



Repertoire & Resources

It's All About the Singers:

An Interview with Clinton Hardy Ferrie and Philip Brown

by Gretchen Harrison



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Both of you teach in traditional K-12 school situations. What trends are you seeing that support choral music education and performance? Conversely, what trends do you see that could create a barrier for successful choral music education and performance?

Ferrie: I believe that what truly sustains music education in my community are the students, parents,

and community members who value and support it. Across the country, I've witnessed programs face significant cuts, yet whenever the possibility of cuts has been raised in my own district, parents have consistently been among the first to advocate for the continuation of our programs.

I also see the work we do inside our classrooms as essential to this support. By building strong relationships with students and fostering a genuine love for singing, we empower them to share their enthusiasm at home. When parents see the joy and growth their children experience, they are more willing to invest in music education. Ultimately, by creating a safe and welcoming environment and exposing students to a diverse range of music, we help them experience music as it truly is: a universal language that connects and inspires us all.

Brown: I think the trends in choral music education in K-12 schools varies from community to community. Where programs are doing well and thriving, there seem to be several themes happening in those areas. First, positive and supportive relationships between the teacher(s), students, and community are key. Establishing an environment where students feel safe, welcomed, challenged, and know they'll grow as musicians and people. Next, music advocacy is not only the choir teacher's job; music in schools needs to be promoted



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by the administration, school board, and surrounding community. The third biggest factor for the choir teacher is selecting repertoire. Teaching goes beyond just notes and rhythms; selections should be timely, age appropriate, and challenging yet accessible.

Conversely, there are a few concerning trends that are impacting choral music programs. First, we are in the era of MORE—more class options, more electives, more graduation requirements... just more. That limits the opportunities for students to take arts classes. Second, school budgets being given to music programs have not caught up with the inflation of music costs the past ten to fifteen years. Many districts are taking away resources and lowering budgets, making it more challenging to update/modernize the choral music classroom.

When looking for repertoire, how do you differentiate between “singer focused” and “teacher focused” repertoire? Is there a difference?

Ferrie: Absolutely. As a mentor for multiple teachers in my state, I cannot count the number of times I have heard someone say they chose a piece simply because they loved it or because they sang it during their own school years. While personal connection to the music is valuable, our own preferences should not dictate repertoire choices for our choirs.

Selecting music that is too difficult can set students up for frustration and a performance that falls short of its potential. On the other hand, programming something overly simple may become tedious for the ensemble and result in disengagement. The key lies in balance. Effective repertoire selection should be rooted in the needs, abilities, and potential of the choir currently in front of us, not just in what we as directors might enjoy.

For adjudicated contests or evaluations, there may be times when the most appropriate piece is not the ensemble’s favorite. In those cases, directors can create excitement by adding elements of fun. Provide historical or cultural background to spark interest or use playful strategies such as having students sing the piece in an exaggerated tone to highlight what not to do. These lighthearted moments bring laughter, relieve tension,

and allow students to reengage with focus.

To keep the joy of singing alive, directors can also balance challenging repertoire with music students love—incorporating a popular song into warm-ups or transitions, for example. This reinforces that while discipline and growth are essential, singing should also remain an enjoyable and life-giving experience.

Brown: I remember in my first year of teaching, I attended a local area high school choir concert, looking to learn and be inspired by the singers and music of the concert. Before the chamber choir performed, the conductor spent several minutes sharing with the audience how proud he was of the singers because they were tackling such difficult music. As he continued, it felt like more of a disclaimer than program notes. Sure enough, the choir demonstrated just how hard the music was and struggled through the performance. While the teacher hyped them up prior to the performance, it was evident in the choir’s facial expressions and demeanor that they were not having a successful performance.

As choral music educators, we have teaching goals in mind for each singer of each choir. One of those goals should be to meet them where they are as they enter the choir room to start the year while looking to where they hope to grow by the end of that year. The repertoire sung in a choir is an important part of facilitating and nurturing that growth, musically and hopefully personally.

Directors have their “go to” songs or even a “bucket list” of music they want to teach, and I do not think there is anything necessarily bad about that. Where it can be problematic is when these teacher-driven lists are put ahead of the important question: *what is the best music for the singers in the choir?* If those two thoughts are aligned, that’s great. But if they are not and music is chosen by the teacher with the biggest justification being “I’ve always wanted to teach/conduct this song,” a moment for reflection may be in order.

Both of you have had choirs perform at ACDA national conferences. How did you prepare yourself and your singers to deliver the most successful performances for such a high-stakes event?

Ferrie: Preparing a choir to perform at a national conference is both a tremendous honor and a significant undertaking. The process can be emotional, stressful, and demanding, but it can also become one of the most rewarding experiences of your career if you embrace the journey, stay organized, and seek support along the way.

