the fact that participants described the interview itself as professionally generative suggests that structured dialogue can function as more than an exchange of information: it can create conditions in which practitioners articulate, compare and reconsider the reasoning underlying established practice.

Participants' recognition that pronunciation itself changes further strengthens the case for reflective expertise. As the literature demonstrates, accents, prestige varieties and genre conventions are historically contingent (Milroy, 2000; Coupland, 2011; Marshall *et al.*, 2024). Knowledge acquired during formal training cannot therefore be assumed to remain permanently sufficient. Conductors working across contemporary genres need to remain attentive to changing musical and linguistic practices.

Continuing professional learning should therefore not be understood solely as remediation for incomplete initial training. Participants certainly identified boundaries within their existing knowledge and confidence, but the object of their expertise was itself changing. Even previously well-founded knowledge may require reconsideration as accents, genre conventions and performance expectations evolve. Expertise in ECD is therefore not fixed. Professional competence requires a strong foundation of knowledge whilst also allowing that knowledge to develop as new evidence emerges or circumstances change.

This does not imply continual rejection of established knowledge. Reflective learning may equally confirm that an existing practice remains appropriate. Its significance lies in maintaining the possibility of reconsideration. Professional knowledge becomes adaptive when inherited conventions can be evaluated in relation to current evidence and experience rather than preserved solely because they are familiar.

Participants' accounts of observation, listening, consultation and professional dialogue also suggest that professional development takes place partly through practical experience and interaction with others. Written and technical resources remain important, but some dimensions of expertise are developed through hearing distinctions, observing other practitioners, discussing choices, experimenting in rehearsal and evaluating their effects. Technical understanding and practical judgement therefore develop in interaction rather than as entirely separate forms of learning.

Reflective Professional Learning consequently provides a mechanism through which the other dimensions of expertise remain responsive over time. Judgement and pedagogy are not static competencies but capacities capable of development through experience, enquiry and dialogue. Expertise lies not in eliminating uncertainty permanently, but in possessing resources through which uncertainty, change, and the boundaries of existing knowledge can be recognised and addressed.

Towards an Adaptive Framework for English Choral Diction

Taken together, the findings support a conceptual framework in which ECD is understood through three interdependent dimensions: Professional Judgement in Context, Responsive Pedagogy, and Reflective Professional Learning.

Professional Judgement in Context describes how conductors evaluate factors relevant to a particular diction decision. Genre, historical and cultural context, vocal production, ensemble capability, textual communication, singer identity and performance intention may all influence the outcome, but their relative significance varies according to circumstance. Professional judgement therefore involves accountable flexibility: evaluating competing possibilities and being able to justify why a particular approach is appropriate within a particular context.

Responsive Pedagogy concerns how these judgements are realised with singers. Artistic decisions cannot become collective performance practice unless they can be communicated and enacted. Participants described explanation, adaptation, consultation, selective intervention and, in some circumstances, collaborative decision-making as means through which this occurred. Responsiveness therefore concerns not only the transmission of a

diction decision, but how professional authority, pedagogical strategy and rehearsal attention are adapted to the singers responsible for realising it.

