

Advocacy for the Choral Art: Empowering Our Communities

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In conversations with choral directors, the word “advocacy” can sometimes evoke feelings of apprehension or uncertainty. Yet, advocating for what we believe in, particularly in the profession of music and arts education, is not just the obligation of a select few—it is a responsibility we all share.

What comes to mind when you hear the word advocacy? Some people assume that advocacy is reserved for elected individuals in ACDA or NAFME leadership. Absolutely, that is one form of supporting our students to maintain the privilege of music learning, but it is certainly not the only one. When I served as national president for NAFME, teachers across the country would often tell me that someone needed to do something to save music education. Guess what—“we” are all someone! In this article, we will explore practical strategies for effective and user-friendly advocacy, focusing on the essential role of singing, the choral art, and music education throughout our schools and communities.

Why Advocate?

Understanding the Impact

Advocacy is a vital catalyst for change. By supporting music learning, we are safeguarding opportunities for all children and adolescents to learn and grow through the vehicle of music study and performing. We are shaping a future where every child has access to the transformative power of music. Expanding the awareness of others is crucial, especially if those individuals know little about music learning or they are not concerned about education.

Engaging the Community:

Bridging Gaps and Educating Others

Advocacy is more than just preaching to the choir—it is about informing and teaching those who may not fully understand the value of music education. Master choir directors start with the students' comfort zone, their baseline of knowledge and skills, then take them into the unknown territory of new material and skillsets. We do not typically program Bach chorales if the singers in an ensemble still struggle to match pitch. Consequently, members of the community who are removed from the performing arts, except as consumers, may need to know how they will be served by supporting music learning. In other words, we meet them in their world and care about the issues that are important to them.

Most humans are members of the WIIFM Club: What's In It For Me? Take a moment to think about how music is perceived in the world of non-musicians or by people with little exposure to the world of education. Respect and honor their points of view and be willing to learn from their perspectives. Have a conversation and say, "Tell me more." Remember that we also make assumptions about career and choices of study that are unfamiliar to us.

Advocacy informs people why every child benefits from music and other art forms. It is about providing opportunities for students' learning. Respectfully engaging with different viewpoints of individuals with limited experience of choral singing or other educa-

tional concerns is key. We can bridge that gap between their perspectives to an enlightened understanding of the myriad benefits that music brings to every child's holistic development.

Music is a vital component in all of our lives. I once heard a speaker at an Alaska Music Education Association conference share that only one to two percent of the world's population reads music. Yet, we know that every year billions of dollars are spent on music as consumers just in the United States alone. If only a small portion of the people across the globe read music, it makes sense why some believe that music study is reserved for a talented minority.

Music learning is more than just singing songs or playing instruments—it is also about instilling scientific, mathematical, linguistic, historical, and artistic understanding in students. Every person must take math in school, yet only a small percent of the people in our population pursue math as a profession. By studying math in school, students learn how to problem solve and expand their understanding of abstract constructs. Studying choral music also teaches students to problem solve and expand their comprehension of abstract concepts. We guide students on a journey to better understand themselves and the world, by engaging in music learning and performing.

So what is music? Add your own ideas to the list below:

- Music is science.
- Music is math.
- Music is a foreign language.
- Music is history.
- Music is physical education.
- Music develops insights.
- Music uses both sides of the brain.
- Music is literature.

- Music is art.
- Music is social emotional.
- Music is collaboration and teamwork.
- Music fosters a growth mindset.

Starting Point: Where and How to Begin

How do I start advocating for the importance of choral music? One effective strategy is storytelling. By sharing the narratives of students' journeys and achievements—their triumphs, struggles, and growth—we humanize the justification and vital need for music learning. Each of us can begin an advocacy journey in our personal comfort zones. Listed below are actionable steps that any educator, administrator, professional musician, parent, or supporter of music learning can take. Consider implementing a few of the following suggestions:

- **Highlight Student Success:** Showcase examples of everyday student achievement in concert programs and presentations to demonstrate the tangible outcomes of studying and making music. Display examples of photos and student's successes on a rolling PowerPoint as the audience arrives before a performance. Draw attention to Word Clouds comprising students' descriptive words of selected songs. Show students' responses to sentence stems used for reflection and analysis in the choral rehearsal.
- **Share an Informance:** Have students present an "informance" rather than a polished performance. Showcase the process of how they learn. Walk the audience through a rehearsal, step-by-step, including solfège/sight singing, historical context, assessment, and student self-reflection.
- **Call to Action for Parents:** Encourage parents to reach out to local decision makers. Equip parents with talking points and relevant information to advocate effectively for music learning at local, state, and national

levels. Provide a handout and/or digital access to talking points for parents to use when they contact their local, state, and national leaders. Include contact information for local legislators in programs to make it easy for parents to engage in advocacy.

