

Repertoire & Resources

Children's Choirs



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Children's and Community Youth Choir Directors' Retreat

by Joy Hirokawa and
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The biannual Children's and Community Youth Choir Directors' Retreat has become the go-to professional development opportunity for those who work with young singers, and the recently completed retreat in Atlanta was no exception. The Retreat was started in 2010 by Robyn Lana, then ACDA's R&R Chair for Children & Community Youth Choirs. Robyn recalls:

With a great team of regional chairs at the national conference in 2009, we held a focused discussion on how ACDA could better serve our children and community youth membership. Many were hoping for more focused sessions relating to children's choral singing. Others recognized the importance of having those of us working with youth inter-



RISE Chorale perform at the 2020 ACDA Children's Choir Conductors' Retreat.
Photo by Dan Biggerstaff Photography

acting with conductors of all aged ensembles. We realized we needed a special event, held in opposite years of the national conference, and not so cost prohibitive that it would deter members from attending regional conferences. Thus, the Retreat was born.

Cheryl Dupont continued the tradition and is to be particularly commended for deftly navigating planning for the 2018 Retreat in Houston, held just months following Hurricane Harvey. She notes the importance of the event, saying:

Our community is vibrant and talented. The Retreats provide great opportunities for making and deepening friendships, and promoting networking, collaboration and sharing. Every session relates to what we do, and so many talented artist/teachers contribute their time and talents on behalf of our community.

Recognizing that there were many approaches to leading children and youth choirs, the founding committee wanted to bring all parties to the table to cross pollinate ideas and "support, inspire, and encourage

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others in their work” (from the Vision Statement for the Retreat). The Retreat’s Mission Statement goes on to say:

The ACDA Children’s Choir Conductor Retreat will create a gathering of directors and teachers committed to supporting the work of colleagues and nurturing conductors/educators new to the children’s choir profession.

The goals developed by the committee are to:

- Collaborate in the spirit of cooperative sharing
- Provide an opportunity to network with conductors across the country
- Offer opportunities for problem solving
- Mentor young conductors and each other

These ideas have guided the planning for every Retreat. Collaboration and collegial support are key elements to the Retreat’s success. Survey results clearly indicate that one of the most valuable aspects of the Retreat is the friendly, open, and welcoming atmosphere, as well as the presenters’ generosity and willingness to share their expertise.

With this philosophical basis, a structure for the Retreat emerged that was flexible and responsive to the needs of the attendees. The Retreat would be held biannually on



Atlanta Young Singers under the direction of Millie Turek. Photo by Dan Biggerstaff Photography



The Performing Choir Conductors - Millie Turek, Martha Shaw, Emmy Williams Burch, and guest accompanist, André Thomas. Photo by Dan Biggerstaff Photography

Martin Luther King weekend in even numbered years, as January is generally a quieter month for music educators and a time when they may be seeking fresh inspiration. Ending the Retreat on Sunday allowed time for attendees to return home for special MLK observances on Monday. The registration fee

was kept low to encourage more participation.

This year’s retreat in Atlanta far exceeded expectations in numbers of attendees, with 190 in attendance from thirty-three states and Washington DC. Over ninety were first-time attendees. The retreat hosted four new friends from

Canada, who promised to return with more Canadians in two years. A special acknowledgement goes to Minnetonka, Minnesota, Public Schools, which sent an entire cohort of teachers to the retreat. We had the added bonus of overlapping one day with the Atlanta Chapter of the Chorister's Guild Mid-Winter Workshop on Saturday. Some of our attendees arrived on Friday and attended the Chorister's Guild evening concert, and at least one Chorister's Guild member attended both events, joining the ACDA retreat on Sunday.

The schedule has evolved over

time in response to feedback surveys. Attendees were particularly eager to have more time to exchange ideas with their colleagues. As food is a great way to bring people together, much of this was accomplished in Atlanta not only through longer meal times but also activities such as a welcoming gathering at the hotel bar, roundtable discussions on a focused topic over lunch, breakfast provided as part of the retreat activities, and a post-concert reception.