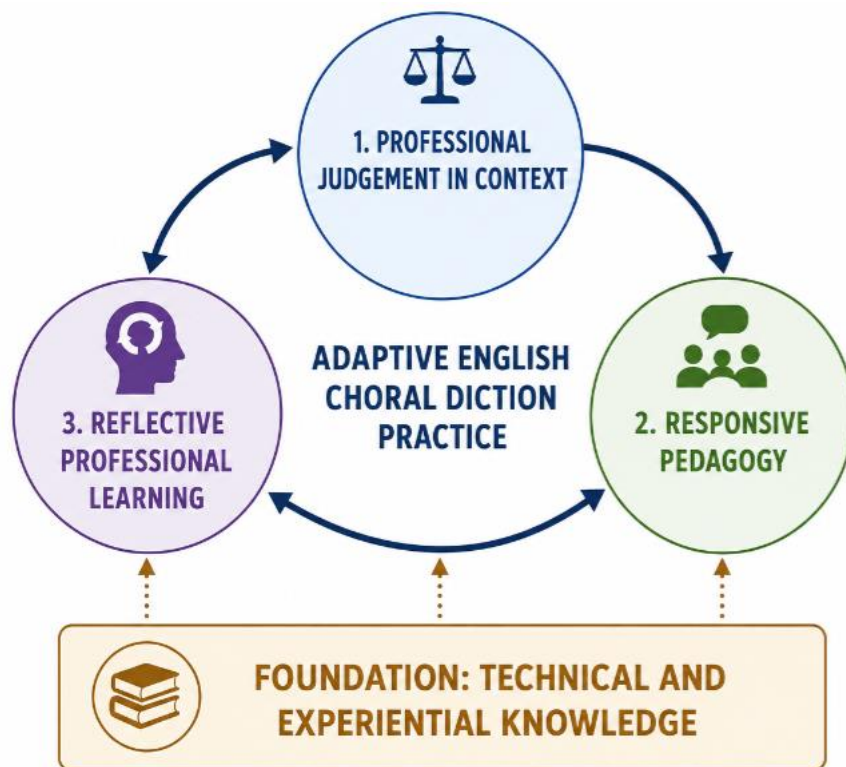
Reflective Professional Learning describes how the knowledge underpinning judgement and pedagogy continues to develop. Experience, enquiry, dialogue, listening and reflection allow conductors to recognise uncertainty, reconsider previous assumptions and incorporate new understanding into subsequent practice. This dimension also recognises that the linguistic and musical contexts to which professional knowledge is applied continue to change, making ongoing development a normal part of professional practice rather than something needed only when problems arise.

These dimensions should not be understood as a linear sequence. They operate recursively. Professional judgement informs pedagogical action; rehearsals produce new musical and interpersonal information; reflection upon that experience contributes to professional learning; and revised understanding subsequently informs future judgement. Pedagogical interaction may itself generate new knowledge, meaning that rehearsal functions not merely as a site where expertise is implemented but also as one context in which expertise develops.

Technical diction knowledge remains essential within this framework but does not constitute a separate fourth dimension. Knowledge of pronunciation, phonetics, vocal production, and stylistic convention provides resources that operate throughout the process. Their application, however, is mediated through judgement. Knowing several diction systems does not independently determine which system—or which features of one—should be employed in a particular performance.

The scope of this framework should, however, be distinguished from a complete account of rehearsal as a shared social and musical event. Its primary focus is conductor professional practice: how conductors describe making diction judgements, translating those judgements into pedagogical action, and developing their understanding through experience and reflection. Singers are integral to these processes, particularly within Responsive Pedagogy, but their perspectives are represented here through conductors' accounts rather than investigated independently. The framework therefore does not claim to explain the full range of interactions through which diction is collectively negotiated, experienced or produced within an ensemble. Rather, it conceptualises the conductor-facing dimensions of adaptive ECD practice while recognising that these operate within a relational rehearsal environment shaped by singers as well as conductors.

The framework can therefore be represented conceptually as:



This representation is necessarily simplified. The dimensions may operate simultaneously and influence one another in multiple directions. Its purpose is not to prescribe a decision-making procedure or to model every interaction occurring within rehearsal, but to make visible relationships within the forms of conductor expertise described by participants.

The framework also distinguishes adaptive expertise from unrestricted subjectivity. Professional decisions remain open to evaluation according to the quality of the knowledge and reasoning through which they are made. A context-sensitive decision should be capable of justification through relevant musical, linguistic, vocal, cultural or pedagogical considerations. Adaptability therefore concerns responsiveness informed by expertise rather than freedom from professional standards.

The framework extends rather than replaces established approaches to ECD. Traditional pedagogies provide indispensable technical resources (Marshall, 1953; Fisher, 1991; Jordan, 1996; LaBouff, 2008). The contribution of the present framework lies in making more explicit the professional reasoning through which conductors determine when, why and how those resources should be mobilised.

