The Choir as Garden: A Dynamic, Singer-Centered Approach to Choral Leadership

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T oday's choral educators often prioritize relational goals for singers as they strive to foster positive experiences of belonging, relationship-building, and community. Such goals reflect a person-centered approach that values singers' experiences as much as (or more than) the music they present.

Despite choral leaders' intentions, singers' experiences do not always reflect the relational, person-centered values that leaders espouse. Researchers have identified barriers to singers' positive experiences including requirements that singers mold themselves to a conductor's musical vision and the use of repetitive rehearsal techniques focused on technical perfection.[1] When teacher-conductors prioritize musical results more than singers' experiences, ensemble members can lose positive rewards of group singing that leaders ostensibly intend to foster.

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This article presents a metaphor of the choir as a garden to help educators align their practices with the relational, singer-centered values they often hold. The Garden Model frames teacher-conductors as cultivators of conditions that allow singers to develop and grow. When individuals' varied growth is fostered, singers can be emboldened to function as an interdependent ecosystem that is more than the sum of its parts. The first part of the article situates the model in the context of my own experience as a leader working with a new group.

Uncovering Singers' Understandings: The Puzzle Model

The Garden Model grew from a realization that singers sometimes experience choir as the model's opposite: a limiting, fixed environment focused on the conductor's needs. In a new role with an undergraduate, treble chamber ensemble, I learned that many singers viewed choir as a static space that forced them to adapt to an established structure. While working to uncover singers' perspectives, I came to understand their view as the Puzzle Model. In this view, the choir was a prefabricated jigsaw puzzle, and each singer was a piece required to fit into a fixed space. The Puzzle Model reflected singers' experiences in two arenas: voice parts and holding back their voices.

Voice Parts

In discussing their choral voice part, singers sometimes communicated that their individual vocal identity should be subsumed to the ensemble's needs. Most singers shared that they had no preference for which voice part they sang. In contrast to previous choral settings and those documented by researchers[2] where singers felt quite attached to their voice part, these singers relinquished control over this element of their choral experience to fulfill the larger group's needs. Singers' communication aligned with research by scholars Nana Wolfe-Hill and Patricia O'Toole, who have described how singers disregard their own experience and acquiesce to the desires of the conductor, whom they presume to hold much greater power.[3]

Though singers expressed few preferences, it felt uncomfortable to assign voice parts. The constrained soprano 1, soprano 2, alto 1, or alto 2 slots did not necessarily reflect singers' vocal identity or even their primary vocal range. Rather, the voice part that worked best for singers often reflected their past or potential vocal development, their aural or reading skills, or their confidence in having their voice heard. As conductor Liz Garnett has articulated, voice classification "is as much a dialogue between the individual's experience and habitus to date and the vocal and emotional behaviors encoded within a particular choral tradition as it is an act of objective assessment."[4] Although assignment of voice parts is often helpful and necessary for the ensemble, the process sometimes felt like trying to force puzzle pieces into slightly incompatible spaces. Knowing that approaching voice parts as rigid, fixed categories could unnecessarily constrain singers' identities and vocal growth,[5] I emphasized to singers that voice parts were flexible.

Holding Back Voices

In rehearsals, singers held back their sound, subsuming their individual voices to the group. After speaking with singers individually, several confirmed that they constrained their sound to try to serve the larger ensemble. Some expressed concern that their voice would stick out due to its size, vibrato, or tone quality. Singers also expressed hesitance based on fear of making errors. They articulated insecurities related to singing accurate pitches and rhythms, reading notation accurately, and handling text (a task sometimes made more challenging by learning differences or singers' first language). Sometimes, they hesitated because of general anxiety about having their voice heard. Perhaps because of past experience, singers seemed to perceive the ensemble had fixed expectations that might not accommodate their voice.