I approach this preparation with a backward-planning mindset. From the beginning, I provide students with a clear timeline that outlines what needs to be accomplished and when. For example, by a certain week we may aim to have a set number of pieces learned or specific selections memorized. I regularly update students on our progress, which helps keep everyone accountable and motivated. At the same time, I make a point to include moments of joy and variety. While it is easy to become consumed by conference repertoire, it is important to balance the rigor with opportunities to sing something lighthearted—such as a holiday carol or a pop song—so students don't feel overwhelmed by the same music for months at a time.

Equally important is taking care of yourself as the director. When my choir was preparing to perform in March at the 2025 National ACDA Conference, I came down with the flu in January. My instinct was to push through and keep working so we would not fall behind, but I realized that doing so would not only harm my health but also diminish the quality of instruction I could give my students. I chose instead to rest, and that decision ultimately benefitted both me and my ensemble.

For anyone preparing a choir for such a prestigious stage, my advice is to give yourself grace, protect your well-being, and focus on the journey you share with your students. At the end of the day, the growth, memories, and community built throughout the process matter far more than external perceptions of the final performance.

Brown: There is such joy and exhilaration when the

email comes in that the choir has been accepted to perform at a national convention. Shortly after that comes the wave of nervous energy thinking about logistics, repertoire, and on and on that demand lots of time and energy. I consider myself blessed to have had two different choirs perform at national conventions—a treble choir and a mixed choir—and both were extremely rewarding for the choirs. The amount of support, kindness, and appreciation shown by the choral community toward the singers in the choir at any convention is such a gift.

Being focused on the long-term planning goals of the choir's repertoire preparation was the biggest musical concern each time we performed for national convention. Communicating clear learning goals, next steps, memorization dates, and many more details become important for each singer to demonstrate their knowledge consistently. Choosing repertoire with the singers in mind first was for me more important than the national convention attendees. The singers are the ones who truly live with the music, learn it, create art with it, and must be motivated and inspired by it. That, in turn, gives the choir the opportunity to share those musical blessings through the repertoire to anyone who is listening.

Any time I program repertoire for a convention, I seek out feedback and opinions early on about the possible program from colleagues. Their wealth of knowledge sheds light on perspectives I may or may not have recognized. If it is a thematic program, I try to craft that performance flow of repertoire as if telling a story, taking the choir and those listening on a musical journey. At the 2025 National ACDA Conference, we honored the theme of that conference: “past, present, and future.”

My advice on preparing an audition for a national conference is go for it. You will never know if you don't try, so while the audition process is lengthy, it is worth the time and energy. If you get selected, stay in the moment with the singers, and don't change anything about what it is you and your choir already do, because that's what got you selected to perform. Be true to you and your singers, allowing the convention attendees to see a thirty-minute glimpse of the special world your choir has created so skillfully.

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What advice can you offer those who are preparing students to audition for honor choirs?

Ferrie: From the very beginning, I set clear expectations with both students and their parents regarding audition preparation and recording. I make it known that I will not record a student who arrives unprepared. If a singer shows up without adequate preparation, I will send them home and allow only one additional opportunity to attempt their audition.

To ensure the process reflects the authenticity of a live audition, I limit each student to two takes, selecting the stronger one. No audition is perfect, and I believe it is important that the recording resembles what adjudicators would hear in person. While I support students by providing rehearsal tracks, offering group sectionals, and helping them learn the music, I emphasize that it is ultimately their responsibility to put in the time and effort to be prepared.

Recordings are made in my choir room using my iPhone—without specialized equipment or digital alterations. Having served on multiple honor choir listening committees, I know how evident it becomes when recordings have been edited or when directors provide prompts during the process. As sponsors, it is our responsibility to be fully familiar with the rules to ensure students are not unintentionally disqualified. While most students record with me present, I do allow those I trust to record independently, even in a practice room without a director. In fact, I have had students successfully earn placement in honor choirs through this approach. Ultimately, what matters most is that students come fully prepared, sing with a forward tone, and demonstrate musicality in their audition.

Brown: Timelines and learning goals, that's it for me. If the audition is due by a given date, find out who is interested in auditioning early on. Then communicate with them where they need to be in their demonstrated learning by giving dates leading up to the audition. If it is a live audition, help the student know what the physical environment of the audition will feel like, how to slow things down before they sing or start the audition, and how to stay present in the moment and let things go as the audition unfolds.

If it is a recorded audition, I make sure students read

and follow the guidelines for the audition. As a director, clearly communicate with those auditioning how many times they will get to record each component of the audition. I usually will not record any component more than three times. I record in a room that is neutral as far as acoustic—not a dead space, but not a lively one either. I usually record with an iPhone voice memo or video recording, depending on the instructions given. I suggest avoiding DAWs such as GarageBand if you forget to check the settings, as it is pretty easy to hear when an audition has been digitally enhanced or altered.