As a conceptual framework derived from the accounts of five experienced UK conductors, it remains provisional and interpretative. Its value lies not in claiming universal applicability but in providing a language through which the interaction of knowledge, judgement, pedagogy and professional learning can be investigated further. Its conductor-facing scope should likewise be regarded as a boundary of the present evidence rather than an assertion that conductor reasoning alone accounts to produce ECD within ensemble practice.

Implications for Conductor Education

The adaptive framework has potential implications for conductor education and continuing professional development. If ECD requires contextual judgement as well as technical competence, conductor preparation may benefit from creating opportunities to develop both. These implications arise from the forms of reasoning described by participants and should therefore be understood as propositions for educational practice rather than as interventions evaluated within the present study.

Technical knowledge of pronunciation, phonetics, vocal production, and stylistic convention remains fundamental. The findings do not support reducing its importance. Rather, Professional Judgement in Context demonstrated that participants evaluated this knowledge alongside genre, cultural and historical context, vocal production, ensemble characteristics and artistic intention. Their accounts of authenticity, RP/SSBE and competing musical priorities further suggested that technically defensible possibilities could require evaluation rather than automatic application. Conductor education might therefore integrate technical instruction with opportunities to practise contextual reasoning: alongside learning how particular sounds are produced, developing conductors could be asked when and why alternative choices might be appropriate and what musical, linguistic, cultural or vocal consequences follow from them.

Repertoire-based case studies and comparative listening could provide practical means of developing this reasoning. Conductors might compare several plausible approaches to the same repertoire, evaluate contrasting recordings, identify relevant genre, accent and historical considerations, and justify a preferred approach. Such activities would reflect participants' accounts of negotiating stylistic authenticity rather than simply reproducing an assumed original pronunciation, whilst also requiring conductors to distinguish contextual flexibility from arbitrary preference. The purpose would not be to replace technical correctness with subjectivity, but to practise the accountable reasoning through which technical knowledge can be applied where more than one defensible possibility exists.

Responsive Pedagogy suggests a related educational need. Participants described explanation, collaboration, adaptation, prioritisation and selective intervention as part of translating artistic judgement into rehearsal practice. Their accounts indicated that identifying an appropriate diction outcome was insufficient in itself; conductors also had to judge how that outcome could productively be realised with particular singers. Developing conductors might therefore work with rehearsal case studies or simulations in which the same artistic intention must be communicated to ensembles with different levels of experience, vocal capability, existing pronunciation habits or rehearsal constraints. Reflection on such cases could include not only whether an intervention was technically accurate, but why explanation, demonstration, collaboration, correction or restraint might be appropriate in a particular circumstance. This would position pedagogical responsiveness as part of diction expertise rather than as a separate rehearsal skill.

Reflective Professional Learning provides a further implication for both initial education and continuing professional development. Participants described professional knowledge as developing through listening, observation, discussion, experience and engagement with others, while some aspects of practice appeared to remain tacit until articulated through dialogue. Participant C's description of conducting as "a very solitary thing" and of the research interview as "CPD for me" is particularly relevant here, as is Participant B's observation that the discussion raised matters they had not previously "said out loud." These

findings suggest potential value in creating structured opportunities for conductors to articulate and examine the reasoning underpinning their practice. Peer observation, facilitated case discussion, comparative listening and structured reflection on rehearsal decisions could provide contexts in which assumptions are made explicit, alternative approaches considered and professional reasoning critically examined. Such activities would not assume that reflection necessarily requires collaboration but would respond to the finding that dialogue could itself stimulate reconsideration of established practice.

Continuing professional learning is also important because participants described both limits to their existing expertise and changes within the linguistic and stylistic contexts to which that expertise applies. Participant D's observation that "RP itself is changing all the time" and description of being "constantly listening" suggest that professional development cannot be understood solely as remediation for gaps in initial training. Conductor education might therefore seek to develop habits of ongoing enquiry alongside established technical knowledge, including critical listening, evaluation of changing performance conventions and reflection on whether previously acquired assumptions remain appropriate within current practice.