A New Model: Choir as Garden

As this ensemble's leader, I critically examined my own practices. Following scholar John D. Perkins's query, "What is written on our choral welcome mats?,"[6] I reflected on how I might have unintentionally perpetuated an idea that our group was a static and limiting
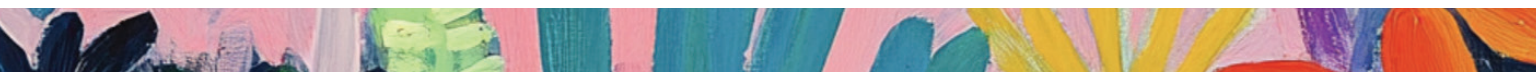
space, and I examined how I might facilitate a more free and welcoming experience for singers. Although some of the singers' concepts of the choir predated my leadership, I determined to remake any habits that perpetuated the Puzzle Model. A new model was needed to move toward a singer-centered approach that clarified the values of the choir, held the conductor accountable for practices aligning with those values, and communicated with singers about the ideas that guided our choral community.

The Garden Model frames the conductor's role as a facilitator of a welcoming environment. Just as horticulturalists cultivate a hospitable environment for plants, choral leaders can create a welcoming space with conditions that encourage growth. The Garden Model also asserts that, like plants, individual singers are different, and the collective environment benefits from expressions of individuality. In biological ecosystems, diversity is a strength. Similarly, in choral environments that value and welcome individuals' varied characteristics, the collective ensemble is primed to thrive. The next section will contextualize the Puzzle and Garden Models by relating them to scholarly discourses about education, choral pedagogy, and tensions in the role of the conductor.

> **"The Garden Model also asserts that, like plants, individual singers are different, and the collective environment benefits from expressions of individuality."**

Context for the Garden Model

The Gardener in Philosophy, Education, and Psychology

Many philosophers, educators, and psychologists have used the metaphor of a gardener to represent person-centered approaches.[7] Philosophers Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau compared teachers to gardeners, suggesting that educators can facilitate students' growth by cultivating a well-tended learning environ-

ment.[8] Philosopher Martin Buber framed educators as either gardeners or sculptors.[9] Those who approach teaching as gardeners help learning unfold naturally; in contrast, Buber wrote, those who approach teaching as sculptors seek to shape students into premade, fixed forms. Psychologist Alison Gopnik applied a similar framework to parenting.[10] Gopnik urged parents to serve as gardeners who nurture children's potential for growth rather than as carpenters who shape children into their fixed vision of "the ideal" adult.

Buber's and Gopnik's concepts of the exacting sculptor and carpenter find their counterparts in traditional, formal conceptions of the choral leader. In formal Western musical training, the conductor engages in solitary score study to craft an ideal vision of a musical product, which they then exhort singers to recreate precisely.[11] This model permeates much of choral ensemble music making. In the ensemble I worked with, singers had internalized this system as the Puzzle Model. They confined their voices in what they perceived as a specific, predetermined approach to ensemble singing. Comparing the choral educator to a gardener offers a different approach, as the conductor leads by recognizing and valuing singers' musical contributions and by creating ample, flexible space for all individuals to grow.

Tensions in the Conductor Role

Scholars have identified elements of choral leadership that reflect both the Puzzle Model and the Garden Model. Researcher Patrick Freer asserted that both performance and pedagogy are part of an optimal music education.[12] Yet, Freer argued, formal musical training can encourage conductors to spend more energy on creating a pristine musical performance than on crafting pedagogy that prioritizes singers' needs.

Other scholars have described tensions between choral leaders' choices to prioritize *product*, *process*, or *people*.[13] Within this framework, conductors emphasize to varying degrees the final musical *product*, the *process* of learning and rehearsing, or the experiences of the *people* in the choral ensemble. These distinctions reflect elements of the Puzzle Model's emphasis on a preformed, static musical *product* and the Garden Model's *process*-based, *person*-centered emphasis on singers' development and growth.

In reality, most pedagogical approaches are not "all or nothing." As Garnett explained, although the strict discipline in Western choral traditions can produce "exclusionary and elitist practices," the same choral traditions reflect a "generally inclusive ethos" that views singing as universal and beneficial to all.[14] Choral educators can work through these tensions, Garnett wrote: "It is possible to negotiate a path through this contradictory ideological landscape without either diluting artistic standards or alienating those one would wish to engage."[15] Critical analysis of one's own pedagogy can help educators develop strategies that align with their inclusive intent.

