



Rehearsal Break

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Choral Rehearsals During COVID: Examining Singer Engagement

by Matthew Swanson, Eva Floyd, and David Kirkendall

For several months now, many conductors have been leading rehearsals partly or entirely online. As teachers, it is easy to feel that such rehearsals are ineffective. And, musical growth and progress aside, we all hope that singers will, somehow or other, remain *engaged*—engaged with choral music broadly and engaged with our organizations specifically.

Ensemble leaders should take heart, though. While unorthodox, these online choral experiences may be effective in ways not immediately obvious. Thanks to the work of several researchers, we already know that a framework exists for understanding quality student engagement, and when applied to choirs and their COVID activities, it is clear that successful singer engagement can—and does—occur in the online choir environment. Conductors and administrators can use this framework to reconsider the results of their activities, appreciate their

achievements, give themselves and their singers confidence, and advocate for their programs by pointing to this demonstration of resiliency and ingenuity.

In a 2011 review of student engagement research literature, Leah Taylor and Jim Parsons¹ summarize five requirements for successful student engagement. The five requirements, originally generated by Carie Windham, are interaction, exploration, relevance, media, and technology, and instruction.² Though Taylor and Parsons refer to “students” and “teachers” in their writings, those terms are easily interchangeable with “singers” and “conductors” for our purposes.

To illustrate how these five requirements were met in practice, we describe below the online activities of the Cincinnati May Festival Youth Chorus during the fall of 2020. However, many other ensembles have incorporated these or sim-

ilar activities, and their leaders can easily see how to map those activities on to the Taylor and Parsons framework.

The May Festival Youth Chorus offers tuition-free, high-level choral experiences to singers in grades 8-12 who are drawn from more than thirty schools in greater Cincinnati; the ensemble comprises singers of all voice types, and they would normally rehearse once each week from September through May. The singers focus on developing vocal technique, musicianship, language facility, and performance skills in preparation for frequent appearances with the May Festival Chorus and the Cincinnati Symphony and Pops Orchestras, in addition to their annual featured appearances at the May Festival.

During the pandemic, the Youth Chorus met every other week via Zoom for seventy-five-minute sessions (half the usual rehearsal time). The sessions included a guided vocal

warmup, small group musicianship instruction, and an interview/Q&A with a special guest.

Interaction

Definitions of “interaction” are broad, but Claxton noted that students are more engaged when they see “teachers modeling learning as opposed to telling students what the answers, process, or outcome should be.”³ Dunleavy and Milton’s research found that students also desire the opportunity to personally interact with experts in a given field.⁴ During Zoom interviews and discussions with guests, Youth Chorus members gained easy access to experts in the music field and were able to witness the ensemble leaders learning from these experts at the same time as the students. As one singer wrote in our feedback form, “I love that we are able to actually communicate with experienced and successful people that most people wouldn’t get the opportunity to even meet.” Special guests included a music therapist, a professional orchestral musician, professional singers, voice pathologists, a music theorist, and a prominent composer/conductor.

Exploration

In the words of Taylor and Parsons, “Today’s learners ask for the opportunity to explore and to find solutions and answers for themselves.”⁵ The Youth Chorus staff sent follow-up messages to the singers one day after our Zoom sessions. The messages summarized the pre-

vious day’s interview—especially any unfamiliar terms, composers, or pieces of music—and included recommended listening and reading links for further exploration. Many singers reported that these emails led them to discover for themselves compelling composers, performers, and works. One student wrote, “I’ve really liked how weekly emails had links to pieces of music related to what we talked about with our special guests—listening to those has been a highlight!”

Relevance

“Today’s learners ask that their learning apply to real-life scenarios whenever possible as opposed to theoretical and text-based.”⁶ Often, when asked to think of a job or career in music, youth musicians can envision only an on-stage performer or a school/studio teacher. The Youth Chorus makes a particular effort to expose students to the vast infrastructure of the performing arts and the equally vast array of career possibilities that are arts-adjacent. Nearly all of our students were unaware of music therapy as a field until a music therapist appeared on our Zoom forum, for example. One singer wrote, “[The Q&A session] helps me figure out what I want to go to college for, or see what my life could look like 10-20 years from now.” Critically, these forums have helped students imagine how their futures can include avocational music making, even if they choose not to study music in college.

