

# Research Report

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## **From Principle to Practice: Woman-to-Woman Mentorship in Choral Conducting**

by Kaitlin DeSpain

Gender inequities in choral conducting have been well documented, with numerous studies and organizational reports demonstrating that women remain underrepresented as choral conductors.<sup>1</sup> Recent data from the College Music Society indicates that the percentage of women choral conductors in higher education has declined over the past fifteen years, from 32.95% in 2006 to 25.9% in 2020.<sup>2</sup> This disparity persists despite the fact that women comprise roughly half of undergraduate and graduate music degree recipients and earn doctoral degrees in choral conducting at rates exceeding those of men.<sup>3</sup> Patterns of participation further suggest that gender inequity in choral conducting is unevenly distributed across professional contexts. A 2017 Chorus America report found that men disproportionately lead community, school, volunteer, religious, and professional choruses, while women are more frequently represented in children's choruses.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Stohlmann observed that women choral conductors are more prevalent at the elementary, middle, and high school levels than in collegiate positions.<sup>5</sup> These findings suggest that the gender gap lies not at the point of entry into the field but rather in access to advancement, visibility, and leadership.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the question now is not whether inequity exists in choral conducting but how the profession might address this persistent imbalance.

Mentorship is among solutions most frequently cited

in the literature; however, discussions often stop at the level of principle, offering general endorsement without detailing how mentorship is enacted in practice. Scholars and professional organizations often identify mentorship as a critical pathway for addressing gender disparities in conducting, yet few explore specific or effective mentorship strategies. Even fewer studies specify woman-to-woman mentorship as a distinct practice worthy of investigation. This lack of specificity limits the field's ability to understand how mentorship functions and how mentorship might meaningfully support women's advancement. A synthesis of existing research is needed to move discussions of mentorship beyond aspiration and toward intentional practice. To that end, the following article examines existing scholarship across three areas: access and pathways to professional advancement for women in choral conducting; the structural barriers that shape those pathways; and the role of woman-to-woman mentorship as an equity-oriented strategy.

### **Access and Pathways to Professional Advancement**

Although women enter the choral music field in numbers equal to or greater than men, their opportunities for professional advancement are shaped by uneven access to mentorship, representation, and infor-

mal professional knowledge. Researchers have affirmed the transformative potential of mentorship for women, particularly as a mechanism through which professional norms, expectations, and leadership pathways are transmitted.<sup>7</sup> In her 2023 study about gender inequity in the choral conducting profession, Farquhar-Wulff stated, “most of the interviewees listed previous teachers from their master’s or doctorate programs” as mentors, with some noting that studying with a woman for the first time after previously only having male mentors “made every difference in the world.”<sup>8</sup> This suggests that access to mentors with shared professional and lived experiences can meaningfully influence women’s perceptions of viable leadership trajectories.

This finding underscores the importance of early access to mentors whose professional and lived experiences align with those of their students, particularly within instructional settings. Research indicates that students benefit when they see themselves reflected in their instructors.<sup>9</sup> For example, those from marginalized backgrounds are more likely to persist and succeed when taught by teachers with similar identities and experiences, and women students often perform better under same-gender faculty.<sup>10</sup> Beyond academics, mentoring relationships play a crucial role in student retention, particularly during the vulnerable first year of college, a critical juncture that can influence whether women remain on pathways leading toward advanced study and professional leadership.<sup>11</sup>

Work-life balance further intersects with professional pathways for women in choral conducting by affecting access to time-sensitive opportunities for advancement. Research shows that women’s most critical career-building years often coincide with childbearing years, while men are more likely to gain professional momentum during the same stage.<sup>12</sup> This is particularly pronounced in academia, where the demands of graduate study, the pursuit of terminal degrees, and tenure processes frequently overlap with caregiving responsibilities, constraining women’s ability to pursue professional opportunities, maintain professional visibility, or meet institutional expectations at the same pace as their male peers. As a result, women may delay advancement, modify career goals, or exit leadership pathways altogether.<sup>13</sup>

## **Structural Barriers in the Profession**

Systemic barriers may also narrow professional pathways for women choral conductors and restrict potential opportunities, such as access to particular ensemble types and high-visibility conducting opportunities. For example, researchers have documented the underrepresentation of women among conductors of tenor-bass choirs. In his 2016 survey, Graf reported that some male conductors questioned whether women could effectively connect with or direct tenor-bass ensembles, and suggested they lacked the necessary vocal connection or the social authority to succeed.<sup>14</sup> Similar patterns appear in guest conducting invitations: women are less frequently selected to lead honor choirs, and when invited, are more often assigned to elementary, junior high, or treble choirs rather than tenor-bass or mixed groups. McClean found that between 2000 and 2020, only 23% of all-state mixed choir guest conductors were women.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Nagoski’s analysis of the 2017 ACDA National Conference revealed that just 28% of invited ensembles were conducted by women, and within that group, only 6% directed ensembles classified by Nagoski as “non-conforming.” In this context, “non-conforming” refers to conductors who cross the gendered expectations of their profession, conducting choir types conventionally associated with the opposite gender—i.e., men conducting children’s, youth-treble, or women’s choirs; and women conducting college/university or mixed choirs. In comparison, 26% of invited male conductors led “non-conforming” ensembles.<sup>16</sup>