Finally, participants' willingness to consult specialists, native speakers and other experienced practitioners suggests that recognising the boundaries of personal expertise can itself contribute to responsible professional practice. This has particular relevance within stylistically and culturally diverse repertoire, where individual conductors cannot reasonably possess specialist knowledge of every tradition they may encounter. Conductor education might therefore develop not only breadth of knowledge, but strategies for identifying when additional expertise is required, evaluating appropriate sources and incorporating consultation into subsequent artistic and pedagogical decision-making. Professional competence would then include not only knowing and deciding, but knowing when further enquiry is necessary.

These implications remain propositions arising from the findings rather than an evaluated model of conductor training. They nevertheless suggest that developing adaptive practitioners may require the integration of technical knowledge, contextual reasoning, pedagogical responsiveness and reflective professional learning. The educational purpose of the framework is therefore not to provide predetermined answers to every diction problem, but to identify forms of knowledge, reasoning, pedagogical action and reflection that may support conductors in making informed and revisable decisions across changing professional contexts.

Limitations of the Study

The findings must be interpreted within several methodological and contextual limitations. The study involved semi-structured interviews with five experienced choral conductors working within the United Kingdom. Consistent with its qualitative and interpretivist design, it sought depth rather than statistical representation. Conductors working within other national, linguistic or institutional contexts may encounter different assumptions concerning pronunciation, genre and conductor authority.

Purposive and snowball sampling enabled recruitment of information-rich participants but partly through professional networks, potentially increasing the likelihood of shared assumptions. Although participants represented varied ensemble types and musical backgrounds, the sample cannot encompass the full diversity of UK conducting practice.

The requirement for at least ten years' conducting experience also limits the conclusions that can be drawn about expertise development. The study demonstrates how experienced practitioners conceptualised their practice but cannot establish whether novice conductors reason similarly or how the identified dimensions develop over a professional career. This is particularly relevant to the proposed educational implications.

The exclusive use of interviews creates a further limitation. The data concerns participants' accounts of practice rather than direct observation of rehearsal behaviour. What practitioners say they do cannot be assumed to correspond exactly with what occurs in practice, and embodied or habitual aspects of expertise may be difficult to articulate retrospectively.

The findings must also be understood in relation to the perspective from which rehearsal practice was investigated. The study examined conductors' accounts of their own professional reasoning and pedagogical practice rather than directly observing rehearsals or gathering singers' perspectives. The adaptive framework should therefore be understood primarily as a framework of conductor professional practice in relation to ECD, rather than as a complete model of rehearsal as a shared social and musical event. Although singers emerged within participants' accounts as active considerations in decisions about identity, ensemble capability, collaboration and pedagogical response, their experiences were not investigated independently. The study cannot therefore determine how singers themselves understood or experienced these processes, or how diction decisions may have been negotiated collectively beyond conductors' perceptions of those interactions. Research incorporating singer perspectives, rehearsal observation or other ensemble-based approaches could examine these relational dimensions and explore whether the framework requires extension beyond its present conductor-facing focus.

The researcher's position as an experienced choral conductor shaped both data generation and analysis. Shared professional knowledge facilitated detailed dialogue but also influenced the questions pursued and interpretations developed. Reflexivity was used to examine this influence, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021), but the resulting themes remain a situated interpretation rather than the only possible reading of the dataset.

The scope is additionally restricted to English choral diction. Although some participant examples concerned other languages, the framework was developed in relation to ECD and should not automatically be assumed to apply to singing in other languages. Nor was the study designed to compare systematically between individual genres.

Finally, the adaptive framework is a conceptual outcome of the present analysis rather than an independently tested model. Its usefulness has not yet been evaluated through rehearsal observation, conductor education or other participant populations. It should therefore be regarded as provisional and interpretative rather than prescriptive. Its present boundaries reflect both the research question and the conductor-focused evidence from which it was developed.

Recommendations for Future Research

These limitations suggest several directions for future investigation. Observational research could examine how professional judgement and responsive pedagogy operate during rehearsal. Direct observation combined with post-rehearsal interviews or stimulated recall could provide insight into how conductors modify decisions in real time and illuminate processes comparable with Schön's (1983) reflection-in-action. Such research could also test whether the recursive relationship between judgement, pedagogical action, rehearsal experience and reflection proposed within the framework is observable in practice.