Negative Effects of Product-Centered Approaches

Although some choral contexts, such as professional ensembles, might unapologetically prioritize a product-centered approach, choral researchers have identified disadvantages of product-centered approaches for singers in a variety of settings.[16] When a group focuses on replicating the conductor's vision of a static musical product, choral singers can regularly feel marginalized or taken for granted.[17] Singers in choral settings have reported feeling judged, evaluated, and excluded as conductors ignore their individuality and treat their voices as cogs in a music-making machine.[18] Though choral leaders might aim to care for singers and their voices as they pursue a refined performance product, they sometimes overtax and fatigue singers in their focused drive toward musical excellence.

Further, conductors' narrow pursuit of technical perfection through repetitive "microrehearsing" and persistent corrections of errors can take the joy out of expressive music making.[19] Leadership approaches built on constant cycles of error correction can not only make singing miserable, they can also devalue singers' agency and neglect to develop singers' independent musical skills.[20] Moreover, competition-based systems for achieving technical excellence can lead to singers being discouraged, excluded, and disenfranchised.[21] Such approaches reflect a view of singers as objects through which to achieve a musical goal rather than as subjects who shape their own growth.

In addition, with a product-focused approach, relationships can suffer. In choral environments where leaders prioritize technical performance standards over the singers' growth and relationship building, singers often experience few positive relational ties to the group and its members.[22] When singers must consistently mold their voices to the conductor's vision of a predetermined musical product, they lose relational benefits that arise from choral singing.

Positive Effects of Person-Centered Approaches

In contrast, researchers suggest that when choral educators cultivate a welcoming environment for all ensemble members, they offer space for singers to feel connected with others as their authentic selves.[23] Approaches to choral singing that are collaborative and person-centered can help singers experience rewards from agency and growth.[24] Scholar Nana Wolfe-Hill used a feminist pedagogical approach to advocate for an "equalization of power," wherein singers share their own knowledge and express their voice through dialogue and community.[25] Choral leaders who facilitate such agency and belonging in choral communities might counteract the unjust marginalization of individuals who have been regularly excluded or minoritized, making the choral environment a more socially positive, humane, and equitable space.[26]

When choral educators intentionally choose approaches that most effectively support singers' experiences, the positive impact can be profound. The following section articulates how the Garden Model can help choral communities realize relational, singer-centered goals.

The Three Values of the Garden Model

The Garden Model's three values serve to foster positive, relational experiences for singers. The first two reflect attention to the value and growth of individual ensemble members: 1) *Every individual helps create the environment*, and 2) *Each voice brings qualities to recognize, nurture, and value*. The third value situates the ensemble as an interconnected ecosystem: 3) *The ensemble is more than the sum of its parts*. The following sections describe each value and its application to rehearsal contexts.
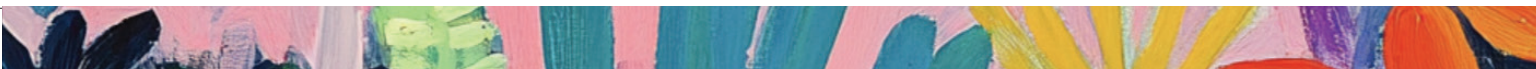
Value 1: Every Individual Helps Create the Environment

In the Garden Model, every individual helps create the environment. Instead of relying on only the choral leader to sculpt a pre-imagined performance, singers actively shape the group and its music making. Four practices can facilitate this goal: a) musical decision making, b) embedded leadership, c) singing away from the printed score, and d) highlighting the individual within the collective.

