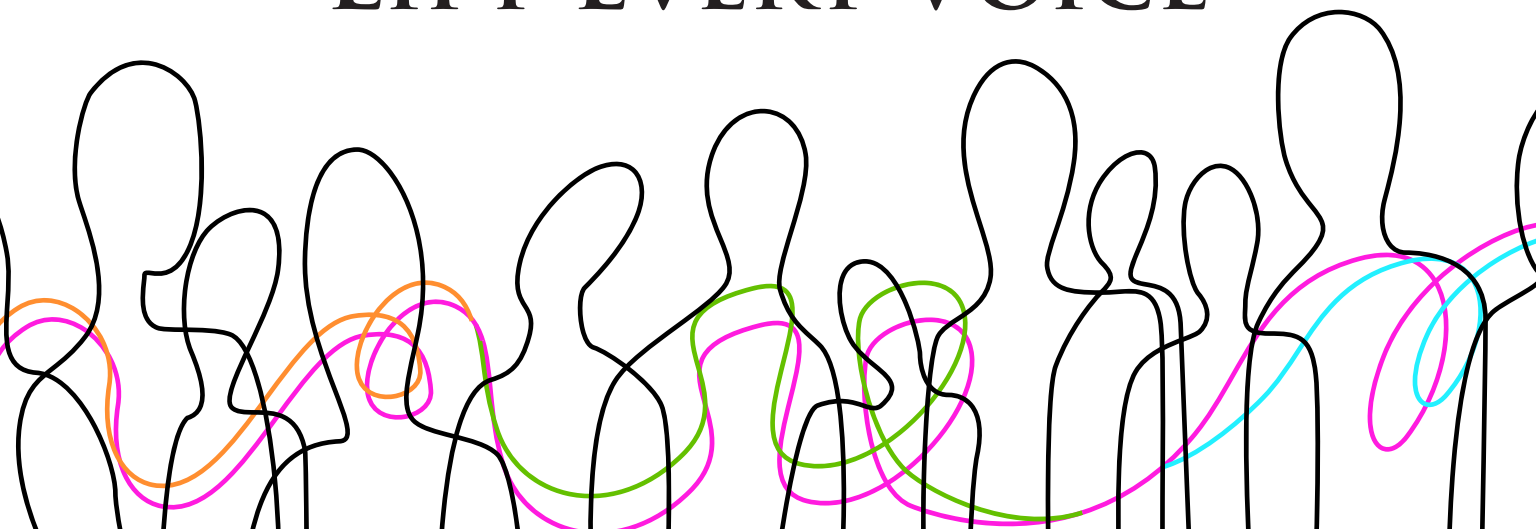


LIFT EVERY VOICE



Accessible and Beautiful: Reflections from Our 2023 ACDA National Conference Insight Session

by Edryn J. Coleman

When we were invited to present an insight choir session at the 2023 National Conference, I knew it was an incredible opportunity to showcase the hard work of our students and the diversity of our choral program within the overall school community at Oakland Mills High School in Columbia, Maryland. Our choir reflects a rich tapestry of backgrounds and cultures and embodied the 2023 Conference theme, “A Place of Belonging.”

The Oakland Mills community is among the most diverse school communities within the Howard County, Maryland, Public School System with 80% minority enrollment: 44.4% Black, 20.8% Hispanic, 19.7% White, 7.2% Asian, and 7.7% two or more races. The ethnic percentages of the singers reflect the diversity of our school and the community at large. Our singers are Christian, Muslim, atheist, and open members of the LGBTQIA+ community. At a time when people who felt unseen were given a voice, I felt strongly that the timing was right and that our choral program was the physical manifestation of the conference theme through our collaboration and representation.

Through perseverance and dedication, our students demonstrated that *every* choir, regardless of perceived obstacles, has a place at ACDA. Their success is a pow-

erful reminder that diversity in choral music is not just important—it is essential. This experience reinforced my belief that all choirs have something valuable to offer. My hope in documenting this journey is to inspire others to share their own stories and take the challenge to submit a proposal for the next regional or national conference session themselves, thereby engaging with the broader choral community.

Session Structure and Goals

Through a multi-faceted experience that was part reading session, part teaching session, all within the context of an honest conversation, the overall goal of our session was to contribute to our diverse choral community in the following ways:

- 1) Address the need for more accessible SATB/SAB choral music that offers multiple opportunities for building and teaching music skills and an impactful performance experience.
- 2) Address the need for more diverse music composed and arranged by minoritized choral musicians.



3) Address the need to create a place of belonging in the choral space that supports the social and emotional needs of every ensemble member.

Through our session, titled “Accessible and Beautiful: SATB/SAB Music by Minority Composers/Arrangers,” we sought to share with attendees a body of repertoire that may potentially serve them in their teaching contexts. We chose to structure the session in a sequential format for each of the six selections: performance, discussion of the piece, followed by singer perceptions. Each piece was performed by the Oakland Mills singers along with the audience in a reading session-style format.

