

Inside the Choral Classroom: Advice for the First-Year Teacher (Part 2)

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The May, August, and September 2015 issues of *Choral Journal* featured a three-part series of articles with interviews from eleven choral teachers sharing advice for the first-year choral teacher. We are reprising that series with a similar set of questions and a new set of interviewees. Participants received the Q&A form via email in January 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2021, participants answered an additional question directly related to teaching during the pandemic. These answers are shared in Question 7. Part 1 appeared in the August 2020 issue and answered questions about expectations, classroom management, and balance. Answers are listed in alphabetical order by last name.

Part 2 will address the following questions:

Repertoire and Resources: Where can I find quality repertoire for the skill/size/balance of my choir? Where should I start when considering putting together a program?

Voice Building: How do I build a strong choral sound in my choirs? What encouragement/advice/practical suggestions can I offer to students who might be struggling?

Organization/Recruitment: How do I stay organized when conducting multiple choirs? How do I maintain/recruit students to the choral program?

Silver Linings and COVID-19: What lessons have you learned from teaching during the pandemic? Is there anything you adapted that you will keep as we move forward? What advice would you give to a new choral teacher navigating social distancing and unfamiliar technology?



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QUESTION #4

Repertoire and Resources:

Where can I find quality repertoire for the skill/size/balance of my choir? Where should I start when considering putting together a program?



DEANNA JOSEPH

Hopefully, you've graduated from your college or university with a wealth of repertoire resources to draw on. The biggest mistake I see new teachers make is programming music that is too difficult for their choir with regards to divisi, range, and tessitura. Program for the choir that you have, not the choir you wish you had. You'll get there, but it takes time. School districts have wonderful repertoire lists for large group performance evaluation or festival, so that's a great place to start.

Don't be afraid to ask other choral teachers in your district for repertoire advice. For example, email them and ask for their top three repertoire recommendations for your choir. Also, don't hesitate to reach out to your college professors for suggestions and help. And go down repertoire rabbit holes. Have a few favorite living composers but their music is too difficult for your choir? Look up their websites and see if they have other pieces that are of an appropriate level for your group. There is always the option of posting a repertoire question on various choral social media groups—people are always willing to offer suggestions there. However, when asking a question in that forum, be as specific as possible to elicit the most useful results.



JOSEPH KEMPER

Programming was difficult for me as a first-year teacher. I often programmed music that was either way too hard or way too easy. Finding and knowing that perfect Goldilocks spot of “just right” (challenging, but not too challenging) seemed like an impossible concoction. Fortunately,

today, music publishers provide many online resources that greatly aids perusing music. Reach out to seasoned teachers in your district to find out what sorts of repertoire they program for various levels of ensembles. Additionally, don't discount the value of trying out different repertoire before committing for the concert. It's good to have a plan for day one, but you may find that the music you've picked is either too hard or too easy. Be ready to make changes. Be flexible and try your best.

Choral Public Domain Library (CPDL) is an incredible resource with almost limitless options of pre-1900 repertoire. The best part is that the music is open-sourced, in the public domain, and can legally be edited and adapted. Want to introduce the music of the Renaissance to your treble choir but are struggling to find unison, two-part, or SSA repertoire? Try taking another work for a different voicing (e.g., SATB), teach them the soprano and alto parts, and bring in student instrumentalists to play along with all of the parts, including those being sung by the choir. Scholarship surrounding Renaissance performance practice has changed a lot, and we now know that some repertoire that was once thought to be exclusively performed a cappella was likely accompanied colla parte (i.e., instruments doubling the vocal lines). Just like the musicians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who were quick to adapt music to the needs of the musicians in the moment, so should we feel empowered to do the same. If your students quickly learn those two parts, you can modify the tenor or bass part to create yet another part, allowing your repertoire to adapt to the needs to your students.



JASON LEIGH

The gold standard for me when I am looking for repertoire is attending concerts. Ideally you will join various music associations such as ACDA and NAFME and, if your school district believes in what you are building, you will attend state, regional, and national conferences. Of course, this is not always possible, but try to make a couple each year. Attending these concert sessions is always refreshing and gives you ideas not just about spe-

cific repertoire but also the possibilities for what your students could do. Your local county or district-level honors choirs are always helpful.