A.) Musical decision making

If every individual is to create the environment, singers must make musical choices. When singers exercise their skills in musical interpretation, expression, and technique, they grow as individuals and help shape the ensemble. Musical choices within the rehearsal might occur during arranging, improvisation, or other creative activities involving informal learning.[27] According to scholars including Matthew Garrett and Jessica Nápoles et al., invitations into critical thinking at the top levels of Bloom's taxonomy—*analyze*, *evaluate*, and *create*—center singers' contributions and offer singers agency to actively shape music making.[28] In rehearsals, singers might demonstrate critical thinking with gestures showing contour or articulation or by verbalizing ideas about expressive choices.[29] Short writing exercises can prompt singers to articulate goals for a musical passage, summarize a piece's message, or quickly reflect on a rehearsal activity. When they are given space to actively guide music making, each singer shapes the ensemble environment.

B.) Embedded leadership

In many choral organizations, singers serve in formal leadership roles as officers, section leaders, or committee members. Such positions can benefit choral communities by dispersing power held by the conductor and offering singers avenues for ownership. To further facilitate every individual's creation of the environment, all singers can engage in informal, short-term, rotating leadership roles. Each individual might serve as a facilitator of a small-group discussion, or rotating singers might report to the full group after sectional rehearsals to share successes and remaining struggles. Rather than relegating icebreaker activities only to opening days of rehearsals or special events, leaders might engage singers in community-building activities on a regular schedule. Consistent activities that invite singers to share elements of themselves encourage singers to co-create the ensemble based on their strengths.

C.) Singing without the printed score

Rehearsal processes that rely on printed notation as the primary vehicle for music learning require singers to have significant formal musical training. This emphasis creates barriers for singers who have seldom engaged in music with notation and for singers with learning or language differences that make reading notation a greater challenge. Moreover, reliance on the printed score can neglect singers' expressive experiences, a vital element of singing that notation cannot fully represent. In contrast, teaching through oral/aural traditions, away from the printed score, transmits music through singers' entire presence, creating multiple pathways for musical communication.[30] Even if used as a small portion of a group's rehearsal practices, teaching and learning orally/aurally can foster a relational, singer-centered approach by offering a deeper, more direct path to musical expression and by encouraging singers to bring their full selves to the group.

D.) Highlighting the individual within the collective

In performing ensembles, unity is often a central goal, yet singers also benefit from feeling valued as unique, individual contributors.[31] To emphasize that every individual helps create the environment, choral leaders might highlight singers' musical contributions through intentional use of flexible repertoire and arrangements. Adaptable repertoire such as lead sheets, rounds, or improvisational or aleatoric music can spotlight individual singers' soloistic ideas, their abilities as instrumental accompanists, or their decisions about musical form or expression. Singers' own compositions, too, can be highlighted as an element of group singing. Deliberate approaches to repertoire can render singers' individual musicality more visible to the group.

Value 2: Each Voice Brings Qualities to Recognize, Nurture, and Value

In the Garden Model, each voice brings qualities to recognize, nurture, and value. This concept applies to a) singing voices, including singers' tone quality and style, and to b) speaking voices, including singers' intellectual and interpretive contributions.

A.) Singing voices

Because the singing voice is deeply tied to individuals' identities, choral leaders' responses to ensemble members' singing can be especially impactful.[32] Explicit or implied messages about timbre, style, or vocal technique can support or diminish singers' identities.[33] When singers perceive that in the choral environment, the ways they sing outside of choir are devalued, they might hold back their voices, thereby diminishing their strength and individuality.

Through the Garden Model, leaders aim to recognize voices for their uniqueness, appreciating singers' most typical, preferred, or default tone qualities. If, for instance, some singers perform a passage with a more "chesty" or "belted" tone than the musical style typically calls for, the whole choir might experiment with matching that tone quality, then create the opposite quality, a lighter, thinner sound. Next, singers might experiment with a middle ground, incorporating both qualities without judgment of one or the other. Such exercises communicate that all singers are capable of singing in a variety of tone qualities and that all choices of sounds can be viewed positively (provided they are vocally healthy). Finally, singers can weigh in on the tone quality "recipe" they might use for particular passages and pieces. An ecumenical approach to tone quality embraces varied types of singing, honors singers' cultural and musical identities, and recognizes, values, and nurtures each voice in the room.