After singing each selection, I guided session participants through the points of accessibility for teaching, including pedagogical tools and potential challenges. Lastly, the Oakland Mills High School choral students shared their perceptions as they related to belonging in choir through their personal connections to the selected repertoire. These insights sometimes encompassed storytelling that related to engagement with the text, how rehearsing the music brought the singers closer to each other, and specific elements in the process that fostered deeper connection and belonging.

Making a Decision and Navigating Insecurities

Although it may be a daunting task to present a session at a national conference in front of peers, my advice is for everyone to consider adding your voice to the important conversations happening in our profession. So many of us choral musicians have wonderful ideas to share, but the thought of presenting in front of an audience of professional colleagues can be intimidating. And indeed, it can be. However, there are so many important messages for all of us to share with one another in the spirit of uplifting the profession and engaging meaningfully with our beloved choral art. Although it was a risk I undertook with trepidation, my students and I are so much richer for it.

When structured carefully, I believe that the choral rehearsal is a magical, experimental place where relationships of trust are formed between conductor and

choir. For me, being in the classroom with students while working together and finding what techniques work best for our ensemble is a fun and enjoyable process. It is in these spaces where we discover those “tricks that click” that develop and become defined across time. Teachers and students in the classroom are all learning together, every day. I have always enjoyed the rehearsal process just as much (and sometimes more) than the actual performance. Therefore, the opportunity to present the insight choir session was well suited for my musical goals. It was neither exclusively an interest session nor concert performance but the melding of both.

Making the decision to present this session came with a plethora of human emotions and insecurities. “Am I smart enough to talk to a room full of choral colleagues?” “Are we good enough to sing in a room of other choral conductors at ACDA?” And generally, “Am I doing this right?”

There have been times at ACDA conferences when I have witnessed other teachers commenting about not feeling a sense of belonging or even feeling welcomed at all. The content of many of these comments are the challenges in some schools’ finances, not being able to afford the experience of singing at a conference, and comments expressing that the sound or style of their specific ensemble would not be seen as “ACDA-worthy.” Comments like those sadden me, although I, too, have felt that way. This session was intended for all of those unheard and marginalized voices who felt as if their choir didn’t belong at ACDA! Insecurities need not necessitate inaction. As the saying goes, “Anything worth having is worth working for!”

The first thought after deciding that “I am going to do this!” was, “Now, what am I going to do?” That surely sounds comical, but it was true for me. I felt very deeply that my school program was emblematic of the conference theme (“A Place of Belonging”), which was my driving motivator to submit the application. I had to ask myself many hard questions, giving serious thought to what we could offer in this style of session, for example: “What routine(s) or procedures have I infused with my music teaching that yields positive results in our classroom?” I wanted to present a session that would be as impactful, inclusive, and encompassing as the conference theme itself.



Creating a Master Plan

What is it that choral folks need? I was still searching for that innovative “thing” that would benefit every colleague who attended the session. As choirs began to return to in-person rehearsals, many directors personally shared with me that their ensembles had learning gaps and/or were smaller. To me, this was a sound pedagogical reason to look for accessible music. In addition, many conductors and singers alike are looking for more composer/arranger diversity in the music they perform. With those ideas in mind and much soul-searching, I set my sights on a choral reading session using my school choir as the demonstration ensemble. Rather than a reading session in the traditional format, however, I sought something original and innovative. This brought me to the idea of a hybrid reading session with three main goals for each attendee.

- 1) Provide choral colleagues with accessible, voice-specific repertoire for SAB/SATB ensembles that not only provides foundational teaching examples but also provides the singers with a successful and beautiful performance.
- 2) Provide choral colleagues with accessible repertoire that is composed and arranged specifically by persons of color.
- 3) Provide choral colleagues with a live demonstration of students performing the music while showing a community of trust built between teacher and students through student testimonials and real-time responses reflecting their connection to the music during the session.

So, the plan was formed. In our Insight Session, participants would engage in this hybrid session that was part-reading session, part-concert session, with honest and direct conversation with the students. Choir members would share with the audience how they connected with the selected repertoire to find a place of belonging in our school choir by linking their thoughts and feelings to the music performed. Hearing students express what belonging meant to them in relation to being in a choir could provide a pathway for ACDA participants who wanted to remodel or rebuild the sense of belonging in

their own choral communities.

With the plan in place, we submitted the application, and many nervous months later, the acceptance arrived via email. The sheer joy and feelings of accomplishment were real and intense. Our choir and school community were elated. Our students felt celebrated and excited. But, once the initial excitement from being accepted subsided, reality set in. We needed a financial plan, as the trip to Cincinnati was going to be expensive. Additional finances were required for meals, lodging, and transportation, and much more to get us there. There were so many days that I doubted myself. Many days I left school thinking, “What have you done to yourself? What made you think you could be impactful?” Those were the feelings that questioned whether I belonged. I ignored them and kept forging ahead. In my mind I knew that what we presented in our session would serve a greater purpose.

Considering Financial Responsibilities

After setting aside those concerns and insecurities, I immediately began searching for hotels and working to secure the best price for transportation. I knew that a few parents could afford the cost outright, but for many it would be a larger but tenable burden they would struggle to carry. I also knew that other students just would not have the financial means to support this opportunity. This meant we needed to employ some form of fundraising.