Research incorporating singers would provide another important perspective. The present study identifies explanation, dialogue, adaptation and collaboration through conductors' accounts; singer-focused research could examine how such practices are experienced and whether collaborative intentions are perceived similarly within ensembles. It could also investigate how singers' own linguistic identities, stylistic knowledge and professional or musical experiences contribute to the collective negotiation of diction. Including accompanists, vocal coaches or specialist practitioners could further examine how expertise is distributed within choral practice. Such work would be particularly valuable in testing and potentially extending the present framework beyond its conductor-facing perspective towards a fuller account of rehearsal as a shared musical and social process.

The development of expertise over time also warrants investigation. Comparative studies involving novice, developing and experienced conductors, or longitudinal research following conductors across stages of professional development, could examine how contextual judgement and responsive pedagogy develop and what role formal education and professional experience play in that process. This would be particularly useful in determining whether the dimensions identified through experienced practitioners represent capabilities that can be deliberately cultivated during conductor training.

Comparative research across national, linguistic and cultural contexts could test the transferability of the framework. The present study is situated within the UK, where RP/SSBE carries particular historical and social associations. Other English-speaking contexts may produce different relationships between pronunciation norms, genre, singer identity and professional practice.

The educational implications also require empirical evaluation. Research could investigate how ECD is currently taught within conductor-training programmes and whether approaches such as comparative listening, repertoire case studies, rehearsal simulation, peer observation, facilitated professional dialogue and structured reflection support the development of adaptive decision-making. Such research could examine not only whether participants acquire additional diction knowledge, but whether they become better able to justify contextual choices, adapt pedagogy to particular ensembles and recognise when further enquiry or external expertise is required.

Finally, subsequent research could examine the framework itself: whether its three dimensions remain useful across other participant populations, whether additional dimensions are required, and whether the recursive relationships proposed here are supported through observation and longitudinal study. The purpose would not necessarily be

to establish a universal model, but to test its explanatory value, examine its conductor-facing boundary and refine its scope in relation to the wider collective processes through which choral diction is produced.

Summary

This chapter has argued that ECD can be understood as an adaptive dimension of conductor professional practice in which technical pronunciation knowledge operates alongside contextual professional judgement, responsive pedagogy and reflective professional learning.

The findings extend existing technical approaches by shifting attention towards the reasoning through which conductors decide when, why and how diction knowledge should be applied. Professional Judgement in Context identifies the accountable reasoning through which competing musical, linguistic, vocal, cultural and ensemble considerations are evaluated. Responsive Pedagogy explains how resulting judgements are enacted through approaches adapted to singers and rehearsal circumstances. Reflective Professional Learning demonstrates how the knowledge underpinning judgement and pedagogy remains open to development through experience, enquiry, dialogue and reflection.

The proposed adaptive framework conceptualises these dimensions recursively. Knowledge informs professional judgement; judgement shapes pedagogical action; rehearsal generates further musical and interpersonal experience; and reflection upon that experience can contribute to revised understanding and subsequent practice. Technical knowledge remains fundamental throughout this process, but functions as a resource for professional judgement rather than as a system capable of independently prescribing every artistic outcome.

The framework is principally a framework of conductor professional practice rather than a complete account of rehearsal as a shared social and musical event. Singers and ensemble relationships are integral to the processes described by participants, but the present study accesses them through conductor accounts rather than independent singer perspectives. This boundary limits the framework's explanatory scope while also identifying a productive direction for further research.

Rather than replacing established diction systems, the adaptive perspective therefore situates them within the broader professional processes through which contemporary conductors interpret repertoire, work with singers, negotiate uncertainty and continue to develop their practice. Adaptability does not imply unrestricted subjectivity; it describes the capacity to make informed, contextually accountable and revisable decisions.

Conclusion

This study explores how experienced choral conductors conceptualise, teach and continue to develop English choral diction (ECD) within contemporary multi-genre practice. Rather than seeking a single model of correct ECD, it investigates the professional reasoning through which conductors make, communicate and reconsider diction choices when established technical guidance does not independently determine an appropriate outcome.