Media and Technology

Taylor and Parsons view media/technology as a tool for enhancing engagement by creating accessibility to relevant subject matter, creating opportunity for interaction with experts, and creating deeper connections and relationships among learners.⁷ One of our singers commented on the importance of relationships: “The music itself is important, but finding ways to build the relationships in the choir is just as important.”

We knew that Zoom would provide opportunities for the choir to interact with fellow singers, the artistic staff, and our special guests, but we did not anticipate the surprising benefit of randomized visual placement. Friesen noted that student engagement is strengthened when students work alongside their teachers in a horizontal relationship rather than a strictly vertical hierarchical relationship.⁸ Fascinatingly, the Zoom platform made this theoretical concept visually concrete by situating the teacher/conductor alongside the student/singer in the Zoom grid. In this case, technology, paired with the shift in instruction toward discussion and questions, helped create a more collaborative learning environment.

Instruction

Creating compelling instructional portions of the rehearsal (guided vocal warmups and small group musicianship lessons) was a challenge. Among many negative aspects created by the inability to hear our singers was the difficulty to ef-

fectively pace the lessons. To combat this, we were intentional about seeking specific feedback from the members. The vocal warm-ups were met with enthusiasm by the singers, even though they could only hear themselves and the conductor.

Comments from singers indicate the desire to keep using their instrument. “It is important to warm up even though we can’t hear anyone because we’re practicing keeping our voice healthy and in shape”) and the importance of routine (“Warm-up allows me to mentally and physically transition into a more receptive state”). The use of purposive questions during instructional activities was critical to keeping students engaged in the lessons. To offset the inability to hear the singers, we often used questions to gauge singers’ understanding, both individually and as a group.

We found success in separating pitch and rhythmic skills during the small group musicianship lessons. Half of the choir was in a break-out room to practice rhythmic skills while the other half attended a break-out room focusing on pitch and solfege; we then switched groups at the indicated time. Each instructor created lessons that could be successful without hearing the singers, relying on formative assessment techniques during the lessons (specifically, utilizing a questioning technique designed to monitor students’ learning and provide feedback to teachers about the learners’ progress).⁹

Rhythm lessons

For our lessons in rhythm, we created vertical columns of notes, in varying meters. As we began, only the notes were visible. Going down each column, students participated

in the assigning of beat numbers, always by predicting the next number, based on the value of the current note. Correct numbers would appear to students, one at a time, to confirm each prediction (Figure 1).

Figure #1
Rhythm Column

$6 \times 1/8 = 6/8$

Once there was a visual consensus about assigned beat numbers, we would perform those numbers in a rhythmically correct fashion; next, the teacher would recite the numbers while students would participate on a series of repeated *ta* syllables; and finally, the teacher would clap a steady beat and challenge them to *ta* the correct rhythm against the given tempo.

Why arrange the notes vertically, and why discern the numbers one note at a time? The vertical organization eliminates the horizontal space between notes as an intuitive guide, and demands that students respond to the *value* of each note. Analyzing each note one at a time establishes a critical principle: the beat number on which a note begins has *nothing* to do with the value of that note, but rather, *everything* to do with the value of a previous note. The vertical columns also eliminate bar lines, so there is no possibility of spotting a bar line and attempting to assign beat numbers by working backwards. Fluent sight-reading is a linear phenomenon, operating (in normal music) in a left-to-right fashion. Music does not stop; there are no “do-overs.”

As fluency with this process increased, we would turn periodically to rhythms seen in a previous session, without beat numbers present. Students were given a brief period of time to visualize a correct set of beat numbers and then perform them as a group, followed by a *ta* performance. It is important to remember that writing beat numbers into music is a “training wheels” exercise; true sight-reading is the ability to make this analysis internally, silently, and quickly.

