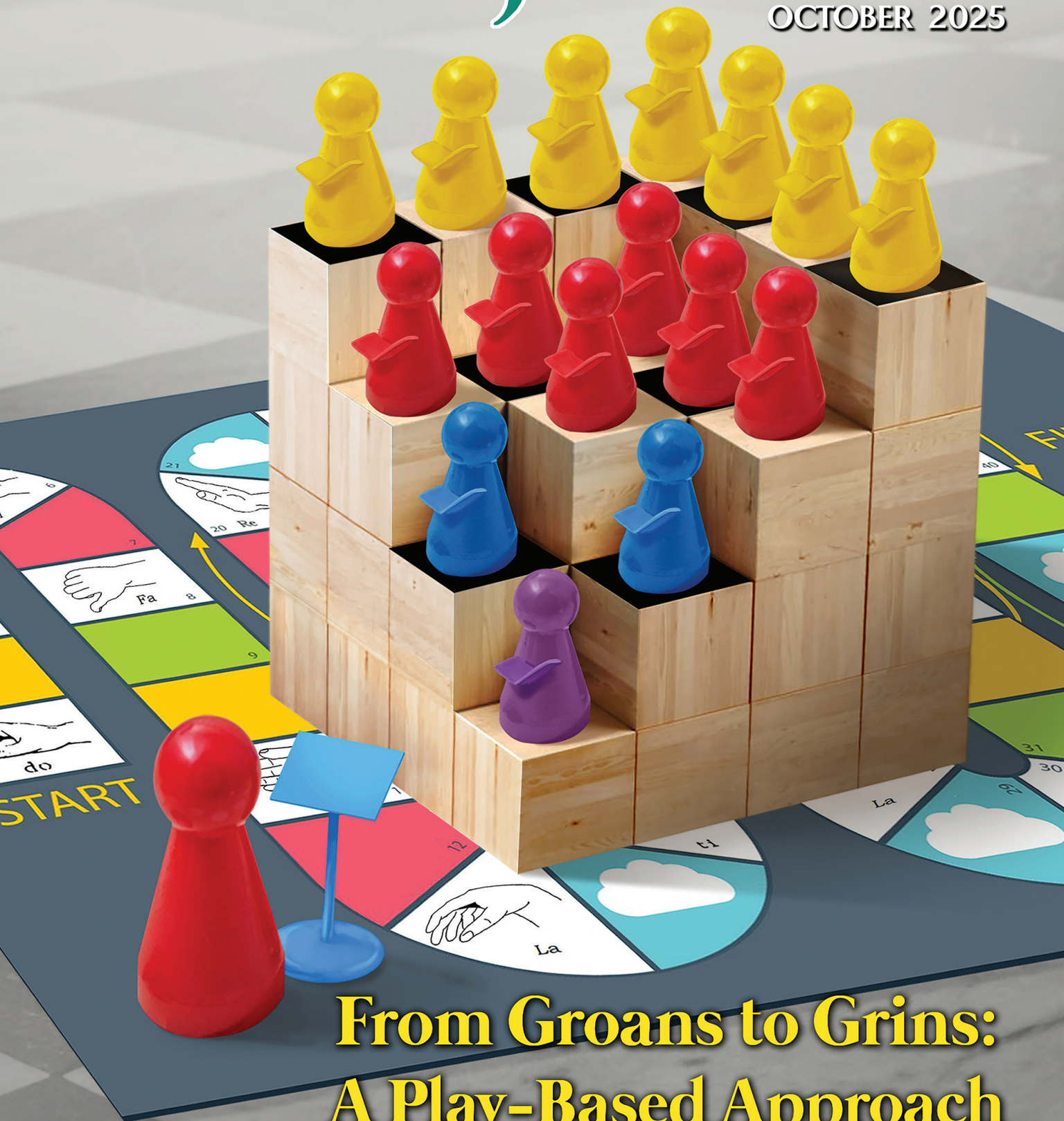
Official Publication of the American Choral Directors Association
US ISSN 0009-5028

CHORAL JOURNAL

OCTOBER 2025



From Groans to Grins: A Play-Based Approach to Teaching Music Literacy

MAP MIDAMERICA PRODUCTIONS & MidAm International

LET US PUT YOU **ON THE MAP!**

25 CONCERTS IN 2025

5 WORLD PREMIERES

86 GUEST CONDUCTORS

5,331 PERFORMERS

35 STATES REPRESENTED ON STAGE

OVER 30,000 AUDIENCE MEMBERS

TAKE THE STAGE WITH US IN 2027 & **BECOME A PART OF OUR INCREDIBLE LEGACY**

contact@midamerica-music.com
212.239.0205
www.midamerica-music.com

Contents

October 2025/Volume 66, Number 3

Annual dues (includes subscription to the *Choral Journal*): Active $125, Industry $150, Institutional $135, Retired $45, and Student $15. Library annual subscription rates: U.S. $75; Canada $80; International $170. Single Copy Issues US/Canada: $9; International: $20. Circulation: 13,000. Main office: 405-232-8161

The *Choral Journal* (US ISSN 0009-5028) is issued monthly except for April, July, and December by the American Choral Directors Association. Periodicals postage paid at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and additional mailing office.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Choral Journal, PO Box 1705, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73101-1705.

Since 1959, the *Choral Journal* has been the refereed, international journal of the American Choral Directors Association. Each issue features: scholarly articles, anonymously peer-reviewed by the editorial board; refereed articles on pedagogical or scientific issues for the choral conductor; refereed articles with practical advice and ideas for the choral conductor; reviews of books, recorded sound, and choral works by choral experts; and editorials from association leadership. The January issue previews each year's regional or national conference offerings. Articles from the *Choral Journal* can be found in the following online databases: JSTOR (Arts & Sciences XI Collection); ProQuest (International Index to Music Periodicals); University Microfilms International; NaPublishing; RILM (Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale); EBSCO music index; and WorldCat. Advertising options are available for members and nonmembers. Cover art by Efrain Guerrero. Interior art by Tammy Brummell. Musical examples by Tunesmith Music <www.Tunesmithmusic.com>.

Features

Articles

Reviews

News

Editorial

STANDING COMMITTEES

ADVOCACY & COLLABORATION
ALEX GARTNER, CHAIR
agartner@pensacolasings.org

COMPOSITION INITIATIVES
KATIE HOUTS, CHAIR
katie.houts@gmail.com

DIVERSITY INITIATIVES
ARREON HARLEY-EMERSON, CHAIR
arreon@equitysings.com

EDUCATION & COMMUNICATION
JOHN MCDONALD , CHAIR
JohnMcDonald@wustl.edu

INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES
JOSHUA HABERMANN, CHAIR
joshhabermann@gmail.com

REPERTOIRE & RESOURCES
GRETCHEN HARRISON, CHAIR
nationalrr@acda.org

RESEARCH & PUBLICATIONS
ELIZABETH CASSIDY PARKER, CHAIR
eparker@temple.edu

ADVOCACY STATEMENT

The human spirit is elevated to a broader understanding of itself and its place in the world through the study of and participation in choral music. Singing in a choir produces more active and involved citizens. It affects self-worth in youth and adults. It builds connectivity throughout communities. Society benefits from the aesthetic beauty and community of singers created by choral programs within schools, houses of worship, and community organizations through involved citizenry, connectivity throughout communities, and feelings of personal self-worth. The American Choral Directors Association and its membership resolve to ensure the survival of choral programs for this and future generations by:

Actively voicing support for funding at local, state, and national levels of education and government; collaborating with local and national organizations to ensure the distribution of arts funding data and arts-related activism opportunities; advocating for full access to choral singing and inclusion of all singers in a choral program; and ensuring the distribution of advocacy statements and data regarding choral programs.

From the Executive Director

Robyn Hilger

The Value of Membership

At its best, choral music is about connection and belonging. When voices come together, we create something bigger and more beautiful than any one of us could on our own. That same spirit of connection is what makes being part of our association so valuable. None of us has to walk this journey alone; we have a whole community of people who understand the joys and challenges of this work.

Membership is more than a card or a title; it's an invitation to resources, opportunities, and relationships that help us grow. Our journals (the *Choral Journal* and the *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing*) put inspiration right at your fingertips: practical rehearsal tips, repertoire ideas, grounded research, and thoughtful reflections from colleagues who know exactly what you're facing. Our repertoire and resource libraries are like a trusted friend when you're searching for the right piece or a fresh approach. (*Note: Don't miss the newest 2025 Virtual Reading Sessions available at www.acda.org*)

And then there are the conferences. If you've ever been to one, you know the energy of sitting in a performance that leaves you speechless, or the spark of an idea from a session that you can't wait to try back home. Add to that the honor choirs—life-changing experiences for our developing singers (and future colleagues!) and a reminder to all of us why this work matters so deeply. Information for the 2026 Region Conferences is available at https://acda.org/region-conferences, and the 2027 National Conference will be held in Minneapolis, MN, in 2027! You can always check the event listing in the weekly e-newsletters for many local events as well.

But perhaps the greatest gift of membership is the people. The colleagues you meet often become lifelong friends, the ones you call when you need advice, the ones who cheer you on, and the ones who simply "get it" when you share a story from rehearsal. Those connections remind us we're not alone, even on the hardest days. If you're a member, I encourage you to dive in—read the journals, use the repertoire lists, sign up for the next conference, and please reach out to someone new. If you're not yet a member, now is a wonderful time to join us. We will welcome you with the spirit of enthusiasm and collegiality.

Our association thrives because of YOU, the membership. We are creating something extraordinary together, not just for ourselves, but for the future of choral music.

Robyn Hilger

From the **President**

Edith Copley

One of the articles in this issue is about the amazing composer, arranger, conductor, and actor Jester Hairston (1901-2000). I was fortunate to attend sessions with this inspiring man in the early 1980s. He shared his personal story, the history of each spiritual, and enthusiastically led us in the singing of his arrangements. Hairston was a dynamic educator and a shining star in our profession.

Since beginning my term as national president, several people have asked me: "What is *your vision* for ACDA?" After thinking about this question, I realized I have a *shared vision*. Everyone in ACDA leadership is working together to forge a path into the future, create new resources for our membership, and provide materials to help us to be strong advocates for our art.