Using semi-structured interviews with five experienced UK choral conductors and reflexive thematic analysis, three interconnected themes were developed: Professional Judgement in Context, Responsive Pedagogy and Reflective Professional Learning. Together, these themes answer the research question: how do experienced choral conductors conceptualise, teach, and continue to develop ECD within contemporary multi-genre practice? Participants conceptualised ECD contextually, taught it through approaches responsive to particular singers and rehearsal circumstances, and understood their expertise as continuing to develop through experience, enquiry, dialogue and reflection.

The findings affirm the importance of technical knowledge concerning pronunciation, vocal production and stylistic convention while demonstrating that such knowledge does not independently determine what should be sung in every context. Participants considered genre, text, historical and cultural context, vocal production, ensemble capability, stylistic expectation, singer identity and communicative intention. Accent and authenticity illustrated this particularly clearly. Authenticity was not consistently understood as reproducing an original or culturally associated accent; participants also considered the identity of the ensemble producing the sound. Appropriate choral diction may therefore involve negotiation between repertoire-associated stylistic conventions and the collective identity of its performers.

The study consequently proposes that ECD can be understood as an adaptive dimension of conductor professional practice. The three themes operate recursively: existing knowledge informs contextual judgement; judgement shapes pedagogical action; rehearsal generates further experience; and reflection can revise the knowledge and assumptions informing subsequent decisions. The framework therefore extends rather than replaces established approaches to ECD by making more visible the professional reasoning through which technical knowledge is mobilised within specific repertoire, ensembles and performance contexts.

Crucially, adaptability does not imply arbitrary pronunciation or abandonment of professional standards. The findings instead suggest a form of accountable flexibility. Several pronunciation possibilities may sometimes be technically or artistically defensible, but this does not make them equally appropriate in every context. Professional judgement requires conductors to evaluate possibilities against relevant musical, linguistic, cultural, vocal and pedagogical considerations and to justify why a particular choice serves a particular repertoire and ensemble. Recognition of uncertainty can similarly form part of expertise where it prompts enquiry, consultation or reconsideration.

This conceptualisation has implications for conductor education. Technical diction training remains essential but could be complemented by opportunities to compare plausible choices, justify decisions contextually, explore alternative pedagogical approaches and reflect systematically upon rehearsal experience. Developing strategies for recognising the boundaries of individual expertise and seeking appropriate linguistic, stylistic or cultural knowledge may similarly form part of professional development. These implications remain propositions arising from the findings rather than an evaluated educational model.

The framework also has clear boundaries. It is conductor-facing, rather than a complete account of rehearsal as a shared social event. Singer perspectives on authority, collaboration, pronunciation and collective linguistic identity remain indirect. The findings are

also derived from five experienced UK conductors and from accounts of practice rather than rehearsal observation. They cannot establish how adaptive expertise develops from novice to experienced practice, and the framework has not been independently tested across other conductor populations, cultural or linguistic contexts. It should therefore be regarded as provisional and interpretative rather than universally prescriptive. Future research could combine rehearsal observation with conductor reflection, investigate singer perspectives and professional development longitudinally, test the framework in other contexts, and evaluate its potential educational applications.

Ultimately, this study reframes the central problem of contemporary ECD. The question is not only 'What is the correct pronunciation?', but also 'What makes this diction choice appropriate here?' The second question does not reject the first; it situates technical knowledge within the broader professional responsibility of deciding how that knowledge should be used. ECD can therefore be understood not solely as pronunciation, but as an interaction between knowledge, contextual judgement, pedagogical action and continuing professional learning through which conductors seek to make informed, responsive and revisable artistic decisions.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Semi-Structured Interview

1. When thinking about diction in choral settings, how do you approach this topic in your choral settings?
2. Has there ever been a time when you were uncertain as to how to approach a specific word?
3. Have you ever been aware of choir members who have struggled to follow your direction in terms of diction?
4. What are your thoughts on diction, and how it relates to different genres?
5. Do you believe RP is a neutral accent? Should this still be considered that standard for classical choral or all choral singing?
6. I mentioned the works of Daron Oram, and the idea of 'othering' and disadvantaging those who do not come from an SSBE Background. What are your thoughts on this topic?
7. Going forward, if a new guide to choral diction was written, what do you think would be most helpful to training and working choral conductors?
8. Reflecting on this interview, what are your key takeaways on the topic of choral diction?