Finally, in the arena of live concerts, you will have your local colleagues both in your district and in neighboring districts. When I began my career, I wanted to know who around me had the best programs, and I established connections with those people. I was always picking their brains about programming and rehearsal techniques. Having any kind of ego is so counterproductive to building the program you want. You are going to make many mistakes, and in order to cut down on them you should learn from those around you who are already doing a great job.

Lastly, something that wasn't as prevalent in the beginning of my career that is nearly my daily bread at this point is use of the Internet. Not only are there publishers large and small, various professional organizations host websites that are filled with suggestions. Of course, the biggest resource that nearly everyone uses is YouTube. Sure, the sound quality is not always ideal, but you can hear magnificent performances from

Having any kind of ego is so counterproductive to building the program you want. You are going to make many mistakes, and in order to cut down on them you should learn from those around you who are already doing a great job.

—Jason Leigh

all over the world. Many hidden gems in my programs have come from watching performances of fearless choirs from Canada to Australia to various places in the United States. Often times the pieces I like the best were written for that choir, and I have to do some obsessive digging on the internet to track down the composer, but it has been well worth it.

All in all, I still find myself bringing up some of the smaller publisher websites and clicking on their newest offerings. These sites offer so much in the way of

previewing a score and hearing an actual choral performance of it. At some point, you may even develop a relationship with a composer and commission a piece. It all begins with curiosity.



EMILY MERCADO

This question (in addition to question 5) are very big questions—ones that I attempt to answer in my Choral Music Methods course at The University of Utah. We spend a lot of time discussing music appropriate for various stages of vocal development. The main points I address are:

Difficulty level—I program music that allows me to teach my students how to sing and be musical. First and foremost, as a conductor, I am a voice teacher. Even at the collegiate level, and especially because I conduct a non-auditioned choir, I have students who need to learn proper vocal techniques. If I have to spend the majority of my rehearsals pounding out notes and rhythms, then the music I chose was too hard and ultimately a disservice to my students' vocal and musical growth.

Sight-singing piece—I try to program at least one piece on each program where the students have to learn using only solfege. I do not touch the piano. This allows us to transfer our solfege skills to our repertoire, and the students have expressed that they feel a great sense of pride as a result of this process. In addition, we hardly have to address intonation issues when we learn a piece on solfege.

Variety and student driven—I program music from a variety of time periods and countries and that require students to produce a variety of tone qualities. For example, I almost always program an early music piece (these also tend to be the pieces we learn using only solfege). Then, I program a non-western piece (these tend to provide opportunities to experiment with less familiar vocal timbres). In addition, if I have a student or students with knowledge and experience with non-western music, I will ask that student for appropriate programming suggestions and pedagogical considerations. Finally, I will also program contemporary choral music, romantic music, and popular music.

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When programming popular music, I typically involve the students in this process so that they can sing/arrange popular music that is relevant to them.



LULU MWANGI

When you subscribe to several music publishing companies, you receive all their catalogues. Most of them are organized by ensemble type/need. My go-to is usually the J.W. Pepper website state repertoire lists because it is organized by various categories and levels. I often visit other publishing sites as well, especially if they allow for advanced filter searches. The ACDA website has a whole section dedicated to repertoire. I also listen to various choirs on YouTube to find some really unique repertoire options. Another resource is watching videos of international choir competitions. There is so much out there!

QUESTION #5

Voice building:

**How do I build a strong choral sound in my choirs?
What encouragement/advice/practical suggestions
can I offer to students who might be struggling?**



CAROLYN GROSS

I think the foundation of every choir is its tone. Work for a full, resonant, age appropriate tone no matter which level of singers are in front of you. I also integrate many details of the music making into the music learning. I work with many student teachers, and they all seem to want to isolate musical elements as they teach; first teach the notes, then add rhythmic accuracy, then articulation, then dynamics. I don't suggest thinking about teaching that way. I suggest working in small chunks, with great detail. Create beauty in the learning stages. It is rewarding to young singers to make a musical phrase. Give them the vision of the whole piece, but the details of a phrase.