The revision of ACDA's Bylaws and Constitution was completed in 2023. Our organization's next step is to develop a Strategic Plan. National ACDA President-elect Jessica Napoles will chair this important committee, which will guide ACDA into the future.

Statistics show that the majority of our members are unable to attend a region or national conference. It's disappointing that so few can attend these professional development events. I'm well aware that many members have limited financial resources and often have great difficulty taking time away to attend a conference. Every regional and national conference team is working diligently to control costs and make conferencing more accessible. Recently, ACDA has made 2023 and 2025 National Conference reading sessions and videos of selected interest sessions available to all of our members, regardless of whether they attended a conference. In addition, R&R leadership and steering committees are working to offer members more non-conference resources such as new webinars, podcasts, and genre-specific reading sessions throughout the year.

With recent severe cuts to arts funding and the continual loss of school music programs, the Advocacy & Collaboration Standing Committee plans to review and compile advocacy resources from various arts coalitions and make this valuable information available on ACDA's website to help us become stronger advocates for music in our communities.

Our *shared vision* for the future involves strategic planning, more practical resources throughout the year, and accessible materials to help us advocate for the choral art. It is my hope that these initiatives will benefit our current membership and draw more choral musicians to our organization in the days and years ahead.

NATIONAL OFFICERS

PRESIDENT
EDITH COPLEY
ecopley@acda.org

VICE PRESIDENT
PEARL SHANGKUAN
pshangkuan@acda.org

PRESIDENT-ELECT
JESSICA NÁPOLES
jnapoles@acda.org

SECRETARY/TREASURER
ROBERT NATTER
rnatter@gettysburg.edu

PAST PRESIDENT
DAVID FRYLING
dfryling@acda.org

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
ROBYN HILGER
executivedirector@acda.org

NATIONAL R&R CHAIR
GRETCHEN HARRISON
nationalrr@acda.org

EASTERN REGION PRESIDENT
AMANDA HANZLIK
amanda.hanzlik@acdaeast.org

MIDWESTERN REGION PRESIDENT
DERRICK FOX
foxderri@msu.edu

NORTHWESTERN REGION PRESIDENT
WILLIAM CAMPBELL
billcampbell@nwacda.org

SOUTHERN REGION PRESIDENT
JEFFERY AMES
jefferyacdasouthern@gmail.com

SOUTHWESTERN REGION PRESIDENT
JONATHAN D. OWEN
Jonathano@swacda.org

WESTERN REGION PRESIDENT
JULIE DANA
jdana@acdawestern.org

INDUSTRY ASSOCIATE REPRESENTATIVE
OLIVER SCOFIELD
KI Concerts
oliver@kiconcerts.com

From the **Editor**

Amanda Bumgarner

One of the articles in this month's issue highlights the life and choral works of Jester Hairston. In addition to the regular editorial board review, I reached out to André Thomas and Anton Armstrong, who knew Hairston and graciously agreed to take a look at the article before publication. I am grateful for their time on the article and also for sharing a personal experience.

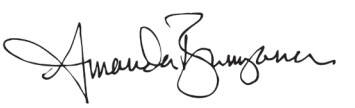
From André Thomas: "I met Mr. Hairston shortly after I turned seventeen. He shared with me the story of how a performance of the Katherine Dunham Dancers inspired him. This all-Black troupe appeared in many Hollywood films as 'native' dancers, which helped illuminate his vision for works like *Elijah Rock* to be semi-staged. While many young arrangers are doing excellent work today, Hairston, Burleigh, and others gave us some truly definitive settings of these spirituals."

From Anton Armstrong: "I had the opportunity to prepare singers for Mr. Hairston during my years in Grand Rapids, MI, when I taught at Calvin University in the 1980s. I also had a delightful time with him around 1995–96 when Philip Brunelle brought [Jester] to Minneapolis to guest conduct VocalEssence in a concert of his works. At that time he was in the early stages of dementia but was still so effective when he was conducting the ensemble."

The cover article, "From Groans to Grins," introduces the concept of teaching music literacy through play in three domains: rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic. The author offers a variety of games and suggestions for play that can be immediately implemented into the classroom.

The Rehearsal Break column features another article that is directly applicable to the rehearsal space. In "Beyond the Attendance Sheet" readers will find strategies for addressing assessment using the four Anchor Standards from the National Coalition for Arts Standards: (1) Creating, (2) Performing, (3) Responding, and (4) Connecting.

Finally, this issue contains an On the Voice article related to warming up the choir, a Choral Conversation with Mark Lawley, and a Choral Review of Rollo Dilworth's *Weather*. As always, we are excited to share this issue with you and hope you find something to apply to your work. If you have any feedback related to the articles, write a "Letter to the Editor." Find guidelines at acda.org/choraljournal or email abumgarner@acda.org with questions.



2026 Region Conferences

2026 ACDA Eastern Region Conference
February 25-28, 2026 • Providence, Rhode Island

2026 ACDA Midwestern Region Conference
February 25-28, 2026 • Milwaukee, Wisconsin

2026 ACDA Northwestern Region Conference
March 4-7, 2026 • Tacoma, Washington

2026 ACDA Southern Region Conference
March 4-7, 2026 • Memphis, Tennessee

2026 ACDA Southwestern Region Conference
March 4-7, 2026 • Albuquerque, New Mexico

2026 ACDA Western Region Conference
March 4-7, 2026 • San Jose, California

www.acda.org

From Groans to Grins:

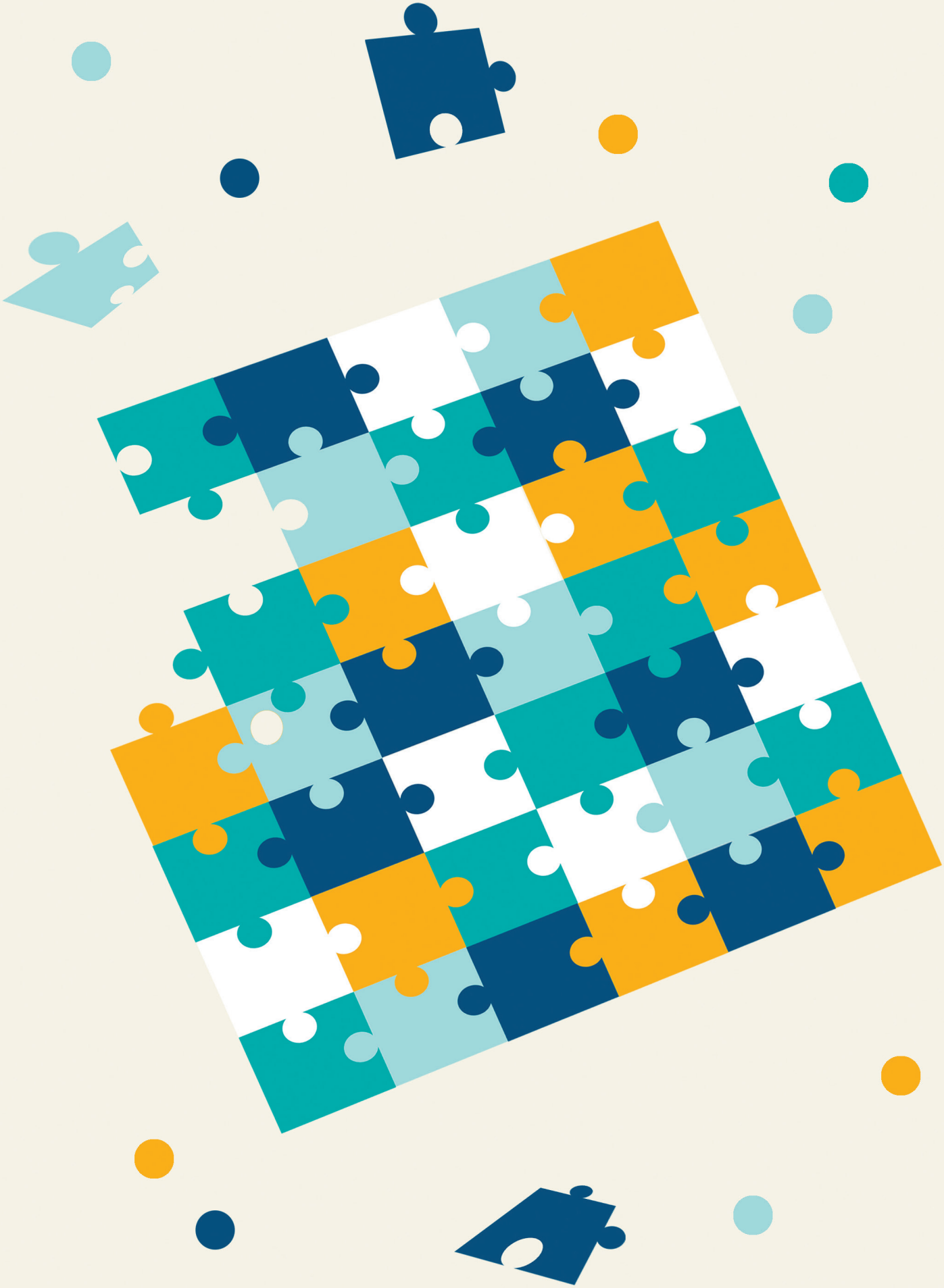
A Play-Based Approach to Teaching Music Literacy

SALEEL ADARKAR MENON

Choral music educators continually seek effective methods to engage students in music literacy, a fundamental component of musical development. Traditional approaches to teaching sight-reading and literacy may elicit resistance from students, yet many believe these skills are essential for well-rounded musicianship.[1] These traditional approaches might look like teachers using methods books to rehearse exercises as if they were repertoire. Instead, researchers and practicing teachers increasingly support the integration of musical play as an alternative approach to teaching music literacy. Musical play comprises structured, interactive activities that foster creativity and collaboration. These activities enhance student engagement while supporting skill acquisition in ways that feel enjoyable and motivating.[2] By reimagining sight-reading and other literacy exercises through the lens of play, educators can create a dynamic learning environment that encourages active participation, reduces performance anxiety, and nurtures a lifelong appreciation for music.

