

# A Unique Perspective: Directing Chorus at the Perkins School for the Blind

by Arnold Harris

The term “siloes” is often used to reflect the individual, and rather independent, work environment that chorus directors inhabit. It certainly is accurate in describing my own situation as music director of the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts. When I attend conferences such as the 2023 Massachusetts ACDA summer conference, I am always struck by how different my setting is from the other directors I meet. None of my students look at me for any cues, gestures, or any physical manifestation of musical direction, as is completely expected from other choral directors. Even so, there are many aspects of my work with the Perkins Chorus that I feel have much practical use for any chorus director, and I am hopeful some of the techniques and approaches I have used over my thirty-eight years of directing at Perkins can be of use to other directors in their own “silos.”

## **Background**

The Perkins School for the Blind is the oldest school for the blind in the United States. It was founded in 1829 by John Dix Fisher and some other leading Bostonians as the New England Asylum for the Blind. Fisher became interested in the possibilities of educating American blind children after visiting the world’s first school for blind children, L’Institution Nationale des Jeunes Aveugles, in Paris, France.

Perkins has always been completely supportive of the music program—an acknowledgement that skill in music is not sight dependent, and understanding the

many positive educational benefits as well as the great benefits of social and societal integration that participation in music affords. I once took the chorus to sing at the Massachusetts State House at an official inauguration of some state officials. Looking out at the legislators sitting at their very old wooden desks, I realized that these were the same desks, in the same hall, where at some similar event in the 1840s, legislators sat listening to the singing students from Perkins. But that was then, and I want to tell you about what is happening now.

## **Music Programs**

For over forty years, Massachusetts has had laws mandating that all children have a legal right to a free and appropriate public education. The student population at Perkins represents a wide mixture of a variety of physical and intellectual challenges, all in conjunction with varying levels of low vision and blindness. Most of the students participate in some of the wide variety of opportunities our music program offers. These include our performing ensemble groups of beginning and advanced chorus, and handbell or instrumental ensembles. Many also take part in individual lessons on piano, voice, percussion, guitar, or any band or orchestral instrument. If performance training is not appropriate, we have an active music therapy program.

Any student wishing to sing in the advanced chorus that I conduct must be able to sing with accurate pitch both individually and in holding a harmony note. The

audition process, as I will describe, is simple. Before auditioning, I make clear to the students that it is possible that they might not be “ready” for part singing at this point in their musical experience. I ask them to assure me that they would be able to handle that kind of assessment. If they feel that they could only accept “yes,” I won’t continue the audition. This serves a secondary purpose of presenting a scenario that might happen to them later in life, after Perkins, when out in the “real world.” Although my audition is not musically difficult for the student, it is an accurate way for me to determine a student’s pitch accuracy and vocal range. Since virtually none of the students have ever “auditioned” for a chorus, I don’t want to intimidate anyone or set up an anxious situation. If a student was in a chorus before, it was at a much more elementary level than the groups I conduct.

They need not prepare a solo in advance. The audition is composed solely of echoing an easy three-note melody at increasingly higher intervals. Students are asked to sing “la la la la” as I play C D E D C; then D E F E D; E F G F E... I then sing in harmony with them in thirds. This gives me concrete knowledge of their intonation abilities and also helps me determine their vocal range for the chorus’ SATB arranged music. This is all the musical information I need, gained through a non-stressful and hopefully fun musical moment.

### Rehearsals

The techniques I use for introducing music theory concepts in rehearsals can be used by any chorus but are seen here through the lens of a non-sighted chorus. All teaching is done by rote and by the conductor’s voice. All cues for entrances, dynamics, articulations, and all other musical concepts are presented by me. I teach all lyrics by rote repetition, although I often make literary braille copies of the music for the students to read while learning. There exists a format for music in braille, but it is a very sophisticated system and is not practical for use in my setting. Thus, all learning is by rote. While all of these are concerns specific to my chorus, aspects of how I conduct warmups and rehearsals may be applicable to conductors in other settings.

As would be found in any other choral setting, rehearsals start with vocal warmups. However, I spe-

cifically build in explicit musical theory concepts into these vocal exercises. This is important because all my teaching focuses on maximizing the keen aural abilities of the students. I want to connect their excellent musical minds to all their vocal output. For example, one warmup that I use specifically focuses on identifying the intervals of perfect fifths and major and minor thirds. I start by saying, “This warmup will include the first five notes of a major scale,” which I play on the piano, “and will include isolating the perfect fifth between the top and bottom notes of any such phrase,” again played by me.

Starting on C, we sing “la la la la” as I play C D E F G, then I’ll announce “perfect fifth up and down” and play C G C as they sing along. The next step is to play a series of major and minor thirds as aural examples. Then, I ask them to sing, using “la,” C D E F G C, emphasizing the perfect fifth down to the tonic at the end. I will then announce “major chord” and play C E G as they sing, as always, with “la.” Immediately thereafter I call out “minor chord,” and again they sing as I play C E<sup>b</sup> G. This process repeats, singing “la” as I play the same pattern in D<sup>b</sup> Major, D Major, E<sup>b</sup> Major, etc. I have found this to be a very powerful tool to develop “active listening while singing” skills. They need to be thinking about what sounds they are actually producing, rather than just performing the rote physical vocal exercise, creating the connection between their musical minds and their physical singing.

Another time I will do it in reverse, going down from G to C then performing chords downward, “major” G E C and “minor” G E<sup>b</sup> C and continuing upwards, as just detailed. I constantly emphasize the importance of the third above the root in determining modality. I will point out that a major chord is built with a minor third, E G, on top of a major third C E, and the reverse is true for minor chords. This emphasizes the importance of the third in determining modality.

An auxiliary approach to incorporating scale theory into my vocal warmups is teaching how to build chords on each step of a major scale demonstrating and identifying the pattern of chords constructed: major, minor, minor, major, major, minor, diminished, major. Again, starting on C I’ll play, and they will sing a C Major scale (singing la) to establish what I call the “language” of C Major. Then we build and identify the chords of

each step. I identify the chords: “major” - C E G, minor - D F A, minor - E G B continuing through steps 4, 5, 6, 7 and the repetition of C Major. I then repeat the pattern, ascending by half steps singing the appropriate major, minor, or diminished chords up and down.

During these exercises, I continue to interject comments about the crucial importance of the third interval in major and minor modality. I often play a perfect fifth and ask if anyone can identify the modality of the “chord” that is played, with the answer of course being, it’s not a major or minor chord. Then, by playing a major or minor third above the root, it is apparent to their ears that the vital identifier of modality is the major or minor third.

Another approach to combining scale theory into my warmups is by identifying via singing and listening all the intervals from the root up to the next step of a major scale. Again, I always start by playing the scale first, then I’ll announce, “major second” and play C D; “major third” C E; “perfect fourth” C to F..

I also incorporate all the above exercises using minor scales at other times throughout the year. This allows me to introduce the concept of key signatures and of the nature of relative major and minor scales.

As an aside, although during warmups I have the students sing “la” during rehearsals, I will also demonstrate melodies using the “fixed do” system. This is more applicable to my groups, as they begin to identify “do” with any C they encounter, “re” with D, etc.

Exercises such as these combine to challenge and “warm up” both the voice and the brain. They have proven to be invaluable to the students in the chorus, helping them develop their musical theoretical knowledge in active conjunction with the physical act of singing.

### Community Building


Being a member of the Perkins chorus enables the students to participate in and collaborate with many wonderful Boston area groups. Each year my chorus shares a rehearsal/performance with a chorus from a local high school. In addition, we have longstanding musical collaborative relationships with excellent Boston area organizations such as Chorus Pro Musica, Revels, Emmanuel Music, Vocal Revolution (a large

Barbershop chorus), and developing new relationships with Blue Heron, an internationally renowned early music ensemble and students from the Longy School of Music of Bard College. In addition, the chorus has been invited to sing the National Anthem at Boston Garden and Fenway Park before Celtics and Red Sox games! These have been thrilling experiences to sing in front of tens of thousands of people. Watch the chorus sing the National Anthem at a 2010 Boston Celtics game by using the QR code or visiting [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qipRf5\\_\\_ISk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qipRf5__ISk).



I have great respect for, and trust in, the aural and musical skills of my students. I keep those skills in mind in every aspect of choral work, from repertoire choice through rehearsal to performance. Hopefully some of the ideas and techniques I have presented will themselves be of use, or will lead you to create your own active ways to connect their own vocal warmups directly and consciously to music theory—all for the benefit of your ensemble members.

### Conclusion

Let me end with one thought about the uniqueness of working with a blind chorus. Although the presence of an audience adds a natural excitement and focus between ensemble and director in a traditional choral performance, there is no “magic” of director/chorus interaction in my concerts. Once I count off the rhythm, I step aside and have no direct impact or influence on the proceedings. I have no ability to catch an individual’s or a section’s attention if they might be momentarily lost or confused. I enjoy the performances as an “audience member,” although a highly involved one. Every part of the performance has been built in during rehearsals, trusting their musical abilities to shine when they are “out there on their own.” 

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