Appendix B

Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

Purpose

This appendix provides a concise illustration of the analytical process described in the Methodology and Methods chapter. It is not a complete codebook and does not reproduce every coded extract. Instead, it demonstrates how selected interview material was interpreted through Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis and how the analysis developed towards the three final themes.

The analysis was primarily inductive but was necessarily informed by the research question, the researcher's professional position, and prior engagement with the literature. Coding records were working analytical documents rather than fixed codebooks: codes and candidate themes were revised, combined, and reorganised recursively as interpretation developed.

Application of the Six-Phase Analytical Process

Braun & Clarke phase	Application in this study	Illustrative outcome
1. Familiarisation	Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were read repeatedly, with early observations and analytical reflections recorded alongside familiarisation.	Initial observations concerning accent, genre, rehearsal practice, pedagogy, decision-making and professional learning.
2. Coding	Relevant features of participants' accounts were coded broadly and inclusively. Coding remained close to participants' accounts while allowing interpretative development.	Examples included genre-specific pronunciation; artistic flexibility; use of recordings; cultural or linguistic authority; modelling; collaborative choice; scaffolding; practical constraints; and reflective learning.
3. Generating initial themes	Related codes and extracts were brought together into candidate patterns of shared meaning relevant to the research question.	Working patterns included artistic/contextual choice, pedagogical decision-making, collaborative learning, rehearsal methods, practical constraints, and reflective professional development.
4. Developing and reviewing themes	Candidate patterns were reconsidered against coded extracts, complete transcripts, and the research question. Overlap and distinction between patterns were reviewed recursively.	Pedagogical decision-making, collaboration, rehearsal methods, and practical constraints were recognised as interrelated dimensions of a broader responsive pedagogical pattern.
5. Refining, defining, and naming themes	Themes were refined around a clear central organising concept	Three final themes were defined: Professional

	rather than retained as descriptive topic categories.	Judgement in Context; Responsive Pedagogy; Reflective Professional Learning.
6. Writing up	Themes were developed into an interpretative account of how experienced conductors conceptualise, teach and continue to develop English choral diction.	The final account conceptualises ECD as context-sensitive professional practice rather than the application of a single fixed pronunciation model.

Illustrative Coding and Theme Development

The following examples show the analytical movement from participant material to initial coding, developing patterns and the final themes. They are representative examples selected to make the interpretative process visible; they are not intended as a frequency table or exhaustive catalogue of the dataset.

Indicative data focus	Illustrative content	Initial / working code	Developing pattern	Final theme
Genre and accent choices	References to Americanisms in pop, RP/classical expectations, jazz, or musical-theatre sound	Genre-specific pronunciation	Stylistic and contextual choice	Professional Judgement in Context
Alternative valid pronunciations	Trying alternatives; acknowledging that there may be no single right answer; revising a choice	Interpretive flexibility	Artistic judgement	Professional Judgement in Context
Recordings and performers	Listening to original artists, composers, or established performance traditions	Aural stylistic reference	Sources of professional judgement	Professional Judgement in Context
Native speakers / cultural insiders	Consulting people with linguistic or cultural knowledge; questioning inherited authority	Cultural and linguistic accountability	Authenticity and authority	Professional Judgement in Context
Choir identity and capacity	Adapting decisions to age, accent, experience, locality, ensemble purpose, or audience	Situated realisation	Context as part of the artistic decision	Professional Judgement in Context
Demonstration and listening	Modelling sounds, copying performers, listening across sections, comparing alternatives	Aural and embodied learning	Listening and modelling	Responsive Pedagogy