Interest sessions over the years have touched on a wide variety of topics from pedagogy to organiza-

tion, reading sessions to conducting. Sessions for Atlanta included:

- Susan Brumfield: From Classroom to Chorus Building on the K-5 Foundation
- Pam Burns: Healthy, Beautiful Tone Production in the Children's Choir
- Stefanie Cash: Use of Movement to Enhance Choral Rehearsal and Performance
- Maria Ellis: Ease on Down the Road

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- Sandy Holland: Steps to Musical Independence: Working with young singers.
- Melissa Keylock: No Spandex Required: Yoga Stretches for Your Choirs
- Karol Kimmell: Children's Choir in Sacred spaces
- David Langley: Reflections on Motivation and Retention in New Choirs
- Angee & Rick McKee: Where Do We Begin? Developing Choral Artistry in the Elementary Choir
- Tim Powell: An Introduction to Emerging Digital Publishing Alternatives
- Tim Sharp: Children Make Glorious Music: Music Makes Glorious Children
- Tom Shelton: What are my hands doing??? Conducting for the Elementary Chorus Teacher
- Cuffy Sullivan: A Well-Oiled Machine: tips for (almost) touch-free organizational management
- John Tisbert: Sight Singing Fun with Tiz

The retreat has intentionally rotated around the country to highlight the activity of children and youth choirs in the various ACDA regions, raise awareness within various regions of the work going on in children and youth choirs, highlight



Maria Ellis during her interest session.

strong programs, directors, and clinicians across the country, and learn about regional cultural differences. The Atlanta Retreat highlighted Southern Hospitality (with a capital H!), music that carries a Southern identity, and presenters and composers from the region. Food for the reception featured Southern cuisine, and presenters particularly highlighted their work and programs in Georgia.

In addition to interest sessions, each retreat features children or youth choirs from the hosting region on a Saturday evening performance. The performing ensembles for the Atlanta Retreat were invited to intentionally represent choirs along a developmental lifespan. RISE Young Women's Chorale, Savannah, GA (Emily Williams Burch, Director), is only in its fourth year of existence; Atlanta Young Singers (Millie Turek and Paige Matthis, Directors) was established in 1975; and Spivey Hall Children's Choir (Martha Shaw, Director) is in its twenty-fifth anniver-

sary year. In a new addition to the concert program, the performing choirs combined, presenting a thrilling rendition of André Thomas's "I Dream a World," with Dr. Thomas at the piano. This song provided the inspiration for the overall theme of the retreat.

As ACDA Vice President, Dr. Thomas also presented an inspiring closing session that captivated everyone present. In it, he shared some of his personal life story and reminded us of the importance of the work choral directors do with children and the difference choral singing can make in a child's life.

The theme, "Dream a World of Song: Connections, Community, Creative Thought," carried through every aspect of the retreat, intentionally referencing the fact that we were in Atlanta on Martin Luther King weekend. Comments from attendees suggest that the weekend inspired them to connect with those with expertise to share, celebrate their new friends across the country, and think

creatively about possibilities for their choristers:

“The resources that each presenter shared were excellent. I have a fabulous choral reading list now thanks to everyone’s detailed citations. Also, all the attendees were so welcoming and eager to share their experiences and expertise.”

“The group of people at this event was unbelievable. I have made so many wonderful connections and friendships. The presentations were fantastic. I wish I could have seen them all!”

“I’m an ‘old dog’ and learned many new tricks! The connections that I made were incredible and reconnections were wonderful.”

“This retreat had some of the best professional development learning I have experienced in my seven years of teaching music. I gained so many useful tools to bring back to my students!”

“This was one of the most inspiring weekends for me as an educator. To begin, the ‘approachability’ of all presenters, hosts and attendees was unlike many conferences I’ve attended. Being able to sit down with people who were both at the same points in their journeys as well as people just starting and people who have been doing

this for many years was so very important. My team and I left with new ideas, goals and pathways to achieve our goals.”

We would be remiss if we did not profoundly thank Robyn Lana and the original committee for their vision to design an event that so perfectly meets the needs of children and youth choir directors; Cheryl Dupont for her tireless work on multiple retreats; Alex Gartner who was the administrator behind the scenes making everything run smoothly; Tim Sharp for consistently supporting children and youth choirs; the three performing choirs and their directors for their inspiring performance; our fantastic clinicians, reading session conductors, roundtable discussion leaders, student helpers, and presiders for contributing their time and energy; and especially the attendees who carved out time from

their busy, busy schedules to spend the weekend in Atlanta with the goal to improve their practice.

We sincerely hope that, after reading this, you are inspired and wishing you had attended. Please put January 15-16, 2022, on your calendar for the next retreat in Phoenix, Arizona. We look forward to seeing you there! ☐

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