B.) Speaking voices

The Garden Model approach makes space for each singer's speaking voice by validating singers' verbal contributions. For many choral leaders, leaving time and space for verbal contributions can be a challenge, as their musical training often prioritizes rehearsal efficiency, and singers' verbal contributions are not al-

ways economical in the context of a tightly planned rehearsal. To make room for singers' speaking voices, choral leaders can use three concrete communication strategies.

First, when singers ask questions in rehearsal, leaders can attune to their motivation. For instance, when asked, "Do you want measure 43 *piano*, as marked?" a leader might cast the question not as a factual query about the conductor's wishes but as the singer's constructive musical contribution. Perhaps the singer, bothered that the ensemble did not sing the *piano* they hoped for, offered the most polite expression of their viewpoint they could envision in the rehearsal context. When educators respond to singers' questions as essential, thoughtful musical commentary, regardless of the questions' alignment with their predetermined rehearsal priorities, they recognize, nurture, and value the voices in the room.

Second, leaders might respond to singers' verbal contributions with another question. For instance, "What is your interpretation of that *piano* marking?" or "Can you describe what you are hearing?" After choral leaders recognize that singers want to actively shape the music, they can open up space for them to do so. The ensuing dialogue frequently generates expressive choices that the ensemble embraces.

Third, leaders can recognize that their words communicate, intentionally or not, who has the right and responsibility to make decisions. For instance, regularly using words including "need" or "should" might communicate that only the leader knows the one "right" way to create music. Rather than framing musical feedback as imperatives such as "We need to…," "We should always…," or "Yes, but it's got to be…" leaders might frame feedback as questions: "What happens if we listen for…?" "What might help us…?" or "I wonder what might change if we tried…." Questions that redirect singers' attention encourage sensitivity to the group's sound. When leaders avoid directive commands and instead encourage awareness, they nurture singers' contributions to the ensemble.

Value 3: The Ensemble is More than the Sum of its Parts

The Garden Model's first two values focus on the growth of individuals. The third value articulates that
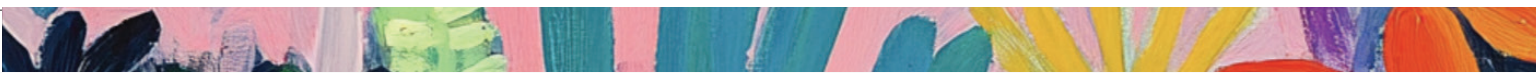
though individual growth is vital, the ensemble is more than the sum of its parts. This third value illuminates how singers function as a greater whole. Interestingly, plant ecosystems' ability to function collectively and interdependently offers a deeper understanding of how choral ensembles can thrive.

Scientists have discovered that plants use complex underground networks to transmit helpful messages to other plants. Through garden soil, tomato plants attacked by pests send biological signals that protect neighboring plants.[34] In forest ecosystems, trees use communication networks to share nutrients and chemical messages that benefit others.[35] Even more remarkably, trees' messages help not just those of the same species, but a variety of trees and plants.[36] That is, plants protect others not simply because they are genetically related but rather because they share the same ecosystem. Gardens and forests act as collective, interdependent superorganisms in which plants share resources, communicate cooperatively, and work in concert to benefit others. In many ways, plants in an ecosystem operate as one.

How do these findings apply to choral ensembles? Researchers have found that groups of singers, too, operate as interdependent superorganisms. Physically, when humans sing together, their breath rates, heart rates, and movements align. Psychologically, singers report powerful experiences of togetherness, synchrony, and oneness during singing. In such moments, many singers feel an intangible connection to something larger than themselves. United in collective experiences, singers can sense that the choir is greater than the sum of its parts and that one singer's experience is connected to the experience of all.[37] The Garden Model's third value encourages the cultivation of space for singers to grow into experiences as an interdependent collective.

Three Values: A Holistic Approach

Taken together, the three Garden Model values encourage a holistic approach to ensemble music making. Values 1 and 2 honor individual singers' strengths and actively uncover their unique contributions. Value 3 articulates how diverse individual strengths can coalesce to form a greater collective. A fertile groundwork based on individual assets supports singers as they grow dynamically into an interdependent whole.