Musical play leverages the natural joy and social interaction that arise from shared music-making experiences, transforming otherwise routine literacy exercises into compelling activities. In a choral classroom, musical play can take many forms, from rhythmic games and call-and-response exercises to improvisational singing and collaborative composition tasks. These activities allow students to explore elements of music literacy—such as rhythm, pitch, dynamics, and phrasing—in a low-stakes, supportive setting.

Saleel Adarkar Menon
Assistant Professor of Music
Rutgers University
saleel.menon@rutgers.edu



This approach aligns with principles of constructivist learning, which suggest that students learn best when they can actively engage in their learning and receive feedback that they can implement immediately.[3] Through musical play, students might internalize music literacy skills more efficiently as they engage in real-time problem solving and expressive collaboration, creating a positive and productive environment that contrasts with a potentially more traditional, static method of literacy instruction. This article introduces a framework for conceptualizing literacy in three domains: rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic. Directors will then explore how to use pedagogical games and play-based learning to practice these domains while applying three specified learning modalities: aural, visual, and synthesized. Although these activities are derived from elementary methods, they are applicable to secondary choral ensemble classrooms, with a particular focus on high school students.

What is Musical Play?

Kathryn Marsh and Susan Young defined musical play as "the activities that children initiate on their own accord and in which they may choose to participate with others voluntarily."[4] These activities balance challenge and ease, empower the players, and spark joy. Marsh and Young also emphasized that a key component of play across all ages is multimodality or blending movement with singing and using objects like props, toys, or instruments.[5] Musical play not only engages children aurally but visually and kinesthetically.[6] Social interactions are also an important part of play. Students can share musical ideas, practice and refine skills, and imitate and create patterns.[7] In 2017, Lisa Koops researched factors leading to student enjoyment, finding that "children's musical enjoyment occurred when there was a balance of structure and freedom, novelty and familiarity, and individual expression within an established community."[8] Researchers have linked musical development and enjoyment to the exploratory practices in musical play,[9] which led to the question: how might the concept of music literacy be reframed using musical games?

Music pedagogues have discussed musical play as an important pedagogical component, which aligns with developmentally appropriate practices for building musicianship. For example, many elementary music teachers refer to methodological practices derived from Orff, Dalcroze, Gordon's Music Learning Theory (MLT), Kodály, and Suzuki. Each of these methodologies recognize play and social interaction as a fundamental aspect of how students learn and construct meaning in music.[10] An Orff or MLT approach might incorporate games, stories, and imagination to build on the learning styles of emerging musicians.[11] Similarly, a Kodály or Suzuki methodology prioritizes a playful approach to develop strong musicianship while fostering a love for music.[12]

What is Music Literacy?

The National Association for Music Education (NAfME) adopts a broad conception of music literacy as a musician's ability to create, perform, and respond to music,[13] yet many teachers define music literacy primarily as one's ability to read Western classical music notation.[14] Choir teachers might align state and national standards for music literacy toward teaching notational literacy, therefore building learning sequences that center decoding notation. However, some teachers have broadened their definitions of music literacy.[15] For example, some scholars define music literacy beyond reading and writing to include the ways in which people use sound and symbols to communicate.[16] According to Edwin Gordon, "Music literacy goes beyond reading and writing music notation … one must be able to listen to music with meaning."[17] Teachers using a more comprehensive approach to teaching literacy may find lesson planning and instructional delivery to be overwhelming. It is, therefore, important to break down music literacy into smaller parts and consider activities to build skills through musical play.

Researchers have compared music literacy to the process of learning a language.[18] Language acquisition scholars break down communication into smaller domains such as vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, which operate both verbally and in writing, and generally occur through immersion. Teachers can approach music literacy in a similar way by disaggregating literacy into an aural pedagogy and a visual one. Many agree that a *sound before sight* approach to literacy is an effective

strategy when beginning to teach music literacy.[19] According to a Kodály model, a "prepare, present, practice" approach[20] allows teachers to expose students to specific musical elements, then define them, and finally practice them until fluent. In their book *Music Play,* Wendy Valerio et al. unfold a similar informal early childhood sequence where teachers *acculturate* students to a variety of sounds, then those students *imitate* those sounds and practice them until they are *assimilated* into the students' musical vocabulary.[21] Understanding this iterative process of music learning is important in developing sequences for building students' music literacy across their lifespan of musical learning.

Breaking Down Music Literacy

Gordon disaggregated music literacy into three experiences: aural, oral, and visual.[22] The aural experience describes listening to and discerning musical elements. Oral experiences describe one's ability to verbally produce musical elements. The visual experience of music literacy describes processes of recognizing and decoding musical symbols at sight. Sight singing is one way to coalesce these three experiences into one difficult cognitive task. Reducing cognitive load by developing these composite skills independently can help students gain proficiency with sight singing. Gordon's framework provides a strong starting point to conceptualize how some activities span multiple literacies.[23] In this article, we will retain his definitions of *aural* and *visual* experiences, while reframing the oral experience to a *synthesized* experience. In my experience teaching, some students were able to learn music by rote, thereby developing their aural literacy. These students could also write their solfège next to note heads in a variety of keys, demonstrating their visual literacy. However, synthesizing the two experiences was difficult. For example, they could not accurately sing the solfège at sight. Synthesized literacy, therefore, is the ability to demonstrate aural and visual literacies simultaneously. Breaking music literacy into distinct components—such as aural, visual, and synthesized literacy—enables more targeted instruction and assessment by allowing educators to isolate specific skill areas, identify gaps in student understanding, and tailor learning experiences to support focused cognitive development in each domain.

Three Domains of Music

Teachers might focus on three domains of music to teach music literacy: rhythm, melody, and harmony.

1) Rhythm: Students can show proficiency in the rhythmic domain by demonstrating an accurate sense of pulse, meter, and tempo.

2) Melody: Proficient students might recognize and produce intervals, scales, and tunes.

3) Harmony: Students fluent with the harmonic domain can situate music they encounter within a tonality and identify the function of various harmony and progressions.

Teachers can work within these specific domains to target the individual areas of sight singing through play and create a fun environment that encourages students' success in building musical skills.

Playing in the Rhythmic Domain

Aural Literacy: Poison Rhythm

Teaching rhythm in ensemble spaces lends itself to musical play because rhythms are catchy, and rhythmic games are inherently social activities, like dancing or clapping. When I was a student teacher in Houston, students loved the game "Poison Rhythm," which my cooperative teacher used to develop students' rhythm vocabularies. This game involves the whole class in a version of "Simon Says," where there is a four-beat rhythm notated on the board. This rhythm should include the elements the teacher intends to practice, such as the dotted-quarter-eighth-note pair, or combinations of sixteenth notes. The rhythm on the board is the poison rhythm, and anyone who begins to perform that rhythm is "out."

To level the playing field, the teacher should practice the rhythm with the group a few times, thereby aurally reinforcing the teacher's rhythmic pedagogical goal. The teacher can perform these rhythmic patterns on a neutral syllable or using a rhythmic solfège system, depending on their goals for the students. After this,

the teacher will cycle through several rhythmic patterns that build the desired rhythmic skill. Eventually the teacher should perform (clap, tap, sing) the poison rhythm. Any student who begins to repeat the pattern is out.

In a more advanced version of the game, the teacher can clap or chant the rhythm on a neutral syllable, and the students can repeat back the rhythms using their rhythmic solfège. When a student gets out, their job is to help identify other students who might get out. Similarly, all the students could be in competition with the teacher. If any student does the poison rhythm, the teacher gets a point. However, if the teacher does not "catch" anyone, the students get a point. This game exposes students to rhythmic patterns relevant to the teacher's pedagogical goals.

Visual Literacy: Rhythm Relay

Students often express difficulty when demonstrating their ability to decode written notation using a standard rhythmic counting system (i.e., 1& 2& 3& 4e&a). They may easily repeat rhythms by rote, but they struggle identifying those same rhythms in notation, let alone chanting the counts in rhythmic solfège. Similarly, it can be easier for students to sing popular music or rap music by ear rather than transcribing the music or learning from notation. It is important to create experiences for students to practice decoding rhythmic notation. "Rhythm Relay" makes use of the multitude of rhythm worksheets designed to help students read and write rhythms. I used the game to practice writing in rhythmic solfège; however, teachers could also use this game to practice composing specific rhythmic patterns.

In "Rhythm Relay," students work in teams to complete the rhythmic worksheet. First, assign a team captain and place them at the first position of the relay line. The team captain begins by writing in the counts for the first line on the worksheet. When they are finished, they pass the worksheet to the next student, who completes the next line. When the team completes the sheet, the team captain will check for errors. If there is an error, the captain will help the erroneous teammate understand the concept. The fastest team to submit the correct and completed worksheet to the teacher, WINS! Ask the team captain to start the relay for each team so they can write an exemplar for the next students to consider when they fill out their own rhythm. Teachers can extend this activity to prepare challenging rhythms that might appear in their repertoire. It is important for teachers to allow space for the social interactions and laughter that come in these collaborative and low-stakes competitions.

Synthesized Literacy: Epic Rhythm Battle (full class)

While "Rhythm Relay" is a great activity for writing in counts, it doesn't provide a play-based approach for students to perform those rhythms. Consider "Epic Rhythm Battle" as a solution! In this activity, based on the popular "Epic Rap Battles of History," the teacher divides students into two groups. The teacher will project a rhythmic worksheet on the screen or assign a series of exercises that are the same for both teams. Groups will alternate performing sections of the worksheet while backed by a rap track on YouTube.[24]

In this activity, students who have difficulty performing rhythms are able to participate and learn from their more experienced peers. To lower the stakes of the activity, tell students that the winning team is not the most correct, but the team who has the most compelling performance. This activity is a great way to resurge the energy in the classroom if there is a lull. This example builds upon a synthesized literacy of students' embodied music making. Synthesized literacy not only includes performing rhythms but can also include composing rhythms. In order to demonstrate fluency in a symbol system, like music notation, writing in that system is an important step in learning. Once students have experiences with rhythmic vocabulary and their rhythmic solfège system, they are more able to read in that system, and eventually they can compose rhythms.