Finally, I share with those auditioning what criteria their audition will be graded on. While they usually never see their scores from these auditions, I find it is informative for them to know how many points the audition is worth, what categories there are for scoring, as this can guide them to grow musically and record the best audition they can. After the audition is recorded, I remind each student that if they did the best they could on that day and time when they recorded, whether they make the honor choir or not, they have grown as a musician through the process and that itself is worthwhile.

What advice do you have for creating a strong interest session proposal for state, regional, or national conference consideration?

Ferrie: One of the most important pieces of advice I can offer is this: make sure your submission is applicable to the division you are submitting to. As the national R&R chair for middle school/junior high, part of my role is to help adjudicate submissions for the national conference. During the last conference cycle, unfortunately, more than 95 percent of the submissions we received for the MS/JH division had little or nothing to do with our age group.

If you are a middle school or junior high choir director, you do have something to contribute. Too often, we hold ourselves back because we believe we are not qualified, that our work is not significant, or that no one would be interested in what we have to share. That is simply not true. You may not be selected the first time, or even the second, but persistence is key.

I remember in 2014, a now close friend of mine

who was serving on our state board called me and said, “You’re going to be presenting at our conference next summer.” I immediately protested, saying I had nothing to offer. She laughed and reminded me that she had seen the work I shared online and knew I had valuable insight for our community. Her encouragement pushed me forward, and that single act of kindness set me on the path to becoming the servant leader I am today.

Have I attended multiple sessions on topics like teaching sight-reading? Absolutely. But I still walk away with new insights each time. Our profession is constantly changing, and new generations of teachers are always joining the field. What may seem routine to you might be exactly what someone in another state needs to hear. So, my advice is simple: share your knowledge, submit your ideas, and don’t be afraid to try. You never know the impact your voice might have on others in our profession.

Brown: There are hundreds of interest session proposals from across the country for conferences like ACDA national. There are several questions for someone wanting to share an interest session that need to be clear right away:

- Who is the primary audience for your session? Age level? Specialty ensemble?
- Is your session a timely extension of a topic that applies to a specific age level or type of choir?
- Would you attend your interest session if someone else was presenting it?
- Will your proposal catch and keep a conductor’s interest?

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If your interest session proposal gets accepted for the conference, celebrate! So many proposals do not get accepted, so it is an honor and clearly a topic/session that the conference committee feels the membership needs. If your proposal is not accepted, it might just not be the right time yet for that session at a conference. Maybe at the next conference that topic will be needed, and your expertise will serve the membership really well then. Also consider that some proposals are not the right fit for a presentation but might work very well as an article in written format that could be published in one of ACDA's publications.

When getting ready to share an interest session or workshop, I usually ask colleagues and peers for feedback in as many ways as they feel they can give that to me. From the content to the visual presentation to any handouts, the feedback I get prior to giving the session helps me focus on what is most important. If you are

using any technology for your session, bring any cords or devices you need with you and test them out in the room you are presenting beforehand. While this seems like a no-brainer, you never know what may happen, and no one wants technology issues to take away or diminish the session.

If you are passionate about your interest session and strongly believe there is value to it, you should absolutely submit it for consideration. When we are attending conferences, we want to hear from people who are driven, passionate, knowledgeable, and skilled. If your session is coming from a place of that intention, we will all be better for it.

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Both of you serve a diverse membership. How do you decide what resources to provide?



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Ferrie: I gather information through a variety of sources. My first step is to look at social media, where I see daily posts from colleagues seeking advice. About two years ago, I launched a national MS/JH Facebook group that has grown rapidly into a vibrant community where directors can seek advice, exchange ideas, and share solutions. While the needs across the country vary widely, common themes often emerge. Identifying those shared challenges provides a strong foundation for addressing issues that resonate broadly.

I also draw inspiration from the teachers I mentor. Their questions and concerns reflect the needs of many, and working with them reminds me of my own early years in the profession—when I had little experience and was still learning what it meant to be an effective teacher. Reflecting on those moments helps me ask myself: *what would I have needed at that stage in my career?*

In addition, I regularly reach out to middle school and junior high choir directors across the country to hear what they are experiencing in their own regions. These conversations reinforce the truth that professional support is not just for new teachers. Mid-career and veteran educators also benefit from meaningful professional development opportunities. Ultimately, I want the profession of choral music education to thrive nationwide. Being intentional, listening to others, and actively seeking advice are essential parts of my role in ensuring that we continue to support teachers at every stage of their careers.

I've developed content through my own channels. Under the name *Choir With Clint*, you can find materials on Instagram and Teachers Pay Teachers—resources I began creating several years ago to expand the availability of middle school choir tools and ideas. I am also the co-host of *The Choir Chronicles* podcast. With two full seasons already released, the podcast offers a wide range of conversations, insights, and practical resources designed to inspire and equip choir directors at all levels. I encourage you to give it a listen; you may discover just the spark or idea you've been looking for.

