



# Rehearsal Break

Jennifer Rodgers, editor

## One Text, Many Settings: Helping Students Create Meaning Through Text in the Choir Classroom

by Emily T. Peterson

Inspiring active and analytical listening in the choral classroom allows students to connect to the text in more profound and thoughtful ways. Time restrictions and other educational obligations often discourage choral educators from incorporating listening activities in daily or weekly practice. There are, however, many ways to build intentional listening and critical aural skills that positively impact other aspects of developing musicianship. Accessing the same text in multiple settings is one way students can connect more deeply, explore more personal meaning, and discover how text influences music and performance. The purpose of this article is to provide an intentional listening framework that educators can implement in daily or weekly rehearsals to reinvigorate student's emotional connection to the text. This framework is focused on incorporating varying styles of music in choral rehearsal to engage students and allow them to interact with text through the use of familiar music.

*It was a junior high passing period, and students were busy chatting and socializing in the hall. Suddenly, music started to play, indicating the one-minute tardy warning. Students started darting*

*into classrooms and rushing to get to class on time.*

*"Hello Darkness, my old friend. I've come to talk with you again. Within the vision softly creeping, left its seeds while I was sleeping... People talking without speaking, people hearing without listening...."<sup>1</sup>*

Students were humming and singing the haunting melody as they entered the classroom. Something unique and creative was happening as they experienced the music on their own terms. But, I wondered, had my students ever considered the lyrics, what they could mean, or how they might connect to their own lives? Had any of them ever heard the whole song without the hustle and bustle of students moving to class around them?

In music with lyrics, listeners and performers have the distinct opportunity to use text to guide their musical interpretation. In a choral classroom, however, it can sometimes be easy to tell students what *we think* the words mean instead of asking *them* to draw their own connections and interact with the text.

For centuries, composers have used text to elevate the power of music. Text painting has helped composers draw direct connections between what is happening musically to what the words are trying to portray.<sup>2</sup> Emo-

tional connections are directly drawn between the text and the music to evoke feelings in the listener. Presenting the same text approached from different musical perspectives is a staple of many composers' musical endeavors, as evidenced by the sheer number of songs that are re-recorded by various artists today—a practice that has been common from antiquity in both sacred and secular music.<sup>3</sup>

Encouraging divergent thinking through listening is important and not difficult to incorporate into daily instructional practices. Designing listening experiences for students based on different interpretations of a single text setting is a great introduction to this kind of free thinking. Students interact with the text multiple times while encountering different viewpoints of composers and arrangers from diverse backgrounds. Each composer or arranger's context and interpretation highlights their unique musical contribution, promotes broader inclusivity and understanding, and empowers students to add their own meaning to the text.<sup>4</sup>

The *Sound of Silence* anecdote comes from a moment of realization I had in my classroom and is the impetus for the strategies shared in this article. Students were already drawn to this music, so I decided to create an extended listening lesson based on the piece. Through listening to various versions of the same song and examining the text in isolation, students were enabled to make profound, thoughtful, and creative connections to the song and text. Specificity in listening brought meaningful change to the way students viewed text and influenced their experience beyond the technical process of making music. In this article, I will share the specific strategies that led to these outcomes in hopes that they are generalizable to future practitioners who may create lessons with varied repertoire. Following is an example of how the concept of "one text, many settings" could occur in the classroom.

## Repertoire Selection

In every area of musical study—historic, research, and applied—thoughtful repertoire selection is crucial. This is particularly true when the goal is to actively engage students.<sup>5</sup> In the following listening sequence example, I selected the music specifically because of my school's culture and the students' pre-disposed in-


clination toward *The Sound of Silence*. When choosing repertoire, one should consider authenticity, cultural relevance, and inclusion. The music selected should avoid perpetuating stereotypes or other social, emotional, or societal issues that might impact a student's participation.<sup>6</sup>

It is essential to know your students and their ability level to better guide their commitment to discovering deeper implications of the text. Their age and emotional intelligence is an essential concern when selecting repertoire. Mature students may do well with more complex text, but it is important to consider their emotional capacity to process underlying messages. It is also possible that there will be students who are unable or unwilling to participate in certain musical selections for personal or religious reasons. We must be mindful when selecting repertoire and text to avoid situations where any student is excluded from the meaningful work of uncovering deeper meaning of text through thorough analysis. Flexibility is an important consideration when designing listening sequences.