Synthesized Literacy: Rhythm Origami (individual/small group)

Composing can be one of the more difficult national standards to incorporate into a lesson. When I developed this activity, students had so much fun, they ended up extending "Rhythm Origami" into more advanced composing by incorporating melody and even harmony.

For this activity, the teacher distributes a blank sheet of paper to every student. Instruct the students to fold the paper into either eight or sixteen squares. An easy way to achieve this is to tell students to fold their pa-

per "hamburger style" then "hotdog style" and then "hamburger style" again for eight squares. Add a final "hotdog style" fold for sixteen squares. Once students have their sixteen-square grid, limit students to choose specific rhythmic elements that equal one beat. For example, students can only choose a quarter note, quarter rest, or paired eighth notes. It is important to be mindful to diversify the meters. This activity can also be used for triple meters using combinations that equal one beat in a compound meter (e.g., quarter-eighth, dotted-quarter, eighth-quarter, eighth-eighth-eighth). The students then write one rhythmic element in each box. To extend this activity, have students perform their compositions for each other in class, then trade papers and perform their friends' rhythms. This is a great way to involve social interaction and movement while allowing students the chance to practice composing and performing rhythms in a low-stakes environment.

Playing in the Melodic Domain

Aural Literacy: Intervals and Audiation

Teachers commonly use interval drills when building literacy skills. When I started teaching, my approach to teaching intervals was by rote. Valerio et al. assert that young musicians develop aural literacy by first acculturating themselves to a variety of sounds.[25] For example, atonal music might be jarring to a newcomer until they spend more time listening to and gaining familiarity with the genre. Luckily, many elementary music teachers skillfully acculturate their students to many sounds. *The Interval Song*[26] can be taught by rote to practice diatonic intervals. Then, teachers might practice audiating different tonal patterns with their students. Gordon coined the term *audiation* to describe a person's ability to comprehend musical elements in their heads without verbalizing or physicalizing those elements.[27] To practice this skill, teachers could show spatially oriented Curwen hand signs to their students and have them repeat the patterns back. Consider limiting the pitches to support specific tonal goals. For instance, if a choir is singing a pentatonic folk song arrangement, the teacher might do some audiation exercises using only pentatonic tonal patterns. Eventually, students can lead these drills and practice with each other.

Visual Literacy: "Name That Tune!" and "Who's That _____?"

Many teachers begin with a bell ringer or a simple task for students to do when they enter the classroom. These can be used to refine musical skills or encourage social music making. When less advanced students display difficulty visually tracking melodies in sheet music, use "Name That Tune!" as a bell ringer to gauge their processes for decoding musical notation. For this activity, the teacher displays the notation of a recognizable tune, for example, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Students must figure out the tune by looking at the notation without help from the teacher or any instruments. Teachers can walk around the room to see what approach students take to solve the riddle. Oftentimes, students intuit the contour of the melody until they recognize the song. Once I realized how my students perceived the function of music notation, I could build upon that knowledge.

If teachers want to isolate specific notational elements, they might use the game "Who's that _____?" Many of my students liked Anime and the show *Pokémon*. Before the commercial breaks in *Pokémon*, the show displayed a silhouette of a Pokémon and had viewers guess "Who's that Pokémon?" For this activity, teachers can use this Pokémon background image (or any popular background image) and replace the silhouette with a musical element for students to identify. For example, a symbol from the International Phonetic Alphabet or a series of notated perfect fourths; ask students "Who's That Vowel?" or "Who's That Interval?" Though students might think the activity is silly, they will appreciate the effort to relate to their interests.

Synthesized Literacy: Musical Spelling Bee (full class)

If composing rhythms is an example of synthesized literacy, then composing tonal patterns develops this literacy as well. But familiarity with notating pitches on a staff is a good skill to practice before composing melodies on sheet music. Teachers can use a collaborative game for students to practice notating music on the grand staff. The game "Musical Spelling Bee" requires teachers to divide students into small groups. I usually grouped students in fours. My classroom had a long whiteboard with staves running along their lengths. I put different clefs (treble, bass, perhaps alto, but my

students never needed to read the alto clef) on each line and assign each team a section of the board. Students made a single-file line in their teams and lined up parallel to each other with the teacher at the front of the lines. Using a list of words that can be spelled with the musical alphabet (e.g., cabbage), the first student in each group is given the same word to spell. Students run to the whiteboard to notate the word on the staff. When they finish, they run back to the next student in their team to give them their marker, like a relay baton.

The next student in the line gets the second word on the list, and so on, until the game is finished. The first team to correctly transcribe all the words, WINS! After this exercise, the students sing the various words on solfège to practice connecting notation to sound, even though these words are rarely idiomatic to sing. One possible adaptation of this activity is singing tonal patterns instead of using words and have the students run to the board and transcribe the patterns. This process of transcribing tonal patterns is better to demonstrate melodic dictation and can allow tonal practice if the teacher has the class sing the patterns. Once students understand some melodic formal structures, they can assemble these tonal patterns into a melody.

Synthesized Literacy: Melodic Conversations (individuals/small groups)

Once students have familiarity with notating pitches on the staff and connecting them to sound in their inner ear, they can more intentionally begin composing music. Introducing this process as a game builds composition from "sound before sight." My undergraduate music education professor used to have my class have "rhythmic conversations" with each other to practice improvising rhythmic patterns. I adapted this activity to melodic patterns. For example, the teacher starts this activity singing a four-measure *musical question* that ends on the fifth scale degree to the whole class. The students all respond at the same time with a *musical answer* that ends on the tonic. This way students can experiment with improvising without feeling any pressure from their peers or the teacher.

Teachers might suggest that a musical answer starts the same as the question but changes at the end to go to the tonic. Students can sing these conversations on solfège or any other tonal system. In language classes, students are frequently taught that they should restate the question to provide an answer in a complete sentence, so this syntactic form is likely familiar to them. Eventually, students will be able to have these conversations in pairs where they can ask questions and answers before finding a new partner. Combining this activity with the notational experiences from "Musical Spelling Bee" can help students toward notating these conversations of the staff to create melodic compositions.

Playing in the Harmonic Domain

Aural Literacy: Chord Drills

Harmonic activities are inherently collaborative and cooperative because they require multiple pitches simultaneously. Teachers can use chord drills to develop an aural literacy of harmony. Similar to melodic drills, building an aural literacy of harmony benefits from a "sound before sight" approach. Jacob Collier is an excellent model for teachers to lead students through harmonic progressions. He surprised the audience during a concert at the 2023 American Choir Directors Association Conference when he entered the stage and assigned sections of the audience various pitches in a chord.[28] He would point at different sections and cue them to move up or down by semitone, giving the audience the opportunity to experience harmony in real time.

These activities can be effective for tuning chords, unifying vowels, and engaging creativity, especially when students take the lead. Once students gain familiarity with chords, teachers might teach them functional harmonies by rote. For example, teaching them that a I-chord in major is sung as "Do Mi Sol" and a IV-chord is "Fa La Do." This can prep students for connecting aural literacy to visual literacy because they can understand how various solfège constitutes different chords.

Visual Literacy: Among Us

The game "Among Us" became popular with my students during 2020. In the game, players assume the role of either a crew member or an imposter, leading the players through a social deduction scenario where

crew members need to identify the imposters. In this concept, students find an imposter in harmonic notation. To start, display an image that has five chords. Four of them are the same chord (e.g., C Major in various inversions, on different clefs, or a broken chord instead of a stacked chord) while one is something different (e.g., a G major chord). Students must identify which option is the imposter and explain why. Having students explain their choices helps mitigate random guesses. To differentiate the images, consider putting a differently colored border around each image so that students can choose the "Blue" or the "Yellow" image as the imposter. Sequentially numbering each image is a second option that will increase accessibility for students with colorblindness.

Synthesized Literacy: Focused Listening (full class)

Many students listen to popular music but pay little attention to musical components of the music except for melody and lyrics.[29] Therefore, focusing students' listening to other components of familiar music can build harmonic literacy. For example, the teacher can pick a familiar song and ask students to try and vocalize the bass line or the guitar part. As students direct their ears, they can become more aware of different layers of music. The teacher can divide the class into different groups and assign different musical components to listen to. Limit the song to just one verse or chorus; this way, once students have workshopped their individual parts, they can combine them to perform an arrangement of the chosen song.

Synthesized Literacy: Harmonizing melodic compositions (individuals/small groups)

If students have some experiences writing melodies, perhaps from some of the aforementioned activities, they might consider harmonizing those melodies with chord roots or full chords. To facilitate learning this skill, teachers might sing some simple folk songs that can be harmonized with a few chords (e.g., "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" or "Hot Cross Buns") and see if students can harmonize the song by singing chord roots. Consider encouraging students to be "verbal processors" and sing their chord roots out loud to see if they work.

Start by limiting their options to Do, Fa, or Sol (I, IV, V) for major songs. This is a kind of extension of focused listening but involves students harmonizing with chords where they hear a change. After rehearsing what their harmonies might be, the teacher might have students share with the class and have the class agree on one harmonization. The teacher should explain that any time the chord root is Do, it is a I chord, and so on. Students can then practice singing in harmony underneath the folk song. The teacher might hold up 1 finger for a tonic chord, 4 fingers for a sub-dominant chord, and 5 for a dominant chord to help students track the progression. Once students understand how these harmonies fit with melodies, they can extend the practice to melodies that they have composed. For example, ask students to write a musical question that ends on Sol and harmonized by a V chord. Then they can write a musical answer ending the song on Do and harmonized by a I chord. They can sing through their song and fill out harmonies using the same process as with the folk songs.

Conclusion

Music literacy and sight singing are challenging activities. Students often get frustrated and disengage, and teachers rationalize boredom by emphasizing music literacy's importance to being a well-rounded musician. A play-based approach to music literacy builds on students' social motivations. Furthermore, breaking music literacy down into smaller components like aural, visual, and synthesized literacy can help teachers diagnose and address where students need more practice. Applying these literacies to the musical domains of rhythm, melody, and harmony gives teachers an opportunity to scaffold skills in ways that allow more opportunities for student success. Finally, prioritizing play and games reduces the stakes of learning skills and bolsters the ensemble's opportunities to build community.