Shared decision-making	Asking singers what they think; agreeing diction; offering bounded choices; majority decisions where alternatives are valid	Collaborative learning	Singer engagement and ownership	Responsive Pedagogy
Progressive rehearsal work	Repetition, score marking, warm-up or musicianship work, staged introduction of pronunciation details	Scaffolding	Rehearsal design	Responsive Pedagogy
Learner difference	Adjusting language or method for age, literacy, experience, first language, memory, or confidence	Differentiation	Adaptive teaching	Responsive Pedagogy
Practical conditions	Limited rehearsal time; prioritising notes/rhythm; non-audition settings; missing training or resources	Practical constraint	Conditions shaping pedagogical choice	Responsive Pedagogy
Tacit professional knowledge	Participants recognising that practices described as blend, legato, colour, or musicianship also constituted diction work	Tacit practice made explicit	Reflective awareness	Reflective Professional Learning
Uncertainty and revisability	Acknowledging limits; asking others; keeping options open; changing or confirming a judgement	Revisable expertise	Reflective professional stance	Reflective Professional Learning
Dialogue and investigation	Peer exchange, specialist input, workshops, listening, research, and rehearsal experimentation	Evidence-informed professional learning	Reflection through dialogue and testing	Reflective Professional Learning
Future development	Intentions to listen differently, revise teaching, develop audio resources, CPD or professional networks	Transfer to future practice	Continuing professional learning	Reflective Professional Learning

Development of the Final Themes

During analysis, several useful working patterns were initially treated separately because they captured various aspects of participants' accounts. Recursive review showed, however, that some of these patterns were better understood as dimensions of a broader central organising concept rather than as independent final themes.

Working analytical pattern	Final theme	Reason for refinement
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Artistic, stylistic, and contextual choice	Professional Judgement in Context	Captured how conductors decide what diction is appropriate by weighing genre, interpretation, aural and cultural reference points, and the identity and capacity of the ensemble.
Pedagogical decision-making	Responsive Pedagogy	Concerned the conductor's choices about how diction should be communicated and learned.
Collaborative learning and singer engagement	Responsive Pedagogy	Represented one way in which pedagogy was adapted to singers, expertise and ensemble culture.
Teaching diction in rehearsal	Responsive Pedagogy	Captured concrete mechanisms through which an intended sound became audible, embodied, and repeatable.
Practical constraints and conditions	Responsive Pedagogy	Showed why pedagogical choices had to remain flexible in response to time, literacy, linguistic difference, ensemble structure, and available resources.
Reflective practice and professional learning	Reflective Professional Learning	Captured how conductors made tacit assumptions visible, engaged with uncertainty, learned through dialogue and evidence, and considered future development.

Final Themes and Central Organising Concepts

Final theme	Central organising concept	Indicative analytic content
Professional Judgement in Context	ECD is conceptualised as a situated professional judgement rather than a universally fixed system of pronunciation.	Genre and style; artistic interpretation; accent; recordings and aural models; authenticity and cultural/linguistic authority; choir identity; ensemble and performance context.
Responsive Pedagogy	Diction is taught through flexible pedagogical choices responsive to repertoire, singers, and rehearsal conditions.	Listening and modelling; collaborative or directive teaching as context requires; vowel and consonant work; scaffolding; differentiation; rehearsal integration; singer ownership; practical constraints.
Reflective Professional Learning	Professional expertise remains open to reflection, dialogue, investigation, and revision.	Tacit knowledge; reflexive awareness; uncertainty and humility; peer/specialist dialogue; listening and research; experimentation; future learning and resource development.

Reflexive and Interpretative Decisions

The interviews were treated as dialogic sites of data generation. The researcher's professional experience supported detailed discussion but also shaped prompts, terminology, and interpretation. Where interviewer contributions materially influenced the discussion, they were retained in analytical records as reflexive context; they were not treated as independent participant evidence.

Analytical importance was not determined by frequency. Divergent and qualifying cases were retained where they clarified the boundaries of a theme. For example, collaboration was not interpreted as universally preferable: some professional contexts required more directive conductor leadership, while other settings supported shared choice. Similarly, adapting diction to ensemble capacity was interpreted as contextual professional judgement rather than automatically as a lowering of artistic standards.

The final themes therefore represent an interpretative account of patterns of shared meaning across five experienced UK choral conductors. They are not presented as objectively

discoverable categories, statistically generalisable findings or a prescriptive model of correct English choral diction.