We may not always fully understand the nuances of our students' lives and personal history. As such, it is important to be vulnerable and open in order to create a classroom environment where students feel comfortable relating to text in a personal way. Inevitably, students will have differing opinions on the meaning of the text, which is ultimately part of the enjoyment of deep listening and analysis. Their differing opinions will help them understand a greater range of interpretation and free them to create their own conclusions about the meaning of the text. Again, creating a respectful and safe environment is essential to ensure that every student can share their opinion and feel valued, despite disagreements with their peers.

## Introductory Listening Lessons and Expectations

Frequently teaching and practicing attentive listening is an essential musical skill. Setting clear expectations for *how* students should listen is an important first step in encouraging them to think critically about what they hear. Teachers should encourage students to listen in silence, saving their comments until the end of the piece. If they need to, students can write down



thoughts as they consider the music so they remember what they want to contribute to the discussion. Listening expectations might also include minimizing distractions outside of talking such as other class work, people entering/exiting the classroom, announcements, or phone usage.

Scaffolding shorter aural activities early in the year helps to build stamina and provides the opportunity for students to practice finding a sense of calm while they listen. To help students process aural input, consider guiding the listening process and encourage them to attend to specific musical facets. For example, I might ask them to focus on different types of instruments they hear, identify the form of the piece, describe the singer's tone quality, or listen for key reoccurring musical material. Providing students with a specific task to identify is a great way to encourage them to attend carefully while giving explicit directives about what careful listening entails. Once students have learned how to listen beyond surface level musical material, they can use those skills to make more informed judgements about the music and further their own musical interpretation.

Additionally, practice providing appropriate feedback. Students may have wonderful musical ideas; however, if they cannot appropriately communicate their thoughts, the meaning is lost. An honest discussion about providing feedback is important before asking students to contribute freely. A teacher might model their vision of appropriate and thoughtful feedback early in the process. Teachers may also offer explicit instruction about expectations for providing feedback, which might be necessary to help guide students through crafting their comments. Incorporating listening lessons at the beginning of the year focused specifically on appropriately responding to music provides the foundation for future listening activities. The majority of time in early listening lessons might be spent discussing how answers such as "this is horrible" or "it's good" are personal judgment responses that don't provide much information for discussion.

Begin with positive comments only, asking students to respond to things they appreciate about the music. Too often, students' natural response is negative, so by insisting on positive comments to start, hopefully they learn to focus on different aspects of the music beyond superficial judgment. Eventually, the conversation can incorporate

negatives, but we spend an abundant amount of time working on how to phrase statements. For example, the statement "this sucks" is not acceptable, but something like, "I disliked this piece because it is unaccompanied and I think it would sound better with instrumental accompaniment," is specific and insightful. Students learn they can disagree about the piece if they can respectfully express that opinion with supporting evidence and thoughtfulness.

### **A Four-Step Model for Intentional Listening**

After establishing a valued and respectful listening culture in the classroom, the real fun of discussing text can happen. The four-part sequence below has been effective in my program. The sessions can be separate or combined and are flexible for the amount of time available to dedicate to the lesson.

#### *Part 1: Expose students to the music on a surface level*

In session one, start the listening activity with a less familiar version of the song to capture the students' attention. Presenting a less common arrangement helps avoid any preconceived notions about the music. It is also a fantastic opportunity for students to hear and experience something they may not seek out on their own. Allow students to experience the music without any other directive. Instead of asking specific guiding questions, it is valuable to simply let students embrace the music and come to their initial conclusions independently.