JACKSON HILL

There are a wide variety of answers to this question that will vary greatly depending upon a director's pedagogical beliefs regarding ideal choral sound and vocal health. One director's "must" will likely be another director's "must not." That being said, there are several things I think should always be considered as your ensembles develop:

Be aware of what your demeanor is contributing to the rehearsal. Our feelings and mindset are contagious to our kids. If we are stressed and tense, they will sing that way. If we are relaxed and engaged, they are more likely to be as well.

Every moment is an opportunity to imbue our sound with the breadth of character we desire. Create a warmup routine that is tailored to the singers' needs. If learning a piece of music is like building a house, warmups are the time to learn how to make the bricks the house will be built with. Before I began teaching, someone suggested that I write out every single warmup I know, and next to it, identify its purpose ("warming up" was not a purpose). Does your choir need to develop better breath control? Is their timbre overly dark? Do they have trouble switching between registers? There are warm-ups to help with all these things. Once they understand how to navigate these concepts in their warm-ups, implementing them in repertoire becomes much easier.

Some kids will progress very slowly. Silenced kids won't progress at all. An environment where even the lowest performing student is validated and empowered to improve themselves feeds the growth of all students.



DEANNA JOSEPH

The best place to start building a strong choral sound is in the warmup. The choral warmup is a place to focus the minds and the voices of the individuals who come into your rehearsal space to sing together. I advocate starting with something that will get the breath engine going

(lip trills are my favorite). When I move to vowels, I encourage the students to sing with vibrato to start and then have the students alternate passages with vibrato and without. By the end of an effective warmup, the choir should be mentally focused and singing with an ensemble sensibility.

An environment where even the lowest performing student is validated and empowered to improve themselves feeds the growth of all students.

—Jackson Hill

In the beginning weeks of the semester, I teach my choirs the common challenges and pitfalls that one finds in each of the choral sections and how to avoid them. Soprano parts sit in the passaggio, so those singers need to work on sounding “domey” and warm at the top of the staff and above it. Altos need to work on bringing their head voice down as far as possible rather than switching into a belt voice, as this can cause intonation and fatigue issues in choral repertoire. Tenor parts sit high in many choral pieces, so tenors need to be masterful at switching in and out of falsetto seamlessly. And basses need to navigate the lower range with brightness rather than an overly covered or pressed sound.



EMILY MERCADO

I teach my students how to sing. I know this sounds simple, but with the constant pressures associated with concerts and festivals, I easily get caught up in the repertoire. I have to remind myself to keep watching and listening with “voice teacher” ears and eyes. When I was a Ph.D. student at Louisiana State University, Dr. Melissa Brunkan taught us to use a voice building sequence during warm-ups. This sequence addresses focus, alignment, breathing, phonation, resonance, register consistency, range extension, vowel purity, musicianship, repertoire specific exercises, and music literacy. I created an excel

spreadsheet with a variety of exercises for each of these categories, and it lives in the front of my binder. This reminds me every rehearsal to work on these essential skills using different exercises. My main goal during the warm-up is to isolate specific skills we are working to develop and then extend those concepts into the repertoire.

I keep learning and I ask for help. Sometimes I invite other musicians into my rehearsal, and I often consult various resources. Currently, my favorite resource is *Prescriptions for Choral Excellence* by Emmons and Chase. This is a wonderful book that diagnosis common problems in the choral rehearsal and offers possible “prescriptions.”



JELANI WATKINS

A great method to build a strong choral sound in your choir is to help each individual singer understand some of the most common singing problems and to familiarize them with the series of ways to warm up even outside of the choral classroom. Working at the Hawken School, I have been fortunate to teach a class called Vocal Performance, where middle school students have an opportunity to dive deeper in the practices of vocal music making. In the beginning of the class, students research a topic that I select relating to some of the most common problems for young singers. The students research their given topic and return prepared to lead a discussion surrounding the problem and related solutions. This list of common problems, listed in order of what I have found most common to least, includes poor confidence, poor breathing techniques, poor posture, difficulty navigating register transitions or accessing parts of their voice range, poor articulation and diction, vocal abuse, and poor tone quality.