By weaving play and games into choral rehearsals, educators not only spark joy and creativity but also deepen musical understanding, proving that learning and fun can—and should—go hand in hand. When teachers embrace play as a serious strategy for music literacy, they empower students to take risks, stay engaged, and discover their musicianship in ways that are both meaningful and memorable. CJ

NOTES

[1] Julie Derges Kastner and Saleel Menon, "Popular Music in Choir: Helping Students 'Find Their Voices,'" *Music Educators Journal* 106, no. 1 (2019): 48–54.

[2] Kathryn Marsh and Susan Young, "Musical Play," in *The Child as Musician: A Handbook of Musical Development* ed. Gary E. McPherson (Oxford University Press, 2006): 289–310.

[3] Allison Renee Fojo, "Constructivism in Choral Music Education: Supplemental Activities for the Traditional Choral Ensemble" *Graduate Thesis Collection* (Butler University, 2021): 539, https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/grtheses/539.

[4] Kathryn Marsh and Susan Young, "Music Play," 462.

[5] Kathryn Marsh and Susan Young, "Music Play," 462.

[6] Andrew Burn and Julia Bishop, "Reasons for Rhythm: Multimodal Perspectives on Musical Play," in *Children, Media and Playground Cultures* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

[7] Susan Young, "Collaboration Between 3-and 4-year-olds in Self-initiated Play on Instruments," *International Journal of Educational Research* 47, no. 1 (2008): 3–10.

[8] Lisa Huisman Koops, "The Enjoyment Cycle: A Phenomenology of Musical Enjoyment of 4- to 7-year-olds During Musical Play," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 65, no. 3 (2017): 373.

[9] Amanda Niland, "The Power of Musical Play: The Value of Play-based, Child-centered Curriculum in Early Childhood Music Education," *General Music Today* 23, no. 1 (2009): 17–21.

[10] Jay P. Mabini, "Comparative Analysis of Kodály, Suzuki, Dalcroze, Orff, and Gordon Music Learning Theory in Early Childhood Music Education: A Literature Review," *International Journal of Research Publication* 150, no. 1 (2024): 956–67.

[11] Sermin Bilen, "The Effect of Cooperative Learning on the Ability of Prospect of Music Teachers to Apply Orff-Schulwerk Activities," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2010): 4872–7; Marja-Leena Juntunen and Heidi Westerlund, "The Legacy of Music Education Methods in Teacher Education: The Metanarrative of Dalcroze Eurhythmics as a Case," *Research Studies in Music Education* 33, no. 1 (2011): 47–58.

[12] Louise Giselle Ban, "Problems and Solutions in Adapting the Kodály Method for Use in Australia," PhD diss., (University of Sydney, 1976); Xiao Chen Liu, I. Ta Wang, and Kwan Yie Wong, "The Effectiveness of Suzuki Piano Teaching Method in Adult Beginner Piano Class," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 12, no. 5 (2022): 118–130.

[13] https://nafme.org/publications-resources/standards/

[14] Edward P. Asmus Jr, "Music Teaching and Music Literacy," *Journal of Music Teacher Education* 13, no. 2 (2004): 6–8.

[15] Paul Broomhead, "A New Definition of Music Literacy: What, Why, and How?" *Music Educators Journal* 107, no. 3 (2021): 15–21.

[16] Julie Derges Kastner and Saleel Menon, "Popular Music in Choir."

[17] Edwin Gordon, *The Aural/Visual Experience of Music Literacy: Reading and Writing Music Notation* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2004), 9.

[18] Suzanne L. Burton and Cynthia Crump Taggart, eds., "Language Acquisition: A Lens on Music Learning" in *Learning from Young Children: Research in Early Childhood Music* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011): 23–38.

[19] Suzanne L. Burton, "Making Music Mine: The Development of Rhythmic Literacy," *Music Education Research* 19, no. 2 (2017): 133–42.

[20] Laura Dunbar and Shelly Cooper, "Speaking the Same Language: How the Kodály Method Promotes Disciplinary Literacy," *General Music Today* 34, no. 1 (2020): 14–20.

[21] Wendy H. Valerio, Alison Reynolds, Beth Bolton, Cynthia Taggart, Edwin E. Gordon, *Music Play: The Early Music Curriculum Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Caregivers* (GIA Publications, 1998).

[22] Edwin Gordon, *The Aural/Visual Experience of Music Literacy.*

[23] Edwin Gordon, *The Aural/Visual Experience of Music Literacy.*

[24] For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7ALZOSS7Fw.

[25] Wendy H. Valerio, et al., "Music Play."

[26] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EejkPYMPUp4

[27] Edwin Gordon, *The Aural/Visual Experience of Music Literacy.*

[28] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxHFJYa4QI4

[29] Julie Derges Kastner and Saleel Menon, "Popular Music in Choir."

In Memoriam

Phyllis Merritt (1939-2025)

Phyllis Merritt, past president of ACDA Southern Region and Florida ACDA, passed away on Sunday, August 3, 2025. After receiving a bachelor's in music education from East Tennessee State University, she taught elementary music in Kingsport, Tennessee, before moving to Florida, where she taught elementary, junior high, and high school choral music. She also served as choir director in several churches. Phyllis completed her master's of music education at the Florida State University in 1972.

During her teaching career, she conducted honors and all-state choruses throughout the United States. Eight choirs under her direction performed for the state, regional, and national ACDA conferences, and three choirs made adjudicated European tours. She was chosen as Teacher of the Year for Okaloosa and Escambia counties as well as for Niceville High School, Meigs Junior High School, and Escambia High School. She was also honored as an Outstanding Secondary Educator of America in 1975.

She was recognized with the Southern ACDA Region Award for Excellence in the Choral Arts, the Florida ACDA Wayne Hugoboom Distinguished Service Award, and as a Distinguished Alumna in the Arts from East Tennessee State University.

After thirty years of teaching in public schools, Phyllis retired from Niceville High School in 1990. She remained sought after as an adjudicator, conductor, and clinician. In 2003, The Phyllis Merritt Singers was founded, bringing together singers and musicians from school and church choirs directed by Phyllis over the years. In addition to community concerts, they performed at the Pentagon, the National Holocaust Memorial, the United States Capitol, and the Biltmore Estate.

Phyllis inspired generations of singers, conductors, and educators through her leadership of school and worship choirs, leaving an impressive lineage of students, colleagues, and friends who carry on her legacy in song.

Photos courtesy of Richard J. Hatch.

Micah Bland
Lecturer
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
mbland1613@gmail.com

The Life and Choral Works of Jester Hairston

MICAH BLAND

"He has shown thousands, if not millions of people, that music is love."[1]

–Eugene Thamon Simpson

The years 2025 and 2026 mark two significant anniversaries for actor, singer, arranger, composer, and choral director Jester Hairston: the 125th anniversary of his birth (July 9, 1901) and 25th anniversary of his death (January 18, 2000). Over the course of his lifetime, he was revered by many in the industry, earning numerous awards, including a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, multiple honorary doctorates,[2] and he is the only known individual to have an ACDA National Convention dedicated in their honor (March 11, 1989).[3] In the preface of his book, *Way Over in Beulah Lan'*, ACDA Past President André Thomas noted Hairston's significant impact on his perception and interest in the spiritual genre.[4] Additionally, Donald Neuen mentioned Hairston's influence in his 2023 Robert Shaw Choral Award acceptance speech, noting that "[Hairston] taught me how to feel the 'inside' of the Spiritual."[5] Although choral directors from earlier generations likely recall Hairston with great fondness and respect, many today may be unfamiliar or only faintly acquainted with Hairston's life and works. In addition, academic literature concerning Hairston's published works is sparse. This article will reintroduce the choral community to Jester Hairston through an overview of his life, published oeuvre, and discussion of selected works.

Biographical Overview

Jester Hairston was born in Belews Creek, North Carolina, on July 9, 1901. The family moved to Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1902 following the death of his father, and he was raised by his mother and grandmother. Hairston's first exposure to the spiritual genre—which would later become the focus of his career—occurred in the evenings when his grandmother would sit in the yard with her friends singing spirituals and sharing stories about their time in slavery.[6]

Hairston's musical training began in primary school, where he learned to read music by the fourth grade.[7] In addition to music, Hairston was a skilled football and basketball player. Due to the racial prejudices of the era, however, he was not permitted to play for most universities in his home state. As a result, Hairston enrolled at Amherst College in 1920, where he majored in agriculture, played quarterback for the school's football team, and sang in the glee club.

Financial struggles plagued Hairston throughout his collegiate pursuits, requiring him to frequently pause his academic endeavors. During his stints in and out of college, he began taking private voice lessons with Vincent Hubbard.[8] In 1927 he enrolled in the music program at Tufts University with Professor Leo Rich Lewis, made possible in part by a loan from Anna Laura Kidder, whom he met through a mutual friend.[9] In total, it took Hairston nearly ten years to complete his undergraduate degree.

After graduating from Tufts in 1929, Hairston moved to New York City and soon joined the Hall Johnson Choir. Early on, Hairston requested to serve as Johnson's assistant conductor; however, Johnson did not believe Hairston possessed the required musical training to serve in this capacity and provided him with additional training and mentorship. Every day, for about two years, Hairston rehearsed a group of sixteen to eighteen friends in Johnson's home as Johnson observed and provided constructive feedback.[10] Toward the end of this training, the Hall Johnson Choir was hired to perform weekly on the *Maxwell House Radio Show*. Because Johnson and the choir were preparing to leave on tour, he informed the program that he would send his assistant conductor, Hairston, with an ensemble. During this thirteen-week residency, Hairston's skills were put to the test, as he was required to produce a new choral arrangement each week.[11] Following the experience, Hairston realized a need for additional training and enrolled in the Juilliard Conservatory from October 1932 to January 1933.[12]

In 1936 the Hall Johnson Choir was hired as the on-screen talent for the Warner Brothers film, *The Green Pastures,* leading Hairston and the ensemble to Hollywood, California. During their seven-year residency, the choir was hired for thirty projects, including the Oscar-nominated film *Lost Horizon* (1937) with music by famed Russian composer Dimitri Tiomkin.[13] For this film, Hairston assumed leadership of the ensemble as Johnson took ill.[14] Impressed by his work, Tiomkin told Hairston, "If I do another picture in Hollywood, I want you to be my conductor and arranger."[15] In 1943 the Hall Johnson choir returned to New York, and Hairston remained in Hollywood to pursue a career in film music.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Hairston's career began to flourish as a choral conductor, arranger, and actor in film. Tiomkin was true to his word and hired Hairston on most all his films that utilized a chorus. During these decades, Hairston is known to have worked on sixty-eight films as a musician with both Tiomkin and other prominent composers of the era.[16] Possibly Hairston's most significant contribution to film music occurred in 1944 when he established the first known integrated film choir in Hollywood.[17]

In 1949, Hairston began a collaboration with Walter Schumann (1913–1958) and his ensemble, The Voices of Walter Schumann. Through this partnership, Hairston met David Lawson, who invited him to lead a ten-day high school choral festival at College of the Pacific (now University of the Pacific). Following the event, teachers wrote to Hairston inquiring how they could purchase his arrangements. Learning of the interest in Hairston's songs, Schumann encouraged and managed the publishing of Hairston's works with a "gentlemen's agreement" that Hairston would not publish with anyone else.[18] Throughout the 1950s, Hairston's works grew in popularity, leading to guest appearances throughout the states.