Pitch/Solfège Lessons

The primary goal of the lessons focusing on pitch was to help singers reinforce their audiation skills. Singers heard a musical example sung by the teacher on a neutral syllable while looking at two solfege statements (without the staff), then singers voted on which example matched what they heard by holding their fingers up on screen (see example below). This activity required the students to match the aural sound given by the teacher with their internal image of the sounds created by solfege patterns. Once the idea was understood this same activity was used with staff notation. This activity was presented as a multiple-choice game. Once the correct answer was identified then it was sung by the teacher on solfege to solidify the relationship between sound and solfege and/or notation. Students also sang the incorrect answer for comparison (Figure 2).

Dictation activities were presented as fill-in-the-blank games. Students were shown a line of solfege syllables with at least one blank

“mystery pitch.” The teacher sang the line on a neutral syllable and the students used Curwen hand signs to show which syllable they thought matched the sound of the mystery pitch. This activity was also done with staff notation: students indicated the line/space of the mystery pitch using their hand staves (Figure 3).

Both of these activities were prepared by singing/echoing the tone set and specific intervals of the corresponding musical activities; these were extended to increase difficulty within the rehearsal and over the course of multiple rehearsals. The activities were essentially formative assessment techniques in action. The multiple-choice votes and dictation hand signs/hand staff answers informed the teacher of the student’s accuracy in matching his or her inner organization to the aural sounds. The teacher could immediately see when the group had mostly matching answers or when the group had varying answers, which indicated the readiness to move forward or the need for review.

Even with the challenge of teach-

ing musicianship lessons online, students indicated they valued the instruction as evidenced from their feedback forms:

- “I like having this practice so I can make sure I’m keeping up.”
- “It gets my brain thinking about theory and really it’s the only place that I actually get to practice it. So introducing and expanding on things we’re doing is cool.”
- “I feel that these lessons help me to get a better grasp on reading music and understanding how music is made.”
- “I like how the musicianship classes make learning theory more like a game so that we learn without struggling.”

Although the online rehearsal situation is not ideal, we found value in the significant amount of student engagement during our online meetings. We learned more about our singers’ musical understandings and curiosities through their questions and discussions, which deepened over time. This deepening is supported by Claxton, who advocates for creating a climate in which students’ questions are welcomed and refined, so the disposition to question becomes more robust and sophisticated.¹⁰ The additional time for group discussion and more collaborative nature of our online meetings has created more opportunities for meaningful connections between fellow singers and between singers and staff.

We hope that the days of live,

Figure #2

Multiple-choice audiation game

Teacher (neutral sound):

d m s r d

Student visual:

#1 d r s r d

#2 d m s r d

Figure #3

Dictation game

Teacher (neutral sound):

d m s r d

Student visual:

d m s — d

in-person rehearsing and concertizing will return soon. At the same time, however, we hope that ensemble leaders everywhere acknowledge that successes small and large were realized even in COVID-era virtual activities. As conductors and educators continue to advocate for their ensembles, programs, and organizations at a time when support is needed more than ever, this engagement framework can assist in articulating what was achieved in the midst of extraordinarily challenging circumstances. □

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NOTES

¹ Leah Taylor and Jim Parsons, “Improving Student Engagement,” *Current Issues in Education* 14, no. 1 (2011): 4-32.

² Carie Windham, “The Student’s Perspective,” in *Educating the Next Generation* (2005) <http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen>

³ Guy Claxton, “Expanding Young People’s Capacity to Learn,” *British*

Journal of Educational Studies 55, no. 2 (2007): 1-20.

⁴ Jodene Dunleavy and Penny Milton, *What Did You Do in School Today? Exploring the Concept of Student Engagement and its Implication for Teaching and Learning* (Toronto: Canadian Education Association, 2009), 1-22.

⁵ Taylor and Parsons, “Improving Student Engagement,” 11.

⁶ Ibid, 12.

⁷ Ibid, 14.

⁸ Sharon Friesen, *Effective Teaching Practices—A Framework* (Toronto: Canadian Education Association, 2008), 14.

⁹ Taylor and Parsons, “Improving Student Engagement,” 21.

¹⁰ Claxton, “Expanding Young People’s Capacity to Learn,” 7.

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