- **Engage Decision Makers:** Invite school board members, administrators, and community leaders to performances and events, fostering a deeper understanding of the value of music education. Send them complimentary tickets, VIP seating, and invite them to a reception following the performance or event.
- **Invite Special Guests:** Have special guests deliver the opening welcome to the audience before concerts and other public events. Examples: The mayor, local or state legislators, school board president, university leadership, ACDA and state Music Education Association (MEA) leadership.
- **State and National Standards:** Print your state music standards and the National Standards for Music Education in written and/or digital programs. Highlight the standards that the students learned as they prepared for that specific concert.
- **Rehearsal Process and Progress:** Before a performance, play thirty-second video clips of the first week of rehearsal, a rehearsal midway during preparation, and the dress rehearsal to bring awareness to the progress and work ethic required of the students.
- **Bring a Parent Day:** Organize parent music classes where they come to class and learn alongside their children/adolescents to gain a better understanding of what and how their students are absorbing new ideas and concepts. During class, have parents sit with singers in the ensemble. Teach them solfège and simple rhythm patterns. Guide the singers to track the music notation with their finger while singing to help the parent follow along and demonstrate that singing music notation is similar to learning a foreign language.
- **School Boards:** Bring an ensemble to perform one to two songs for a school board meeting or other im-

portant boards or council meetings. Thank the members and leaders for supporting music and give each of them a one-page handout that summarizes three points to advocate for music study.

- **Show the Scope of What You Do:** When an administrator comes to visit or observe a rehearsal, provide them a spreadsheet of your plans for the next three to five years: travel plans, community service exchanges, outreach activities, performances, fundraisers, music standards that are covered each month, etc.

- **Utilize Social Media:** Leverage social media platforms to amplify your message and connect with a broader audience.

- **Share Research:** Print summaries of quantitative studies of why choir is good for your school and community. Hand out information physically or provide a QR code so parents and administrators can access details regarding the research.

- **List Websites:** Provide links for arts organizations that provide easy access to additional materials for advocacy. For example: ACDA.org, NAFME.org, NAMMfoundation.org

We can all learn practical strategies for effective and user-friendly advocacy that can be implemented right away in our schools, as well as our local and state communities. Take these ideas and communicate how all students deserve access to music education in every public, private, homeschool, and community setting.

Embracing Advocacy Together

Advocacy for music learning is not exclusive to a small number of elected leaders; it is a collective effort that requires the engagement of educators, parents, elected leaders, policymakers, community members, and many more. By sharing stories, engaging with diverse perspectives, and taking actionable steps, we can do our part to preserve music learning as a fundamental component of our educational landscape for future generations.

What are the ramifications if we do not advocate for music? If we do not step up, who will? How will our singers be better off in ten or twenty years? I strongly encourage all of us to reflect on these questions. Each one of us can start advocating in our own comfort zone, then progress to a more expanded version of advocacy strategies.

*Music sobs for you,
It laments,
It rejoices,
It explodes with vigor and life.* (Anais Nin)

All of us who love the profession of choral music can probably relate to this beautiful, succinct poem. We have had the opportunity in our lives to sob, lament, rejoice, and explode with vigor through singing in a choral ensemble together. Our future generations, of all economic backgrounds, deserve that privilege, too. Helen Keller once said, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” What is one step to take today to advocate for music? Embrace advocacy as a powerful tool for creating positive change and ensure a brighter horizon for all students through music education. Our singers and our choirs need us to advocate for their future and this profession that we all cherish. ■

References

L. M. Brinckmeyer, *Advocate for Music! A Guide to User-Friendly Strategies* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2016).