Hairston received his first major acting role in *The Alamo* (1960), starring alongside John Wayne and Richard Widmark. His popularity in the entertainment industry and skill as a musician caught the eye of the U. S.

Jester Hairston and Dimitri Tiomkin leading an integrated Hollywood film choir. Photo courtesy of dimitritiomkin.com.

State Department, and he was sent throughout the world as a Goodwill Ambassador, leading choirs and teaching them about the spiritual genre. Between 1986 and 1991, Hairston regularly appeared in the television sitcom *Amen* as elderly church member, Rolly Forbes. During the later part of the twentieth century, Hairston continued to appear in film and television as an actor and toured throughout the world working with choirs until his death on January 18, 2000.[19]

Overview of Published Works

As of the release of this article, fifty-four of Hairston's published works are still available for purchase (Table 1 on the next four pages). Table 2 on page 24 lists additional published works by Hairston that have been discontinued and are no longer available. Table 3 on pages 24 and 25 identifies arrangements of his original works by other composers. Due to the limited access of Hairston's discontinued works, this article provides an overview of Hairston's fifty-four available works, with attention given to six selected works.[20]

Although Hairston released a few works during the 1940s in conjunction with his film career, his publishing endeavors did not fully take off until he met Walter Schumann in 1949. Between 1950 and 1960, Hairston published a total of thirty-eight works, a staggering 72 percent of his currently available oeuvre. The remaining fifteen works were published during a twenty-six-year period from 1961 to 1987. An explanation for Hairston's concentrated publishing activity during the 1950s is unknown. Two possible explanations may be inferred, however. First, having arranged music since the 1930s, Hairston likely had a large catalog of unpublished works ready for release. Evidence for this can be observed in the fact that he published thirteen works between 1950 and 1952. Second, Hairston possibly limited his publishing activity after 1960 due to his increased activities as a clinician, appearances as an actor in more prominent film and television roles, and the death of Schumann.

As a composer, Hairston was known for his arrangements of spirituals. Not surprisingly, twenty-seven (51%) of Hairston's published works are representative of the spiritual genre. Hairston's emphasis on the spiritual results, in part, to most of his works being arrangements (70%), unaccompanied (75%), and based on a sacred text (81%).

Possibly the most interesting feature of Hairston's published choral works can be observed in his affinity for divisi soprano and SSATB voicing. Table 4 on page 25 lists the various ensemble voicings utilized by Hairston. Twenty of his works incorporate SSATB voicing, with almost two-thirds of his works utilizing divisi soprano. In contrast to this soprano divisi, Hairston rarely divides the altos or tenors with only five and twelve works, respectively. Hairston also favors the mixed chorus, with all but one of his works published for this voicing. Alternative voicings (SAB, SSA, SSAA, and TTBB) are available for select works and listed in Table 1 on pages 20-23.

Reasons for Hairston's preference of soprano divisi

Table 1. Jester Hairston's Published Works

Title	Year Published	Voicing	Instrumentation	Additional Notes
Amen	1957	SATB, solo; SAB; SSA; TTBB	Unaccompanied	
Angels Rolled De Stone Away	1960	SSATB; TTBB	Piano	Easter spiritual
Christmas Gift	1955	SSATBB opt solo; SAB	Piano	
Christmas in de Tropics	1970	SSATBB, solo	Unaccompanied	
Crucifixion	1952	SAATTBB	Unaccompanied	
Deep River	1951	SATTBB, alto solo	Unaccompanied	
Dis Ol' Hammer	1957	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Dis Train	1954	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Don't Be Weary Traveler	1955	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Elijah Rock	1955	SSATB; SSA	Unaccompanied	
Free at Last	1960	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Arranged by Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson
Give Me Jesus	1960	SATB, soprano solo	Piano	Arranged by Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson
Go Down in de Lonesome Valley	1965	SSAATBB	Unaccompanied	
Go Tell it on the Mountains	1967	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
God's Gonna Buil' up Zion's Wall	1960	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Cover page indicates the work was arranged by both Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson. However, Wilson's name is not included with Hairston's on the first page of music.

Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road	1965	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Tenor solo listed on cover page. However, a solo is not indicated in the score.
Goodbye Song	1967	SATB	Piano	
Gossip, Gossip	1959	SSATB	Piano	Original composition by Hairston and Betty Hall Jones.
Great God A'mighty	1959	SSATBB; TTBB	Unaccompanied	
Hand Me Down	1951	SATB	Unaccompanied	
Hold My Mule While I Dance Josey	1960	SSATB	Unaccompanied with optional piano	Includes body percussion
Hold On	1955	SSATTBB, solo	Unaccompanied	
Home in dat Rock	1957	SSAATB, alto solo and narrator	Piano	Theme and variation form
I Can Tell the World	1959	SATB	Unaccompanied	
I Want Jesus	1958	SATB	Unaccompanied	
In Dat Great Gittin' Up Mornin'	1952	SATBB, tenor solo; SSA TTBB	Unaccompanied	
It's All Over Me	1952	SATTBB, alto solo	Unaccompanied	
Joshua Fit De Battle of Jericho	1952	SSAATTBB	Unaccompanied	
Let the Church Roll On	1978	SATB, solo; SSAA	Unaccompanied	

Continued on the next page

Table 1 continued

Title	Year Published	Voicing	Instrumentation	Additional Notes
Live-A-Humble	1955	SSATBB	Unaccompanied	
Lord, I Don't Feel Noways Tired	1987	SATB, tenor solo	Unaccompanied	
Mary, Mary, Where is Your Baby?	1950	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Described by Hariston as an original spiritual.
Mary's Little Boy Chile	1956	SSATTB, solo	Piano	Described as an original Christmas spiritual based on West-Indian Rhythms.
Negro Spirituals & Folk Songs	1960	SATB (divisi)	Piano and Unaccompanied	Includes sixteen arrangements by Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson.
No Ne Li Domi (You Can't Dance with Me)	1971	TTBB	Unaccompanied	Words and Music by J.M.T. Dosoo and Hairston
Oh, Holy Lord	1950	SATTBB; SSAA	Unaccompanied	
Oh, Rocka My Soul	1950	SSATTBB	Unaccompanied	
Our Troubles Was Hard	1961	SSATB, opt. tenor solo	Unaccompanied	
Poor Man Lazrus	1950	SATB; SSA; TTBB	Unaccompanied	
Ring de Christmas Bells	1972	SSATB, solo	Piano	
Rise Up, Shepherd, and Foller	1974	SATB	Unaccompanied	
Sakura, Sakura/ Song of the Cherry Blossoms	1959	SSAATBB/SSA	Piano	No indication is given that the piano is for rehearsal only, even though it directly doubles the voices throughout. In a video recording of Hairston conducting the work, the piano is used.

Scandalized My Name	1959	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Chile	1952	SSATTBB, soprano solo	Unaccompanied	
Steal Away	1951	SATTBB	Unaccompanied	
Swing A Lady Gum-Pum	1956	SSATB	Unaccompanied	The soprano 2 part is identified and included on the alto line.
Tataleo	1971	SATB, short spoken solo	Unaccompanied	Song in "Ga" language from Ghana, West Africa. Composed by Hairston and Ishmael Adams.
That Old House is Ha'nted	1970	SSATB, solo	Piano	
Two Encores (1. Sittin' Round the Fire; 2. Uncle Johnny's Mule)	1968	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Imitates barbershop harmony style
We're Goin' To That Ball	1967	SSATB	Piano	
What Kind O' Shoes You Gonna Wear	1959	SSATBB	Unaccompanied	
Who'll Be a Witness for My Lord?	1957	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Wonderful Counselor	1952	SSATTBB, solo	Unaccompanied	
You Better Mind	1960	SSATB	Piano	This work is also included in *Spirituals and Folk Songs*

Table 2. Discontinued Works by Hairston (Not accounted for in the analysis of Hairston's music)

Title	Year Published	Voicing	Instrumentation
Band of Angels	1940	SATB	Unaccompanied
Faith Unlocks the Door		SATB	
He's Gone Away		SSA	
I'll Take Sugar in My Coffee-O	1975	SATB, opt. soprano solo	Piano
I'm a Travelin' Man	1963	SATB, baritone solo	
Lay Yo' Head in De Winduh, Jesus			
Little David, Play on Your Harp	1976	SSAATB	Unaccompanied
Long John Done Gone		SSATB, baritone solo	Unaccompanied
Pay Me My Money Down		SA	Piano
The Song of the Trolley			
Wade in de Water	1950	SATB	Unaccompanied
When I Was Sinkin' Down	1977	3-part treble	Unaccompanied
The Wolf and the Dog		SA	

Table 3. Arrangements of Hairston's Works (Not accounted for in the analysis of Hairston's music)

Title	Arranger	Year Published	Publisher	Voicing	Instrumentation
Band of Angels	Tom Fettke	2008	Jubilate Music Group	SATB, SSA	Piano, rhythm section (guitar, bass, drums)