I knew that I needed to find lodging at the least expensive hotel. I began to do my research and found an affordable hotel in Kentucky that was a ten-minute bus ride across the bridge from the Cincinnati Convention Center. Success! After booking our rooms, I looked to secure the charter bus. Once all the logistics had been handled for my school system and approved, it was now time to start gathering the funds to pay for everything.

Through public giving, we raised all of the funds required to make this trip a reality. It was difficult to believe we did that within a six-week time frame. What an enormous gift and privilege. Through the generosity of so many people, no student in our choral program had to pay for transportation or lodging. Now we could direct our focus to preparing musically for our Insight Session.

Presenting the Session

Presentation Day came quickly. I knew that my first goal and joy was to thank the many people in the audience who made financial contributions to assist us in making this trip happen. I wanted people to know how appreciative we were for the support we received.

We presented two sessions that day. We had a few hiccups, but the students were actively engaged and dedicated to doing their best. One of the most impactful moments in each Insight Session was when choristers were asked to give their personal testimonials on how they connected to the repertoire and how the repertoire helped to create a place of belonging for them. Students were not coached on their personal reflections or on how they should connect to each song so that discussion could be organic and somewhat spontaneous. They were, however, asked to keep notes about which songs they best connected to and, if they were willing, share those thoughts in the session with the audience in an honest and sincere manner. The students truly felt that was one of their favorite moments. As their teacher, I agreed. The personal element added a layer of meaning that was critically important.

Reflections

Once we returned from our travels, we made time to reflect on the overall experience. The students felt as though they “left their mark on ACDA,” as one student said. They were overwhelmed with audience support

and responses. They were equally proud of themselves. Then I asked them to share their most memorable moment from the session. Without hesitation, they all replied, “The Jason Max Ferdinand Concert!” I was both surprised and excited. After all our personal preparation and performance, I was certain their first thoughts would be to reflect on their own performing experience. The most memorable moment for them, however, was a performance by another ensemble. That made me so proud of them for broadening their experiences in choral listening. Students find their musical inspiration from a myriad of influences.

I hope you consider applying to present at the next regional or national conference. No matter whether sight-reading tools, vocal pedagogy tips, or the blueprint on how to build the best booster program, if you have something to share, trust yourself and be brave! You don’t know what will happen until you try.

Table 1 shows the list of the selections presented in the session with points of accessibility. We hope that your students will have a meaningful experience singing and learning these pieces, as we did. ■

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Table 1: Repertoire Selections Presented in the Session

Title	Composer	Publisher	Voicing	Points of Accessibility (teaching and learning)
JAM!	Tracy Wong	Graphite Publishing	SSA, SAB	<p>Shared unison beginning theme between all voice parts (mm. 1-18)</p> <p>Uncomplicated rhythmic figures throughout the selection</p> <p>Supportive ostinato in the Baritone line (mm. 19-22)</p> <p>Accessible vehicle for singing non-English text</p>



Music of Life	B. E. Boykin	Oxford University Press	SSA, SAB	<p>Fully accompanied to support overall performance with limited vocal ranges</p> <p>Unison beginning theme with all voices at the beginning (mm. 1-8)</p> <p>Individual lines highlight in solo form for solo-sectional singing (mm. 19-20)</p> <p>Accessible method for teaching compound time</p>
O Magnum Mysterium	Evan Ramos	Carl Fisher/ BriLee Music Publishing	SATB, SSA, SAB, TTB	<p>Unison beginning pitch for entire ensemble to start sections with limited vocal ranges</p> <p>Homorhythmic movement with pulse-driven uncomplicated rhythmic figures throughout</p> <p>Accessible vehicle for singing non-English text and pure vowels</p> <p>Largely diatonic allowing for solfege use in learning</p>
Sing Out, My Soul!	Marques L. A. Garrett	Beckenhorst Press	SATB, SSA	<p>Fully accompanied to support overall performance</p> <p>Unison singing of the main theme shared across all sections and call-and-response of the theme between upper and lower voices (mm. 16-28, 40-44)</p> <p>Homorhythmic movement with pulse-driven uncomplicated rhythmic figures</p>
TaReKiTa	Reena Esmail	Oxford University Press	SATB, SSAA, TTBB	<p>Unison beginning pitch for the entire ensemble with uncomplicated rhythmic figures throughout</p> <p>Unison shared theme between dual voices (mm. 17-30) in addition to being an accessible</p> <p>Onomatopoeic text syllables provide an accessible avenue for performing non- English text</p>
The Word Was God	Rosephanye Powell	Gentry Publications	SATB, SATB-divisi, SSAA, TB/TTB/TTBB	<p>Written with optional accompaniment and limited vocal ranges</p> <p>Shared homorhythmic movement shared between soprano/alto and tenor bass voices throughout</p> <p>Pulse-driven rhythmic figures with strong ostinato figures shared with all voices throughout the selection</p>