Further, in the Garden Model, singers' diverse strengths coalesce into unity, not conformity. Each distinct individual is cared for simply because they are part of the choral ecosystem, and none is asked to diminish their strengths by aiming to look, think, or act like another. As singers work to unify tone, vowels, diction, dynamics, or phrasing, they attune carefully to all fellow ensemble members, creating community organically as they "learn from, listen to, and feel at one with other singers."[38] In this inclusive, humane, and dynamic model of an ensemble, as scholar Sean Powell wrote, "embracing difference" becomes part of "true solidarity."[39]

Complexities and Challenges

The Garden Model as an approach to choral music making holds inherent challenges. The model prompts choral leaders to reflect on important values and remake ingrained habits. Enacting new practices in this context can feel destabilizing, uncomfortable, or risky. Leaders, along with singers, must cope with the uncertainty involved in reflection and change.

Structural conditions can act as barriers to change. For example, many choral environments are built on competitive selection processes including auditions, scholarships, solo opportunities, and tiered ensemble structures that rank singers against others. By assigning differential value to individual musicians, these selective processes contradict the Garden Model notion that all voices should be recognized, nurtured, and valued equally.

Garden Model values are also challenging to enact when, as in many professional ensembles, the core mission is to exemplify musical perfection. As discussed above, consistently prioritizing conductors' expertise over singers' experiences works against the Garden Model's singer-centered ideals. Yet conductor-focused approaches centered on technical excellence, efficiency, and the leader's predetermined vision might be strongly ingrained in a leader's habits or an institution's traditions, even in educational and community settings where technical perfection is not explicitly articulated as the primary goal.

To make progress toward singer-centered goals, choral leaders might first acknowledge that competition and emphasis on technical perfection, no matter the setting, can diminish singers' positive experiences. Second, leaders can have confidence that their choices matter; person-centered approaches increase singers' positive experiences.[40] Third, leaders can disrupt structural obstacles to singer-centered goals. For instance, leaders might ask questions such as, "What alternatives to competitive, tiered ensemble structures might uphold singer-centered values? How might I more often engage singers' individuality and less often prioritize my own ideas? How might our choral community frame changes not as diminishing conductors' technical control but instead as widening the circle of voices?"[41]

Fourth, leaders can understand that potential paths are multi-layered, not an oppositional binary. Some choral communities might be well served by blended approaches if they build on the needs and assets of those present in the room.[42] For instance, choral educators might aim for an approach that, while not fully democratic, is fully inclusive. An entirely democratic model in which all individuals vote on every decision is rarely practical; however, an inclusive model that invites each singer to shape the community's work is frequently achievable.[43] Leaders using an inclusive approach can communicate that all voices are valued while facilitating and mediating singers' varied contributions. Finally, choral leaders can discuss the Garden Model's complexity with singers, clarifying the group's values and aims. Choral communities can lift up the model's values while simultaneously embracing and grappling with its complexities and challenges.

Conclusion

Rather than framing singers as puzzle pieces in a fixed shape of the leader's design, the Garden Model helps singers' strengths coalesce into an interconnected whole that transcends any one voice. In so doing, the Garden Model's dynamic, singer-centered approach supports the relational values that choral communities often espouse but do not always successfully fulfill. An ecosystem based on individual strengths and collective interdependence encourages the belonging, relationship building, and community that many choral ensembles seek. For choral leaders who articulate relational, singer-centered aims, the model of a choir as a garden can serve a vital purpose in aligning our practices with our values. CJ

NOTES

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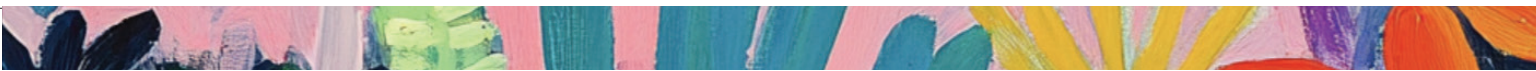
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