Finally, one of our responsibilities as R&R leaders is to curate a list of recommended literature from ACDA members, which is published on the ACDA website after each national conference. I strongly encourage you to explore that resource.

Brown: It seems like in today's social media/digital footprint world, that resources are all around us. I will usually look online and see what questions seem to be coming up most often, or topics that have several comments echoing a need for content in a specific area. Informal conversations and dialogues with peers/colleagues can also identify shared interests for topics and areas of interest for growth in the professional community.

Some of the diversity in the membership that makes it challenging is the multitude of places where people are in their professional teaching journey. Topics, questions, and resources that a teacher in the first five years of their career may be different from a veteran teacher. On the flip side, many new teachers have a wide array of educational skills that veteran teachers may not have, so the possibilities for choral educators to learn from each other truly are endless.

One of the professional conferences I attended many times is the ACDA-MN Summer Dialogue. While the sessions were informative, the director's chorus experience was always fun, the opportunity to observe all-state choir rehearsals formative, it was the informal chances to dialogue with others that made some of the most profound impressions. Through conferences like this, friendships are made, mentors and mentees evolve, and the collaborative spirit reminds me that none of us are in this profession alone.

I do understand that it is not always possible to get to an ACDA conference for a variety of reasons. While some information shared at these conferences is specific to the conference and those in attendance, there are other resources that are available to the entire membership. The Facebook group page "ACDA Senior High School Repertoire and Resources" can be a good way to find resources, see some repertoire suggestions, comment, and dialogue to learn from one another. There is another Facebook group titled "I Teach High School Choir" that offers up lots of the same things and is a great resource. Additionally, the ACDA website has repertoire suggestions and lists that can be informative and helpful.

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What opportunities offered through ACDA are important to you in your professional life?

Ferrie: As a Texan, I grew up hearing, “This is the Texas way, and it is amazing.” And while there is indeed so much to celebrate about the traditions and strengths of Texas, ACDA has broadened my perspective in invaluable ways. Through this organization, I have discovered diverse approaches to teaching, encountered new ideas, and experienced an incredible spirit of kindness from colleagues across the country.

I still remember attending my first national ACDA conference. It was intimidating and, honestly, even a little lonely. I found myself in a city I had never visited, surrounded by people I didn’t yet know. For someone as naturally introverted as I am, it was a challenge. But that experience pushed me to connect with others, and in doing so, I began to realize the true value of being

part of this national community. If you can find a way to attend, I strongly encourage you to consider the next national conference. The event has grown and transformed significantly over the years, and if it has been some time since you last attended, it may feel like a brand-new experience. In my own role, I’ve worked to expand the MS/JH division and to help directors feel welcomed, supported, and valued in a way that extends far beyond the conference itself.

Brown: ACDA has been a constant in my professional life. From going to state, regional, and national conferences, to submitting and sending students to honor choir opportunities, ACDA is a fount of knowledge, resources, encouragement, and most importantly, inspiration. My first national conference was back in Chicago, and many concerts and sessions left me speechless and in deep reflection about how/why/what goes into

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A greater way I found to really learn more about what ACDA has to offer was to get involved by volunteering. If there is an opportunity to volunteer, I highly recommend it. For example, if you want to know more about an honor choir, volunteer to help with a part of it.

Utilize the variety of resources ACDA offers online through their website. Contact the R&R chairs if you have a question or comment. Read the articles provided in *Choral Journal* and *ChorTeach* that you may find timely and helpful. See what potential professional growth opportunities may be out there and attend or apply when you can. If you are looking for a mentor, or feel you'd be a good mentor, many state chapters of ACDA have these programs as well.

Let's end with some final words of encouragement or advice.

Ferrie: I want to remind you of this: *you are worthy*. In our profession, it's easy to get weighed down by the many challenges and distractions that come with teaching—the parts that pull us away from what we truly love. It's also natural to look at others and think they have it easier or that they “have it all together.” The truth is, every educator faces struggles, and no school or situation is without its challenges. At the heart of our work is the joy of teaching students and changing lives. When we keep our focus there, the impact we can make is truly limitless.

Brown:

- Reflect often.
- Celebrate singer-demonstrated accomplishments (great or small) when you can.
- Be a lifelong learner and embrace what comes with that.
- Observe at least three different conductors each year, and pay as much attention to singer engagement as to what the conductor is doing or saying.

- Be sure to sing in a choir at least a few times a year and not just always be leading them.
- Dialogue with a mentor or peer monthly.
- What you offer and bring to your singers is unique and fantastic.
- Take care of yourself. There is only one you, and you are needed by more than just your singers. Your family, friends, children, spouse, partner, and community want to enjoy you as well. 

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