Before providing a list of solutions that I find hopeful, I encourage the students to share their findings, to practice some of their solutions, and to rate the level of efficiency in their opinion. Because vocalists learn how to adjust their sound and navigate their instrument based on feeling and experience, some of the most effective methods are discovered by the students. After

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hearing some of the things they come up with, I guide them through a three-step warmup method that first warms up their minds, provides practice time to move their bodies and navigate their voices in an appropriate way for singing, and finally, briefly reminds them of the styles, harmonies, or tones we will use in selected repertoire. I often encourage students to lead warmups within these categories during class time, which gives them a sense of ownership. This ownership also motivates them to use some of these strategies outside of the classroom, where the greatest growth and connections are achieved.

QUESTION #6

Organization/Recruitment:

How do I stay organized when conducting multiple choirs? How do I maintain/recruit students to the choral program?



CAROLYN GROSS

Be as meticulous as you have it in yourself to be. There is *a lot* of organizational work involved with having a choir program. Use the resources of parent and student volunteers to help do some tasks that you can delegate. Send out a call early in the year for parent volunteers to help with different tasks. Assign two choir managers for each choral group to help with organization so you are freed up to do the teaching.

For recruiting new singers, reach out to other schools in your district. Have a *great* relationship of respect with your feeder school's music teachers. You can invite your feeder choirs to be special guests at one of your concerts, invite them to visit your school on a field trip and have a rehearsal with your top choir, host a choir lock-in for younger kids with your current students running the show, hold an open/bring-a-friend rehearsal, look in the halls for student leaders and approach them, ask your current students to suggest names of kids that would be a good fit for your program the possibilities are endless, but you have to be willing to reach out.



JOSEPH KEMPER

First and foremost, your best recruiting tool is your students. If students love their choral experience, they will recruit without you even having to ask. That being said, don't forget to ask!

Second, by programming music that is diverse in message, genre, time-period, and culture, you will create a musical environment that is more interesting and more welcoming to a diverse body of students. It is important to program music that both reflects your student body as well as provides windows into different cultures and musical traditions that they may have never experienced.

Another strategy that worked magic was a little bit of competition. One of my favorite lines is "All's fair in love and recruitment!" And what better way to inspire your students to recruit than to create a friendly competition with points and rewards. For each person a student recruited, that student got a point (which was recorded with the submission of a "recruitment form" that included the recruit's name, student ID #, signature, and name of the student who recruited them—just a small 1/3 sheet of paper print-out will do). The rewards system was multi-layered and can be easily adapted and changed. The student with most points won a gift card (which was donated from a local business), all students who submitted even one point were

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—Joseph Kemper

entered into a raffle with several drawings for additional rewards, and the class with the highest ratio of recruit points to the number of students in that class got a class reward, like watching a movie in class. By setting those tiny incentives in place, a huge amount of recruiting

energy was shared among the entire program. Another helpful tip is to occasionally print out and post the current competition standings so students can see which classes are currently in the lead.



JASON LEIGH

I feel very strongly about this because it gets to the beating heart behind a program. Most great organizations are run by people who are not afraid to hustle. It is absolutely true that once you have had a program up and running for years, your program can become its own best recruiting tool. But when you are just starting out, you are going to need to hustle. By this I mean you need to put yourself out there. Hopefully that will feel natural to you but if it does not, you will need to quickly get over that. In my middle school, many years into my career, I am still in the hallways in between classes meeting students and getting to know the students I have never met before. This is the choir director version of a cold call in sales. The so-called choir kids are going to find you, and you can certainly enlist them to find others. However, there are numerous students walking around your building who have never been approached about doing something outside their comfort zone. A friendly conversation with you, followed by an invitation to attend a rehearsal, may be what the student needs to become a part of your program. Some of my best students began as quiet members of my general music class or simply had a series of chats with me at their lunch table prior to coming aboard.