Continued from the previous page

Calypso Lullaby	Joel Raney	2009	Hope Publishing Company	SATB, SAB, Two-Part	Piano with optional flute, 3 octave hand-bells, bass guitar, and percussion
The Christmas Spirituals of Jester Hairston	William Ryden	1988	Bourne Co.	Two-part	Piano
I'll Take Sugar in My Coffee-O (discontinued)	Nathan Scott		Alfred Music	SATB	
Mary's Little Boy Child	Valerie Shields	1996	Bourne Co.	SSA	Keyboard, 2 trumpets (or flutes) and optional string bass
Mary's Little Boy Child	Ed Lojeski	2008	Hal Leonard	SATB, SAB, SSA	Piano, guitar, percussion, and electric or string bass
Mary's Little Boy Child	Stan Bowsher		Bourne Co.	TTBB	

Table 4. Ensemble Voicings in Hairston's Published Choral Works

Voicing	Number of Selections
SSATB	20
SATB	12
SSATBB	5
SSATTBB	4
SATTBB	4
SSAATBB	2

Voicing	Number of Selections
SSATTB	1
SSAATTBB	1
SAATTBB	1
SSAATB	1
SATBB	1
TTBB	1

and limited alto/tenor divisi are unknown. However, one explanation may stem from an awareness of high school ensemble needs during the era. As previously mentioned, Hairston initially started publishing his works after leading a ten-day high school festival at College of the Pacific. He regularly returned each summer for this event and led other clinics with high school ensembles throughout the country. In choral ensembles, it is common to have an abundance of treble voices and a lack of tenor-bass voices, an issue that was also prevalent throughout Hairston's career.[21] Having regularly worked with high school students as a clinician, it is possible that Hairston favored SSATB voicing to accommodate for this imbalance of treble and tenor-bass voices.

Selected Works

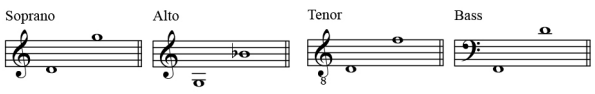
To demonstrate Hairston's inspirational and compositional proclivities, six works were selected as a representative survey of Hairston's published collection. They are divided into three categories: spiritual arrangements (*Elijah Rock* and *Hold On)*, Christmas (*Mary's Little Boy Chile* and *Christmas Gift*), and folk/secular (*No Ne Li Domi* and *Goin' Down that Lonesome Road*). The works were selected for their interesting musical features, historical background, and serve as examples of Hairston's interest in fictional narratives, sound effects, and diverse cultures. In addition, general information (voicing, instrumentation, duration, publisher, year of publication, and vocal ranges) as well as performance considerations are provided for each work to aid choral directors with repertoire selection and score study.

To view a playlist with recordings and interviews, scan the QR code below or use the URL to find the playlist on YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxRtGXHxkiY&list=PLsyAGxXV7Z-GtCuL1IVp_WyAJCqbfBetF

YouTube Playlist QR Code

Spiritual Arrangements

Elijah Rock
SSATB, unaccompanied
(Also available for SSA)
Duration, 2:30
Bourne Co., 1955
Ranges



Elijah Rock is a highly popular spiritual that has been a thematic source for many arrangers throughout the past century. Considering its popularity, it is surprising to learn that *Elijah Rock* would have likely been lost to time if not for the work of Hall Johnson and Jester Hairston.

In 1932, while serving as the assistant conductor of the Hall Johnson Choir, Hairston and Johnson were informed by a chorus member of a former enslaved man living in Keyport, New Jersey. According to the member, the elderly man could sing spirituals that "probably no one in the world [knew] anything about."[22] Recounting the story in his autobiography, Hairston wrote:

> We went way down there one day to Keyport, New Jersey and got down there about 9 o'clock in the morning and played all day with his great, great grandchildren. There were so many of them. That evening we got into his house. The room was so small and there were so many great grandchildren… They said, "If you ignore him, he might sing for you." So I didn't pay him any mind. I led his family all sittin' around in these songs, … everything but a spiritual. After a while, he felt left out. So he hunched me in the ribs and said, "You boys know this song?" So I said, "What is it, sir?" And he sings, "Elijah Rock shout, shout. Elijah Rock."[23]

As the man sang, Hall Johnson quickly and discreetly notated the tune. Upon leaving, Johnson told Hairston,

"Jester, I believe we have a gem here." [24] Both Hairston and Johnson later published arrangements of the tune in 1955 and 1956, respectively.

Performance notes for the interpretation of *Elijah Rock* were discussed by Tim Sharer in the September 1979 issue of the *Choral Journal*.[25] It is interesting to note that Hairston originally intended the work to be "staged and lighted," starting with the basses standing alone on a dimly lit stage.[26] As the song progressed, additional voice parts were to walk on stage as the lights increased in brightness.

Additional performance suggestions include utilizing a "slow and methodical" tempo and avoiding a break between the words "shout, shout" (Figure 1).[27] The latter recommendation is curious, as all available recordings produced under Hairston's supervision incorporate a subtle lift between these words. Reasons for this interpretive discrepancy are unknown. It is possible that Hairston's tempo and rhythmic concerns stem from the arrangement produced by his mentor and colleague, Hall Johnson, who notated a faster tempo and quarter note quarter rest pattern on the text in question (Figure 1). In Hairston's interactions with ensembles, singers also familiar with Johnson's arrangement may have unconsciously exaggerated a rhythmic break, leading Hairston to suggest these performance recommendations.

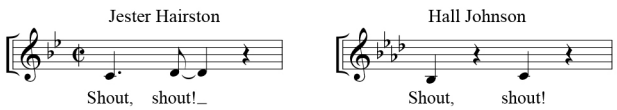
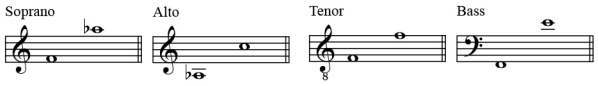


Figure 1. Hairston and Johnson's Approach to *Elijah Rock.*

Additionally, reasons for Hairston's suggested "slow and methodical" tempo may stem from his use of syncopation in Figure 1, which may encourage some ensembles to rush, as well as a response to Johnson's use of a faster tempo in his arrangement.

Hold On
SSATTBB, unaccompanied, solo
Duration, 2:35
Bourne Co., 1955
Ranges



Hairston was an exceptional storyteller, often creating fictional narratives to enhance his works. He stated, "Sometimes, I conjure up a situation and make an appropriate story to go along with the song if I can't find the authentic story."[28] By understanding Hairston's fictional narrative, performers and audience are able to gain insight into the emotional and musical context of the work as envisioned by the composer.

Hold On, for divisi mixed chorus, serves as one example of Hairston's use of fictional narrative. For this work, Hairston imagines a revival meeting in which a sinner sits on the mourner's bench receiving prayer. During the service, a deaconess comes over and tells the sinner,

> The only way… that you'll be able to reach heaven is to keep your hand on the plow… If you're plowing with a plow in the field, and you hold on firmly to the handles, and press down hard, you get a straight furrow. But if you take one hand off that plow… that plow is gonna wiggle.[29]

In Hairston's story, the plow symbolizes Jesus and a spiritual need to hold firmly to Him.

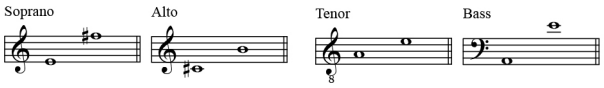
Throughout the work, the melody is passed between the tenor and soprano, with the supporting voices accentuating the melody through a rhythmic delay, entering on beat two. This rhythmic feature, in combination with Hairston's use of syncopation, gives the song a lurching effect, imitating the "wiggle" of the plow.

A solo is indicated in measure 5, occupying the tenor staff; however, there is no indication when the solo should end or what the remaining tenor section should sing. In a recording produced by Hairston, a group of tenors perform the solo, implying that it is optional.[30] If utilizing a tenor solo, this author suggests ending the

solo in measure 21, with all the tenors joining the soloist during each repetition of the text, "Keep yo' hand on de plow, Hold On."

Christmas

Mary's Little Boy Chile
SSATTB, piano, solo
Duration, 3:00
Bourne Co., 1956
Ranges



In addition to his spiritual arrangements, Hairston's holiday songs are among his most popular, particularly *Mary's Little Boy Chile*. Subtitled, "Calypso Christmas," the work is described as "an original Christmas Spiritual based on West-Indian Rhythms."[31] Initially titled "He Pone and Chocolate Tea" (cornbread and chocolate tea), the song was composed as a birthday gift for a friend from the West Indies.[32] In 1954, Hairston revised the tune, recording it with The Voices of Walter Schumann under the title *Calypso Christmas*. The choral octavo for *Mary's Little Boy Chile* was published two years later in 1956 and was soon recorded and released by Harry Belafonte in December the same year. Initially, Hairston was not credited by Belafonte for the work. This oversight was quickly cleared up in court.[33] Solo variations have since been recorded by several other artists, most notably Harry Connick Jr., Tom Jones, John Denver, and Boney M., making it possibly his most recognizable original composition.

Interestingly, the original 1954 Voices of Walter Schumann recording is accompanied by a flute, bells, and percussion. Alternatively, the published choral octavo and a later recording produced by Hairston are limited to piano accompaniment. The variation in these recordings may suggest flexibility with the instrumentation of Hairston's published works, further supported by similar discrepancies discussed later in the article (*Christmas Gift* and *Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road*). Recordings of *Mary's Little Boy Chile,* featuring Hairston as soloist, can be found on YouTube or accessed using the QR code on page 26.[34]

Mary's Little Boy Chile is of moderate difficulty, utilizing lively syncopated rhythms, and relies heavily on the use of a soloist. The method used for notating the solo may be challenging for some singers, as the second and third verses are notated separately on the final page of the octavo. The work is accessible to most high school ensembles capable of the divisi, as the music is highly repetitive, with the chorus singing only two motives comprising a verse and chorus. Although accessible, the work's greatest challenge is its use of syncopation. During each chorus, the choir performs two measures of music entirely on the off-beat (Figure 2). According to Hairston, while leading a choir in Madagascar, the song's rhythm proved to be a challenge. During the dress rehearsal, the ensemble continually performed the rhythm incorrectly, to which Hariston informed them that he would stop and rehearse the mistake in front of the audience if it were incorrect during the performance. Hairston was true to his word, stopping the concert to correct the rhythm.[35]

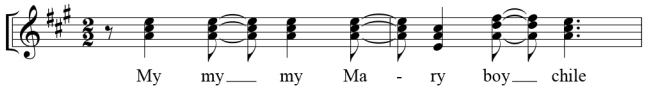
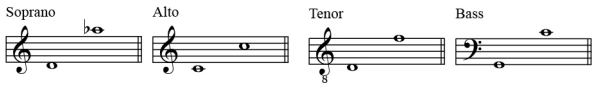


Figure 2. Rhythmic Syncopation in *Mary's Little Boy Chile*

Christmas Gift
SSATBB, piano, optional tenor solo
(Also available for SAB)
Duration, 2:30
Bourne Co., 1955
Ranges



Christmas Gift for divisi mixed chorus and piano, is an original holiday song with words and music by Hairston and serves as a second example of his interest and

aptitude for storytelling. Upon reading the text, one might find the work to be self-centered and narcissistic.