Extant studies on hiring and evaluation reveal additional layers of gendered bias that shape women’s professional experience in choral conducting. Women conductors are often evaluated through contradictory expectations regarding demeanor across multiple contexts, including student evaluations and peer judgment. They may feel pressure to adopt a more stereotypically masculine façade to be taken seriously, while simultaneously being expected to display stereotypically feminine traits such as warmth, patience, and empathy.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, women who resist the caretaker role are judged harshly by students and colleagues, while those who decline to adopt a stronger persona are dismissed as weak leaders, creating a double bind in which behav-

iors praised in men are penalized in women.<sup>18</sup> Scholarship also notes that women professors frequently receive more negative teaching appraisals on student evaluations than men with comparable qualifications and behaviors.<sup>19</sup>

Women conductors may also experience more scrutiny related to their attire and appearance than male conductors, reflecting gender-normative expectations rather than purely musical or professional criteria. Edwards highlighted ongoing challenges related to attire and professionalism for women conductors, while Bryan noted that young women conductors must be prepared to navigate commentary about appearance throughout their careers.<sup>20</sup> In a dissertation by Stohlmann, one conductor recalled being advised to alter her dress to be taken seriously on the podium.<sup>21</sup> These patterns illustrate how gendered expectations regarding demeanor, authority, and appearance function as structural barriers that affect evaluation and restrict access to opportunities for women in choral conducting.

### **Woman-to-Woman Mentorship**

Mentorship has emerged as a potential mechanism to support women's advancement in choral conducting and confront structural barriers. Research suggests that women often lack access to consistent, high-quality mentorship, contributing to unclear expectations for advancement, limited professional visibility, and feelings of isolation.<sup>22</sup> Woman-to-woman mentorship has been identified as a relevant form of support for navigating these barriers, offering guidance grounded in shared professional experiences and gendered realities.

Although numerous researchers have proposed models of effective mentorship, Deng and Turner note that the "understanding of these models is limited due to the multidisciplinary and fragmented nature of the literature."<sup>23</sup> To address this, they conducted a comprehensive review of quantitative studies examining which mentor characteristics most strongly influence successful mentoring relationships. Their analysis identified five key traits associated with positive outcomes: competence in relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities; commitment and initiative; strong interpersonal skills; a pro-social, other-focused orientation; and an openness to development, exploration, and growth. These

categories offer a useful framework for examining effective mentorship in choral conducting, particularly within the context of women mentoring women.

The first characteristic—competence in context-relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities—refers to a mentor's capacity to draw upon relevant expertise and apply it effectively to a mentee's professional context. In choral conducting, this competence includes not only musical skill and rehearsal technique but also knowledge of institutional structures, professional norms, and career pathways, among others. As such, mentors serve as a source from which women gain access to tacit professional knowledge that is rarely addressed in formal training, including how conducting opportunities are allocated, how professional reputations are formed, and how informal barriers influence professional growth. By understanding these informal systems, mentors can help mentees interpret professional feedback, anticipate obstacles, and make strategic decisions regarding their visibility and career positioning. Women mentors who possess this contextual knowledge may be particularly well positioned to support other women as they navigate gendered barriers related to authority, ensemble assignment, and professional evaluation.<sup>24</sup>

The second characteristic, commitment and initiative, emphasizes the mentor's willingness to invest time, maintain ongoing contact, and actively nurture the relationship over the long term. In choral conducting, this may include ongoing advising across career stages, continued engagement beyond formal educational settings, and proactive efforts to connect mentees with professional opportunities. Such sustained involvement shifts mentorship from reactive guidance to proactive preparation, which is particularly important in a field where professional opportunities often emerge unpredictably because they are tied to job openings, invitations, or short-notice engagements. By encouraging early planning for auditions, applications, and career transitions—and by demystifying professional decision-making processes—mentors help mentees develop the capacity to self-advocate and pursue opportunities intentionally. Over time, this sustained commitment supports autonomy by equipping women conductors to navigate professional systems independently.