Once you have students interested in your program you can decide how you want to structure it. Many times your building schedule will determine what type of choirs you are able to run. For instance, in my situation, we are able to meet with at least one grade level during school. That is always helpful because it is built into their day. Beyond that, I think it makes sense to have a choir for everyone, and that might be your all-purpose concert choir. Call it what you like, but it would be a non-auditioned choir. If you are willing to go further, perhaps begin a smaller auditioned choir that will allow you to branch off into more challenging

material. Of course, all of the organizational stuff is academic if you are not the engine that drives the excitement in singers to want to be a part of your program. And just like your classroom, you must provide a safe place where young singers can learn without judgment, hopefully feel at home with a group of like-minded students, and achieve results beyond what they previously imagined. In any school, students will always be drawn to a program whose director clearly cares about their welfare and who is invested in helping the group achieve excellence.



JELANI WATKINS

The overall process of recruitment for choral ensembles directly correlates to the expression of four categories of pride. Initially, it is most important that you foster an environment where students have a level of pride for the ensemble. A music instructor must make the process of creating music in the ensemble fun and exciting. When singers have a high level of pride for their ensemble, they are more likely to invite other singers in the school to join the ensemble. They are also more likely to invite other members of the community to attend concerts and performances outside of the school day.

The next level of pride stems from parental pride. Parents must enjoy attending concerts, not only because their child is involved, but also because they genuinely appreciate the level of musicianship displayed in a performance. When parents appreciate an ensemble, they are more likely to share that information with other parents in the community. More importantly, they are more likely to attribute a higher level of academic value to the function of the music classroom. Several community ensembles take a hit in student retention as students get older because parents view work done in music ensembles as a distraction from more valuable work that can be completed in the STEM subjects.

The third level of pride is controlled by the teacher. A teacher who has a high level of pride for their choir program is more likely to share information about the ensemble with administrators, post videos about the ensemble on the appropriate social media platforms,

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and bring a level of enthusiasm that encourages more pride and excitement from the singers within the ensemble. The fourth level of pride relates to members in the community. Educators must work with outside organizations to connect their students with individuals within the community that they may never have been exposed to outside of the ensemble. This community engagement serves as perhaps the largest network supporting your choral program.

QUESTION #7

Silver Linings and COVID-19:

What lessons have you learned from teaching during the pandemic? Is there anything you adapted that you will keep as we move forward? What advice would you give to a new choral teacher navigating social distancing and unfamiliar technology?



DEANNA JOSEPH

I've learned that my students are capable of learning music independently, which is a real game changer for me. One thing that I may keep going forward is giving the students weekly assignments where they record themselves singing part of a piece a capella and submit it for grading. It encourages practice outside of regular rehearsal...which is what we all want!

My advice for a new choral teacher who is navigating social distancing and unfamiliar technology is take it one step at a time. Many of us in the field were completely overwhelmed when we were first thrown into the fire with virtual everything in March of 2020, but we've all learned new skills and have adapted to the changes. Trust that you will too. And if you can get a jump on planning and learning the technology before you start, you will start the semester well prepared and ready for anything.



JACKSON HILL

Musically, I have gained a lot by spreading out my choirs this year. They have developed greater independence, I have a better understanding of their individual voices, and they have been challenged to listen more critically than before. Even as safety precautions are relaxed, I will continue to use distancing as a tool to help my students improve. That being said, I would recommend gauging your ensemble's comfort level with singing before spreading them apart. If they begin the year already feeling self-conscious about their voices, taking away the support of proximity too soon might be a setback.

When dealing with new tech, I think the best thing is always to get hands-on practice. Find time to just play around with your resource and explore all its features. I've underused my tech's capabilities in the past because I was only focused on learning how to use it for exactly what I needed, which led to me missing out on other helpful features. You can find additional help on YouTube—there is a bevy of tutorials on all subject matter there.