Christmas Gift, hand it here!
Christmas Gift, won't you hand it here!
Christmas Gift, hand it here!
I said it first so now hand it here!

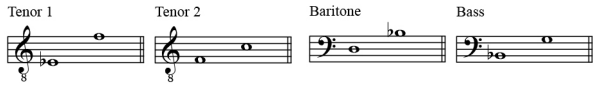
However, this negative perception is quickly dismissed once the reader understands the traditional holiday game that inspired the work. According to Hairston, early Christmas morning one friend would knock on the door of another friend's house and then quickly hide. Upon opening the door, the hidden friend would jump out and the two friends would race to exclaim, "Christmas gift!" The friend who said it last would then have to give the other a small gift.[36] Hence the phrase, "I said it first so now hand it here!" Anecdotally, Hairston noted that an individual would sometimes knock on the front door and then sneak in through another entrance to surprise their friend from behind to win the game.[37]

Composed in the style of jazz, the work is structured in a repetitive verse-chorus form. The optional tenor soloist sings each verse supported by the wordless vocables of the ensemble. The wordless vocables, or scat singing, utilized during the verses simulate the sonorities of a jazz band, with the basses imitating the double bass (i.e., "boom") and treble voices imitating the brass section (i.e., "duwah").

Although only piano accompaniment is notated in the score, a recording of The Voices of Walter Schumann, with Hairston singing the solo, incorporates both a drum set and double bass. This recording is available on YouTube and can be accessed using the QR code on page 26.[38]

Folk/Secular

No Ne Li Domi (You Can't Dance with Me)
TTBB, unaccompanied
Duration, 2:35
Bourne Co., 1971
Ranges



Hairston regularly collaborated with his contemporaries throughout his career. Seven of his published works were written in collaboration with another composer (refer to Table 1). During the second half of the twentieth century, Hairston expanded these collaborations to a global level, leading choirs throughout the world as a Goodwill Ambassador for the U. S. State Department, expanding his knowledge and appreciation of diverse cultures. The Ghanaian folk song *No Ne Li Domi* (You can't dance with me) represents both Hairston's collaborative spirit and interest in diverse cultures.

No Ne Li Domi, for tenor-bass chorus, was written in collaboration with Ghanaian composer Jonathan Michael Teye Dosoo. Incorporating a macaronic text in both English and Adangbe (indigenous Ghanaian language), the work tells the story of a dance contest in which a boy refuses to dance with a girl because she is a poor dancer.[39] Predominantly in Adangbe, the text is short and highly repetitive, with a pronunciation guide provided on the last page of the octavo, making it accessible to tenor-bass ensembles that can manage the divisi.

Musically, the work is highly influenced by Western tonality, imitating Glee club sonorities of the mid-twentieth century, which are possibly a result of Hairston's involvement. It should also be noted; use of percussion is not indicated in the score but acceptable considering the Ghanaian dance basis of the work. According to Jude Nwankwo, dancing in Africa requires instrumental accompaniment. As such, *No Ne Li Domi* would be incomplete without percussion.[40] Interestingly, Nwankwo also notes the collaborative nature of composer and

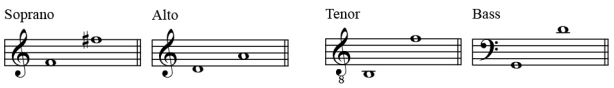
performer in African music.

> In a traditional African setting, performers are collaborators in the compositional process. It is common for choral composers to compose the choral parts and leave the percussion section for the players to improvise, thus collaborating with the composer.[41]

Although improvisation is recommended, percussionists should aim to play in a Ghanaian style, which features distinct characteristics.[42]

— — — — — — — — — —

Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road
SSATB, unaccompanied
Duration, 4:40
Bourne Co., 1965
Ranges



Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road (1965) is considered by Hairston to be one of his best works.[43] The piece is identified on the title page as a work song but described by Hairston as a protest song.[44] This protest sentiment can be observed in the recurring text that concludes each verse, "But I won't be treated disa way." In addition, the song's climactic moment occurs in the fourth verse with the text, "Been kicked all aroun' dis ol' town, But I won't be treated disa way," and is set in a declamatory fashion through the frequent use of accents. Considering the cultural climate of the mid 1960s, and his description of the work as a protest song, *Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road* could arguably be considered Hairston's musical contribution to the Civil Rights Movement.

Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road is dynamically set in an arch form, beginning softly with finger snaps and whistling, building to the previously mentioned climatic moment, and concluding once again with snaps and whistling that gradually fade away. Hairston's use of finger snaps and whistling serve as an example of his affinity for various sound effects.[45] In addition to *Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road*, effects such as snaps, claps, whistling, and nonsense syllables, can be observed in ten additional works.[46]

When comparing the published score for *Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road* with recordings featuring Hairston, several interesting discrepancies appear. First, in a 1974 educational video series on the history and performance of music by Black composers, Hairston incorporates piano accompaniment and replaces the whistling with a harmonica.[47] In contrast, additional recordings directed by Hairston perform the score as notated.[48]

Hairston's willingness to alter his work through the inclusion of piano and harmonica may suggest flexibility in the interpretation and performance of his music. In 1974, when this video was recorded, Hairston would have extensively worked with ensembles throughout the world of varying ages and capabilities. For the recording in question, Hairston may have realized the ensemble's need for additional support and adjusted accordingly. A second discrepancy in the published octavo appears on the cover page which indicates the work includes a tenor solo. However, no solo is marked in the score, and no known recordings produced by Hairston include a soloist.

Performance Considerations

A complete discussion of spiritual performance considerations is beyond the scope of this article.[49] The following serves to identify a few performance considerations specific to Hairston's music.

As most of his works were published over five decades ago, Hairston's oeuvre occasionally utilizes outdated language and objectionable subject matter. Conductors should be aware of the use of gender specific language and antiquated lyrics that do not represent inclusive language. The most surprising use of objectionable subject matter is found in the song *Home in Dat Rock*. Structured as a theme and variation, the work progresses through various musical styles, with the second variation imitating Stephen Foster and the minstrel show. The narrator's text in the score reads,

> During the 19th Century, white minstrel men blacked their faces and tried to imitate the

> slave entertainers. This is probably the way our song would have sounded had Stephen Foster arranged it for a minstrel show.[50]

While the performance of minstrel music is highly objectionable today, Hairston did not shy away from the subject.

Throughout his works, Hairston frequently notates dialect in the score. Interestingly, upon first joining the Hall Johnson Choir, Hairston avoided dialect in favor of the New England pronunciation he learned at Tufts University. To Hairston's surprise, upon asking Johnson to serve as his assistant conductor, Johnson replied that he was considering removing him from the choir due to his lack of dialect.[51] Hairston quickly adopted dialect to remain in the ensemble. Regarding the inclusion of dialect in performance, Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson wrote:

> Another debatable point in the singing of these songs is the extent to which … dialect should be used. After all, they were created in dialect. Much of their charm is enhanced by the dialect. In performance, when all dialect is eliminated, the singing sounds unnatural and affected. On the other hand when most choirs, either Negro or White, attempt to render them in meticulous dialect, the performance sounds stilted. Probably the wisest course is to introduce dialect which is natural to the music and universally accepted.[52]

In connection with this concern of stilted performances, Hairston and Wilson noted the importance of sincere heartfelt expression when performing spirituals. According to Hairston and Wilson, this expression should manifest through physical movement including facial expression, hand clapping, and the rhythmic swaying of the body. However, they also noted that clapping, which primarily occurs in secular works, should be limited in spirituals unless performed in a "spirit of religious ecstasy."[53]

Conclusion

The published choral works of Jester Hairston were highly popular during the second half of the twentieth century. Directors may be familiar with his more popular works; in recent decades, however, many of Hairston's compositions and arrangements have become overshadowed. It is this author's hope that directors continue to program Hairston's well-known works while discovering his less familiar pieces, further preserving the musical legacy of this beloved choral director, arranger, and composer. CJ

NOTES

[1] Eugene Thamon Simpson, "Eugene Thamon Simpson–Rowen College–1994 Interview," YouTube Video, 26:14, September 1, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxRtGXHxkiY&t=53s.

[2] There is conflicting information as to the exact number. An editorial introduction to Hairston's autobiography claims he received "at least five honorary doctorate degrees," while other sources list four or fewer.

[3] "1989 National Convention to Be Dedicated to Jester Hairston," *Choral Journal* 29, no. 7 (1989): 25. André Thomas was asked to lead the conference in Hairston's setting of *Poor Man Lazarus*.

[4] André J. Thomas, *Way over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton, OH: Heritage Music Press, 2007), xiv.

[5] Donald Neuen, Robert Shaw Choral Award acceptance speech (March 2023, Cincinnati, Ohio). Printed in *Choral Journal* 64, no. 2 (September 2023): 53–55.

[6] Jester Hairston, "The Story Song – Black American Folk Music," YouTube Video, 13:27, August 24, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28JKN4ZKucM.

[7] Jester Hairston, "ACDA Jester Hairston Video," YouTube Video, 1:04:24, October 3, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sn801ortqmk.

[8] