

Creating an Adaptive Choir: A Journey of Inclusivity

BRANDI DIGNUM



Brandi Dignum
Music Consulting LLC
Director of Education, Tucson Girls Chorus
brandi@dignums.com

Every student deserves the opportunity to experience the joy and transformative power of choral singing and all that comes with it: expression, creativity, leadership, confidence, belonging, and inclusion. Inclusivity, in its various forms, entails recognizing and celebrating the unique strengths of every singer. When considering neurodivergent singers, it is important to create a community where diversity is embraced and talents are showcased. Bringing neurodivergent and neurotypical singers together emphasizes the belief that every voice is significant and every singer is valued. This conviction underpins a special type of ensemble: the Adaptive Choir.

What is an Adaptive Choir?

There are a variety of ways to include neurodivergent singers in the choral program. A common approach is whole-group integration, where students of varying abilities are integrated into the existing choral structure. This method necessitates adjusting the music skill level and performance expectations daily, especially during competitions. As one might imagine, there are significant challenges with this model, especially when one considers the barriers to learning for the neurodivergent population. These barriers might be visual (e.g., reading skills, visual impairment, dyslexia, and tracking difficulties); physical (motor control, speech speed, range); and cognitive (understanding musical concepts and complexity).¹

Meanwhile, an Adaptive Choir is crafted to ensure that all students have equal access to musical experiences tailored to their cognitive and physical abilities. This unique model provides neurodivergent singers with a place of belonging within the choir department. By design, these groups integrate neurodivergent and neurotypical singers together in a learning environment primarily catered to the needs of its neurotypical members. This collaborative approach highlights the distinctiveness of each student while fostering unity within the choir family.



While Adaptive Choirs provide a special place for neurodivergent singers, some may express the desire to participate in neurotypical choirs as well. Indeed, there have been successful examples of singers participating in both neurotypical and Adaptive Choirs simultaneously. The decision to sing in both ensemble models stems from the desire to sing with friends in the Adaptive Choir, while also seeking additional opportunities to sing and perform at a higher level in the neurotypical choir. The unique abilities of each singer should be carefully considered when choosing placement in a specific choir or choirs within the choral program. Adaptive Choirs lay a foundation of inclusion for singers that might not have an opportunity to participate otherwise, yet they should not be limiting for the neurodivergent singer.

Similarities and Differences

What are the similarities and differences between an Adaptive Choir and a neurotypical choir? There are many similarities, especially the artistic richness and depth. Both choirs also require repertoire that is age appropriate, suits the vocal range of the ensemble, matches the skill level of the singers, and is musically engaging. They equally need structured lessons to reinforce the fundamental musical concepts embedded within the repertoire. Additionally, fostering a classroom culture of inclusion and acceptance within individual choirs and the broader choir community is imperative to ensure that students perceive choir as a safe and supportive environment that is conducive to musical exploration.


The key difference lies in adaptability. In an Adaptive Choir, every facet of the music is tailored to accommodate the cognitive and physical needs of the singers. This may entail simplifying melodies; modifying lyrics;



2023 Class Photo of the Adaptive Choir at Canyon del Oro High School in Tucson, Arizona. Used with permission.

or utilizing diverse activities aimed at engaging students through various modalities, such as integrating body percussion, instrumental accompaniment, and sign language. It is also essential to model for singers, caregivers, and the community what success can look like for this type of ensemble. Celebrating the unique abilities of this group—such as independently walking onto the stage, putting forth effort during performances, and showcasing the wonderful musical contributions of the performers—is key to understanding and acceptance.

Carl Orff famously stated, “Since the beginning of time, children have not liked to study. They would much rather play, and if you have their interests at heart, you will let them learn while they play.” Indeed, Orff’s philosophy of playful exploration of music is well at home among Adaptive Choirs. Incorporating multiple modalities such as singing, moving, listening, playing, and responding can create a dynamic learning environment where every student can actively participate and thrive. Providing various avenues for engagement is crucial for fostering student success. Offering choices in rehearsal gives agency to the singer and helps them personally connect to their learning. These choices could include assisting with repertoire selection and arranging, cre-



ating movement, and improvising. When considering the curriculum, it's important to select repertoire that addresses relatable social-emotional topics, captures the interest of the singers, and is easily accessible or adaptable. Music selections that have proven highly effective for Adaptive Choirs include unison pieces, call-and-response arrangements, and compositions where the teacher engages their own ingenuity to offer opportunities for lyric and melody writing for their students' diverse needs. The use of simple percussion parts and choreography can yield success as well.

Collaboration is essential for the success of Adaptive Choirs. In school settings, the Adaptive Choir might be best executed as a partnership between the Special Education department. By fostering discussions with departmental teachers, Adaptive Choirs can be specifically built with its prospective members in mind. Interactions among neurotypical and neurodivergent singers fosters a spirit of collaboration as well. The former serve as peer leaders and as singing partners that ensure the unity of the ensemble. Equally important is the Adaptive Choir's opportunity to perform both as an independent ensemble and as a collaboration with others. This model creates a sense of autonomy, belonging, mutual respect, and pride.

Preparing for Instruction

Before the teaching process begins, it may be necessary to modify or simplify selected music to ensure that students can approach it without frustration. For example, the amount of text in a song or the tempo at which the text is sung might necessitate modifications to the lyrics for neurodivergent students with speech challenges. To facilitate successful pronunciation, certain words may need to be omitted and replaced with activities like body percussion, instrument play, or choreography. Alternatively, this could be an opportunity for collaborative lyric writing or focusing on singing specific important words instead of entire lines. The musical content itself might also be worth examining for adaptation, especially with regard to the melodic range and harmonic complexity. In these instances, in unison or simplifying rhythmic phrases could increase a singer's potential for success.

To reinforce memory and cognition, it is beneficial to incorporate general music activities that emphasize key musical concepts. This practice can be expanded through the integration of instrumentation, movement, visual aids (scarves, games, books, videos), listening exercises, and improvisation. Given the shorter attention span of neurodivergent singers, it is essential that Adaptive Choirs maintain high levels of engagement by varying activities frequently and providing multiple modes of interaction. Offering visual, auditory, and kinesthetic options within each class helps accommodate diverse learning styles and sustain a high level of engagement.

Ways to Adapt

Text: Verbose lyrics or words that are meant to be sung at a fast tempo may require alteration.

- Pull out important words from the lyrics at large for the students to sing and omit smaller, perhaps less necessary, words.
- Adapt the lyrics for better facility, or perhaps engage the students' creativity and creating alternative lyrics.
- Build new meaning for the piece among the students by writing an additional verse as a group.
- When combining with other choirs, have the neurotypical ensembles sing the fast rhythmic passages while the Adaptive Choir performs a movement instead.

Free play: Difficult lyrical passages and extended instrumental interludes invite free play and improvisation on classroom instruments to maintain engagement.

- Reinforce the steady beat by allowing singers to play it on an instrument that complements the song's timbre and key.
- Use pitched instruments with a prepared tonal set (e.g., pentatonic) to accompany an instrumental interlude or to create an introduction or tag.
- Utilize vocal sound effects that can emphasize the

mood or setting of the piece, such as a rain storm or animal sounds.

Range: The pitches of a song's melody may require modification to accommodate the tessitura of the choir. For particularly challenging passages, consider crafting an adapted melody that has a more limited tonal range that matches the students' abilities.

Sign Language: Utilizing sign language on key words helps with memorization. This may also help those with hearing impairments feel more integrated within the group.

Movement: Create movements to reinforce or illustrate musical concepts.

- Use sweeping arm motions in an arch to demonstrate elongated, legato phrases.
- Emphasize staccato with short, dart-like hand or finger motions.
- Use stomps to reinforce rests along with other body gestures to help with breath intake, cutoffs, and concluding consonants.
- Create motions that emulate dynamic contrast, such as small movements for soft sections and larger, bolder ones for louder sections.

Adaptive Choir in Action: "Shine Like Stars" by Pinkzebra

Let's adapt Pinkzebra's "Shine Like Stars" for Adaptive Choir. Available in a variety of voicings, this piece could be performed as a standalone piece by the Adaptive Choir or alongside other choirs. Let's consider some potential adaptations.

First, to address visual barriers, consider creating a color-coded lyrics page (see sidebar on the next page) that differentiates between verses, refrains, and repeated sections. Words highlighted in blue, which are not repeated, can be reinforced through some simple sign language.

Next, let's consider some modification for the rapidly delivered lyrics beginning with "Listen up." One possibility would be to omit these sections (or perhaps have them sung by another choir) while the Adaptive Choir performs some free play on classroom instruments to the steady beat.

Choreography can help with ensemble unification and to reinforce musical concepts. During the chorus (highlighted in yellow), a simple leg pat can be used to unify the ending "s" of "stars." During gradual crescendo of the tag (highlighted in green), body movements that scale up in size can reflect dynamic growth. Additional movements can be used at other moments during the song to aid with memorization and melodic contour.

Watch the Adaptive Choir at Canyon del Oro High School (Tucson, AZ) perform "Shine Like Stars" with these suggested adaptations either by viewing the QR code or visiting <https://tinyurl.com/yvtezecf>.



Tips for Starting Your Own Adaptive Choir Program

The process of creating an inclusive choir program demands dedication, advocacy, collaboration, and a willingness to think creatively. To determine feasibility, begin by assessing the school population and consulting with administrators and special education teachers. Next, determine if a course format exists within the school catalog that could serve as the foundation of the class. If not, start advocating for its inclusion with school officials and other stakeholders.


Data is a powerful tool that can be used to build support for Adaptive Choirs. Existing programs, such as those at Park Hill School District in Kansas City, Missouri, and at Canyon del Oro High School in Tucson, Arizona, can provide example curriculum. Once established, be sure to build data collection measures during the Adaptive Choir's first year to evaluate success and ensure future support.

Funding is always an important consideration. Work with district officials to identify funding sources, perhaps through the Special Education department, to provide

for teacher salary, sheet music, instruments, adaptive aids, and other teaching and performance tools. Private support through local foundations, businesses, or even social service organizations can be viable as well.

Powerful and Positive Outcomes

Adaptive Choirs are already making their mark on the choral landscape. At one site in Tucson, Arizona, a neurodivergent student reported that “I like the friends that I made.” A neurotypical peer leader shared: “Music has been one of my passions and adaptive music is a place where I can explore that passion in a safe place while having the ability to help others.”

Ultimately, the journey of creating an Adaptive Choir is one that is equally gratifying, challenging, and empowering. To witness the remarkable growth and confidence in neurodivergent singers—people who are often overlooked in traditional ensemble settings—and those who sing alongside them is nothing short of inspirational. The impact of an Adaptive Choir can be deep and rewarding, but it cannot be done alone. It requires communication, collaboration, and an embrace of inclusivity. With these ingredients, an Adaptive Choir can enrich any choral program and create a more vibrant and harmonious community. 

NOTES

¹ When employing an adaptive model, it is crucial to structure lessons using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to ensure success for all singers. <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>; readers may also find information in Kathryn L. Evans, “Universal Design for Learning: Embracing Learner Variability in Choral Ensembles,” *Choral Journal* 64, no. 7 (March/April 2024): 8-20.

Shine Like Stars by Pinkzebra

Verse 1:

I'm dreaming wide awake
This is the life I make
Don't need a holiday
To make me feel this way

8 counts - Rhythm Activity

8 counts - Rhythm Activity

I want you to know

Chorus:

Oh yeah, we shine like stars
Oh yeah, we shine like stars

Verse 2:

What are we waiting for?
It seems we still want more
No one can take away
The dreams we have today

8 counts - Rhythm Activity

8 counts - Rhythm Activity

I want you to know

Chorus:

Oh yeah, we shine like stars
Oh **yeah**, we shine like stars
Like stars
Like stars

Tag:

Oh we shine, we shine like stars.
We shine, we shine 4X

Chorus:

Oh yeah, we shine like stars
Oh **yeah**, we shine like stars
Like stars
Like stars

Oh yes we shine like stars!