JOSEPH KEMPER

Being fully remote made naturally occurring socialization much more challenging. When watching one virtual choir concert this year, my spouse turned to me and said, "This make me so sad; everyone is all alone just singing by themselves in their own rooms." Even during normal in-person ensemble music making, some students will enter a room, surrounded by others, and still feel isolated and alone. Whether the barrier is a screen or a guarded soul, one of our most important jobs is to create an environment where students can feel safe to take risks and empowered to realize their fullest potential. With one remote choir I led this past year, we began every rehearsal with a community building activity—some very short, some longer. While I will not maintain the same volume of these activities when returning fully in person, I will provide community building opportunities throughout *the entire year*. In the past, I have started the year with large amount of community building, but as we get into the swing of things, our focus gradually would shift to the multitude of others goals we were

seeking to accomplish. The community in a choir will organically build on its own just by existing, but this past year taught me that continued supplemental efforts to build community throughout the year will result in a more tightly bonded ensemble capable of supporting one another to rise to greater heights.

The past year also demonstrated the importance of hearing, assessing, and supporting individual voices. To survive the year, many of us had to rely on individualized modes of assessment, as full group evaluation was not possible over Zoom. One of the most powerful tools I implemented was small-group pods. In pods, each comprising 4–5 musicians, individuals demonstrated their learning of their part by singing for their pod mates and myself, after which I would give feedback on how they could improve. Here are few student reflections on their experience in pods:

“I loved having the opportunity to sing for my classmates and come out of my shell. It was helpful to hear other singers and learn from their mistakes as well as my own.”

“It was a bit stressful for me but in the best way possible. I think that if it weren’t such a stressful event, I probably wouldn’t have been so pushed to do my best.”

“I hope that in the future, pods can continue because this system helped me become a better musician, not only in a group setting, but also as an individual artist.”

I got to know students’ voices much better and was able to keep a pulse on their individual progress in a more meaningful way. Across the board, students expressed that, though intimidating at first, pods helped them grow in their artistry, confidence, and comradery amongst their peers. In the future, I will integrate some iteration of this individualized assessment throughout the year.

There were two crucial elements for pod success. First was to provide a supplemental part track for whatever repertoire on which students were being assessed. This was especially important for less confident musi-

cians. More advanced musicians didn’t need this tool as much, but to create an equitable and accessible environment, I found providing this kind of resource was incredibly helpful in supporting and achieving broad student success. Second was to create a healthy and supportive environment. For pods, I had five guiding rules: come prepared, make mistakes, try hard, support your neighbor, and be together. Students want to grow, and when set up in the right way and adapted for the needs of each unique ensemble, individual assessment can yield transformative opportunities for students and ensembles.



JASON LEIGH

Without question, the pandemic threw my routine into total disarray. There is no question that it affected my choral program and, to be honest, those effects will likely ripple into the future. With that said, there are certainly silver linings. For one, my overall philosophy of creating a choir culture around basic principles of striving for quality while maintaining a family atmosphere appears to be sturdy. The pandemic certainly put a stress on that sense of community, but I haven’t changed the way I feel about what a healthy choral community is capable of.

Long term, my recent integration of technology with my teaching is here to stay. This is probably true of all of us. Surely we all want to be physically with our groups, but once I got the hang of newer pieces of software, I was able to create more efficiency in my teaching and offer more as a result. While I recognize the pandemic was traumatizing for all of us in a variety of ways, in a sense it served as an extreme form of professional development. I considered myself technologically proficient prior to the pandemic but, honestly, looking back I can say that I didn’t know how much knowledge I really needed to gain. That forced evolution is something that I am oddly grateful for. Something positive had to come from this time in our lives. For me, I know I will be able to rebuild certain elements of my program, but I’m not sure if I would have made the time to commit to teaching myself some

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of the newer technologies that our regular routines so often conspire to keep us from. In my community, I keep telling our parents and my colleagues that this pandemic has presented our public school systems with a massive upgrade to our operating systems; like their phones. That kind of rapid, institutional change rarely happens in most professions. It happened in ours, and I am grateful.



EMILY MERCADO

I decided to take a chance and contact a few of my favorite composers to see if they would be willing to Zoom with our choir. This last year, I programmed music by Elizabeth Alexander, Brittney Boykin, Rosephanye Powell, and Zanaida Robles, and they each zoomed into a rehearsal to discuss their music and share their stories. With their permission, I edited down those Zoom talks to serve as an introduction to each of their pieces for our virtual choir performances. These zoom talks were especially inspiring for the students. At the end of the semester one student wrote in her evaluation, “The fact we were able to talk to the composers of each piece was an incredible opportunity and brought memories I will carry with me throughout my music career.” Although I want to return to full in-person rehearsals and live performances; in the future, I plan to program more music by living composers, invite composers to speak with the choir, and request additional funds from my university to pay the composers to visit us in person or virtually.



LULU MWANGI

Virtual learning has provided an opportunity for students to be able to better self-assess, work for individual mastery of technique and repertoire, and build confidence. The students have taken a more intentional approach to practicing and learning music because their recordings are so transparent. They have become more critical listeners and have come to understand more deeply the

concept of quality practice. It’s been evident in the improved quality of their performances in the recordings.

As students are learning their music for virtual performance recordings, I usually have them record and submit practice recordings halfway through the learning process. I then ask them to do a reflection on their work and I provide them with mine as well. Then we compare notes and the students know what to work toward as they finish learning the song. This is something I will carry on into next year.

The strength, resilience, and adaptability of the human spirit is evident in how our students have taken on this new normal. Not every day is perfect, but we press on, one day at a time.

—Lulu Mwangi

Another valuable lesson I learned is that we teach amazing young minds that are willing to adapt to change, and as a teacher, it’s important for me to do my best to be flexible as well. That being said, there have been so many new resources being released for online learning, that it has been crucial for me to be selective and to pace myself so as not to be bogged down by and abundance of tools that are not being used efficiently. Quality over quantity.

The strength, resilience, and adaptability of the human spirit is evident in how our students have taken on this new normal. Not every day is perfect, but we press on, one day at a time. We are choosing progress over perfection, process over product, grace, kindness, and all virtues that will help to preserve a genuine love for music, and hope for a better tomorrow.




JELANI WATKINS

In the midst of the challenging circumstances each teacher and student has had to face this year, we have found a surplus of untapped potential within our students. I believe this

potential is not new, but something that was more easily discoverable due to our exposed limitations as educators. One day, a class that ended at 1:00PM negatively impacted my arrival time to my 1:20PM class on a separate campus that was more than twenty minutes away. When I arrived ten minutes after the scheduled start time, I found my seventh-grade chorus rehearsal led by one student, with all of the remote learning equipment already set up by another student. Once the student finished the warm-up, she passed it the baton to me, and we seamlessly continued rehearsal.

I wish I could say that the above scenario was the standard. In our forward-focused, student-centered school, students have always shared voice and choice in repertoire, and they occasionally led sectionals. After this experience, I began to wonder, what more could they do? What more have they wanted to do? Normally, several teachers follow the traditional teaching

model of “I do, we do, you do,” and at times, that is certainly necessary. However, our current environment has demonstrated that it is sometimes possible to just start with “We do,” especially in times when both students and educators are tackling new challenges, both for the first time.

This pedagogical adjustment inspired my colleagues and me to offer our middle school students the opportunity to write, produce, film, edit, and musically arrange this year’s musical. As challenging as it was to allow students to have so much control over the project, it provided a better space for collaboration and unique expression than any pre-existing musical ever could. Out of my limits grew the potential of my students, and that turned my anxieties and fears into a wealth of hope and joy. Our new normal provides a space for students to rise where we as educators fall. That’s something we need so we do *not* return to normalcy. 



MUSICAL MOMENTS WITH PHILIP BRUNELLE

“Musical Moments” was created during the pandemic and introduces choral fans to nearly 300 choral composers.

The roster of names includes composers from the past and present, men and women of many countries who have given us marvelous choral music. I hope you will be inspired to explore this rich list of composers and what they have to offer your choir.

Philip Brunelle, Artistic Director and Founder, VocalEssence
and Organist-Choirmaster, Plymouth Congregational Church

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