Listen to the audio alone several times to increase familiarity. Audio recordings provide fewer distractions and stimulating input so students can focus on the act of listening. The first time through, ask students only to listen with no other directives. Before the second listening, approach students with prompts like: What instruments do you hear? How does the music make you feel? Do you recognize the music or does anything seem familiar about it? What is the form? Does anything repeat or capture your attention? What story is the music telling? What is it about? Does it remind you of anything?

After the second listening, ask students to get into small groups and share their experiences. For the sake



of efficiency, it may be helpful for you to partner or group students together. A simple “turn and share” may be equally effective. Ask students to share what they noticed based on your initial questions and be ready to share something about their experience. When they have had enough time to make connections, ask for volunteers to share with the whole class. Allow ample time for students to share and let their ideas expand and grow. Though it may be time intensive, letting students drive the group discussion can lead to valuable connections and learning.

In *The Sound of Silence* example, I played the Pentatonix version of the song for students first.<sup>7</sup> I selected this arrangement knowing that Pentatonix as a group is currently culturally relevant, so it could be a more accessible entry point to an unfamiliar piece. There are many pop-oriented a cappella ensembles that perform exceptional arrangements of familiar repertoire that students are easily able to relate to and may even listen to by choice. With these types of unaccompanied ensembles, students can often make connections between the listening example and their choral music.

## *Part 2: Connect to previous lessons and expand on common themes*

Revisit the text utilizing a new setting. Start by asking students to review what was previously discussed in the first listening. Often it is surprising to find what students do or do not remember from previous listening experiences. The connections that students make can help guide further discussions. When students have sufficiently shared information and ideas, listen to the next example. Let students hear the example more than once to provide ample opportunity for them to formulate thoughtful ideas about the new experience.

Follow the same general process as with the first example. Ask students to only listen the first time without any priming or directives. The second time, ask students guiding questions particularly focused on the text. Can they understand the text better or worse in this recording? What does the text imply or talk about? Does the meaning of the text feel different in a new setting? Continue the process by asking students to discuss with a neighbor, then be ready to share. Instead of verbal sharing, teachers might utilize this point in the process to have students quickly write out their thoughts. Time restraints are a consideration on how students share

their thoughts, though allowing students the opportunity to express their opinions about the new setting and its relevance to the text is critical to the process.

For our second encounter of *The Sound of Silence*, I chose the original version of the song performed and written by Simon and Garfunkel. As the opening vignette suggests, students already had experience with the original piece and had heard it many times without truly considering the music or the text. After hearing the seminal recording, students were able to make interesting connections to the Pentatonix arrangement. Some made surface-level comments about which version they liked better, but others were able to connect to why they had a specific musical preference. Students were generally able to make better arguments for their preferences after listening to more than one version. The original context of the song often changes a lot of student perspectives, so I was intentional about sharing the roots of the song after they already shared their ideas.

## *Part 3: Analyze the text in isolation before connecting to another listening example*

For the next event in the listening sequence, provide a copy of the text to each student. As students silently read through the text, ask them to highlight or underline any words they do not know or questions they have about the content. Encourage students to make connections to their lives, other things they have read, or phrases that stand out to them. Ask them what questions they have about the lyrics and allow them to answer each other's questions. To spark conversation, I find it helpful to give some insight into my personal connection to the text. It is also helpful to give students parameters if they are struggling to share ideas. A more specific series of questions might be: If you were going to share three keywords or phrases from the text, what would they be? What do these words mean to you? How do these words impact the meaning of the song?

As students share, it is important to listen and expand on their ideas. Let them guide the conversation, allowing space to make meaning of the text. Teachers should model creating connections for the students to help them feel safe and comfortable as well as demonstrating what sorts of aspects they might want to consider in the future. Praising students for their contribu-

tions is also critical to encourage future participation. When students share, it should not be about right or wrong answers, but rather about helping them connect their thoughts to others or to the text itself in meaningful ways.

Hopefully, the structure of the lessons and classroom environment will help students feel empowered to share interesting observations about the text. In my experience, many students are surprised to learn that they misunderstood keywords or phrases when they only listened to the music. Reading the lyrics allows them to think about the meaning of the text without a direct aural stimulus. I have also found it helpful to leave questions about the text open ended and let students share what speaks to them instead of reading through the text line by line. By first understanding what students find important, it is then easier to guide them through the story the text is telling.


In *The Sound of Silence*, some students were drawn to the lines, “In restless dreams, I walked alone, narrow streets of cobblestone... and my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light that split the night,” and they were able to connect to the narrator of the song and could visualize the scenario. Other students were drawn to the emphatic statement, “‘Fools’ said I, ‘you do not know, silence like a cancer grows.’” The idea of silence as a cancerous blight that grows and suffocates the narrator of the song resonated deeply with many students. After listening to this input, I guided the discussion back to the lines, “people talking without speaking, people hearing without listening,” facilitating further discussion. To encourage genuine connections between the text and students, I had to be willing to share what these words mean to me and how Paul Simon uses these words to evoke strong emotions in the listener. As mentioned previously, if I ask my students to emotionally relate to the music, it is also my responsibility to demonstrate being vulnerable and share my personal connections to the message of the text.

After the discussion based on text in isolation, to further students’ understanding, it may be helpful to provide them with another arrangement to listen to while they read along with the text. When students read the text and listen at the same time, they can synthesize important concepts. Using *The Sound of Silence* gave me the opportunity to share the version of the song

performed by the heavy metal band Disturbed.<sup>8</sup> This gritty version painted a new picture for students and resounded on a different level for many of them. The raw emotion and rough edges highlighted the importance of the text. As an extra layer to the listening sequence, I showed them the music video for our final listening. The visual aspect provided a stunning new sensory input to digest the music in a way we had not previously explored.

#### *Part 4: Review previous versions and make connections*

As a conclusion to this listening sequence, revisit each interpretation of the text. Students will often be



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able to make more thorough connections if they have had plenty of time to process the works and re-examine them over an extended period. Review clips of each of the versions of the song to refresh student's memories. It may be beneficial to ask a variety of concluding questions about the experience. Asking students to compare the renditions of the song and make a musically informed decision about which one was their favorite can be a concrete way for students to synthesize the entirety of the lesson.

A strategy like "Four Corners" will allow students to share about their preferences in a low-pressure setting. "Four Corners" is a common educational active engagement strategy designed to stimulate conversation, collaboration, and respectful discourse.<sup>9</sup> The flexibility of this particular engagement strategy allows teachers to encourage discussion and involvement from all students in a structured but safe environment. To

implement a "Four Corners" discussion, determine four different labels or aspects of discussion you want students to think critically about. Students move to the corner that most interests them or they agree with the most. Students discuss in their groups knowing they must be willing to share at any moment and need to have respectful arguments to present to the rest of the class at the end of the discussion. I often used the four different listening examples of the same piece as the topic for each of the corners. Students were asked to go to the corner of the listening example they liked best and have a dialogue with their corner group about why they shared that opinion. Then after the allotted time, they presented their determinations to the whole class. One might also label corners with "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree" and select more guiding questions about the repertoire.<sup>10</sup> There are many creative ways you can fit a strategy like "Four Corners" into an active engagement environment to enhance students understanding of the text.

## Suggestions for Extensions

Since multiple musical settings to a single text has been a common practice for centuries, the possible extensions to a sequenced listening lesson on text settings are extensive. In choral arrangements alone there are often several interpretations of the same text. For example, by searching for the keyword "stars" on most major music publication sites, several dozen different choral settings can be found based on the poetry of Sara Teasdale. Another example is *And So It Goes* by Billy Joel.<sup>11</sup> You can use the original version, an arrangement performed by The King's Singers,<sup>12</sup> and a performance by the Virginia Women's Chorus<sup>13</sup> as points of comparison and discussion. YouTube is a great place to find examples. In addition, this text allows students to make emotional connections to a serious song.

Other possible extensions might include asking students to bring in their own playlists as an avenue to pursue deeper connections to text. In asking students to create a deeper understanding of the music and text of their choice, we can also encourage them to further expand their interpretation of the text we present through the repertoire we select.

*The Sound of Silence* vignette shows a logical order for



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sequencing an extended listening example focused on one text in multiple ways. I was impressed and touched by the level of insight and emotion my students were able to bring to the conversations we had about this text. Throughout the year, students continued to request “THE song,” by which they meant the Pentatonix version of *The Sound of Silence*. Since the students cared deeply about the piece, I even included it as part of our spring concert repertoire, allowing the students to find another way to interact and connect to the music.

### Conclusion

Listening to many settings of one text is a valuable and engaging exercise to help students achieve greater musical sensitivity and deeper interpretation. Teachers should craft mindful and creative listening activities to allow students to discover music on their own terms and make meaningful connections to the aesthetic of the art.<sup>14</sup> Thoughtful, student-centric analysis of multiple settings can also garner a sense of inclusivity and diversity in the classroom.<sup>15</sup> Students can develop lifelong creative listening skills and a deep sense of aural musicianship by practicing active listening as part of routine classroom instruction. 

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Sound of Silence*, Electric Version, Spotify, Track 1 on Simon & Garfunkel, *Sounds of Silence*, Columbia Records, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Peter F. Stacey, “Towards the analysis of the relationship of music and text in contemporary composition,” *Contemporary Music Review* 5:1 (1989): 9–27.

<sup>3</sup> J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*. 10th ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Tiger Robinson and Mara E. Culp, “Promoting gender inclusivity in general music: considerations for music listening,” *Journal of General Music Education* 35, no. 1 (2021): 15–22; John Kratus, “Music listening is creative,” *Music Educators Journal* 103, no. 3 (2017): 46–51; William Todd

Anderson, “Mindful music listening instruction increases listening sensitivity and enjoyment,” *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 34, no. 3 (2016): 48–55; Frank M. Diaz, “Mindfulness, attention, and flow during music listening: an empirical investigation,” *Psychology of Music* 41, no. 1 (2011): 42–58; Erik Johnson, “Developing listening skills through peer interaction,” *Music Educators Journal* 98, no. 2 (2011): 49–54.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Crane, “Hunting Choral Treasure: How Conductors Find New Repertoire,” *Choral Journal* 59, no. 4 (2018): 42–47; Caron Daley, “Operationalizing your diversity goals through repertoire selection,” *Choral Journal* 62, no. 7 (March/April 2022): 57–58; Karen Howard, “The impact of dysconscious racism and ethical caring on choral repertoire,” *Music Education Research* 24, no. 3 (2022): 340–49.

<sup>6</sup> Tiffany Walker, “Addressing Contextual Information in Multicultural Choral Repertoire,” *Choral Journal* 61, no. 4 (2020): 57–62.

<sup>7</sup> *The Sound of Silence*, Spotify, Track 1 on single Pentatonix, *The Sound of Silence*, RCA Records, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> *The Sound of Silence*, Track 11 on Disturbed, *Immortalized*, Reprise Records, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Teach Britannica, “Four Corners.” Accessed March 4, 2025. <https://teachbritannica.com/instructional-strategy/four-corners/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *And So It Goes*, Track 10 on Billy Joel, *Storm Front*, Columbia Records, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> *And So It Goes*, arr. Bob Chilcott, Track 5, Disc 1 on The King’s Singers, *Gold*, Signum Records, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Women’s Chorus, *And So It Goes*, arr. Kirby Shaw, performed Spring 2016, YouTube, 4:34, [https://youtu.be/oBH5rN-Zt74?si=RRQXUz5jiF\\_tfjR](https://youtu.be/oBH5rN-Zt74?si=RRQXUz5jiF_tfjR).

<sup>14</sup> William Todd Anderson, “Mindful music listening instruction increases listening sensitivity and enjoyment,” *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 34, no. 3 (2016): 48–55.

<sup>15</sup> Tiger Robinson and Mara E. Culp, “Promoting gender inclusivity in general music.”