Interpersonal competence, the third characteristic identified by Deng and Turner, includes skills like ac-

tive listening, trust-building, clear communication, empathy, and the ability to provide constructive feedback. In choral conducting, these skills are essential for fostering mentoring relationships in which women can openly discuss challenges related to gendered expectations. Within woman-to-woman mentorship, interpersonal competence may involve creating space for candid discussion of sensitive topics common to the field, including authority on the podium, communication style, appearance, and work-life balance. Mentors who listen attentively, ask clarifying questions, and frame feedback within broader professional contexts can help mentees interpret critique accurately and respond strategically, particularly when distinguishing between feedback rooted in musical or pedagogical skill and feedback shaped by expectations of demeanor, authority, or gender conformity. Over time, interpersonal competence supports professional confidence by helping women develop clearer self-assessment and resilient leadership identities.

The fourth characteristic, a pro-social orientation, refers to a mentor's other-focused concern and their genuine investment in a mentee's success and well-being. In choral conducting, this orientation may involve advocating for other women's visibility, sharing opportunities, and contributing to a professional culture that values collaboration over competition. This other-focused orientation is particularly relevant in discussions of equity, as it frames mentorship not as an individual advancement strategy but as a tool for collective progress. In practice, pro-social mentorship may include recommending mentees for guest conducting engagements, clinics, residencies, or leadership roles; sharing professional networks; and advocating for women's inclusion in high-profile professional positions. Such practices counter competitive norms that can limit women's advancement in male-dominated leadership fields by normalizing advocacy and opportunity-sharing as professional responsibilities.

The final characteristic identified by Deng and Turner—openness to development, exploration, and reciprocal growth—reflects a mentor's willingness to engage in mutual learning, curiosity, and the reciprocal exchange of ideas. When applied to choral conducting, this perspective recognizes that mentorship can evolve across career stages and that mentors themselves


continue to learn through engagement with emerging professionals. Openness to reciprocal growth allows mentoring relationships to adapt as mentees gain experience and professional agency, and over time, mentorship may shift from directive guidance toward mutual exchange. This openness enables mentors to remain responsive to changing professional norms, technologies, and institutional contexts, reinforcing mentorship as an ongoing professional practice rather than a fixed role and supporting continuity across generations of women conductors.

Together, these five characteristics provide a useful framework for understanding effective mentor relationships in choral conducting. Applied specifically to woman-to-woman mentorship, Deng and Turner's framework clarifies how mentorship can function as more than encouragement or informal advice, serving instead as a mechanism through which women gain access to professional knowledge, navigate structural constraints, and build agency within the field.

Mentorship alone cannot resolve systemic inequities; however, research suggests that mentorship may serve as an equity-oriented strategy when supported by intentional structures and sustained engagement. By clarifying some of the characteristics of effective mentorship, choral leaders can become better positioned to design and implement mentorship practices that support equitable pathways for women conductors.

## Summary

Despite decades of scholarship documenting gender inequity in choral conducting, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles across educational and professional contexts. To address these inequities, continued synthesis and dissemination of research remain essential. This research review examines how mentorship functions within existing structural and cultural constraints. In doing so, this review clarifies the role of woman-to-woman mentorship as a critical need rather than an assumed good. As Kay Hoke wrote in her discussion on the gender gap in higher education, "the goal of redefining patterns and adopting a new ideology of work in the public sphere is unlikely to happen as soon as it should; therefore, the issue...is what we can do to help other women bridge the gender gap in the meantime."<sup>25</sup> Clarifying the characteristics and func-

tions of woman-to-woman mentorship represents one way the field can move discussions of mentorship beyond aspiration and toward intentional practice in choral conducting. 

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## NOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> Margaret Stohlmann, “A Brotherhood with One Sister: A Collective Case Study of Women Conductors of Collegiate Men’s Choirs” (DMA dissertation, University of Washington, 2018), iii.
- <sup>4</sup> Roland J Kushner, *Choral Conductors Today: An Updated Report—A Comparison of 2017 and 2005 Findings* (Chorus America, 2017), 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Stohlmann, “A Brotherhood,” iii.
- <sup>6</sup> Higher Education Arts Data Services, *Music Data Summaries 2019–2020* (Reston, VA, 2020), <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/07/M-2019-2020-HEADS-Data-Summaries.pdf>.
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- <sup>8</sup> Farquhar-Wulff, “Discounting Our Colleagues,” 15.
- <sup>9</sup> Cole Burger, “Demographics of Instructors of Selected First-Year Undergraduate Music Courses,” College Music Symposium, <https://symposium.music.org/current-issue/item/11640-demographics-of-instructors.html>.
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- <sup>15</sup> William McClean, “Representation in Choral Music: An Examination of Choral Literature Performed by All-State Mixed Choirs 2000–2020,” *Choral Journal* 63, no. 8 (May 2023): 27.
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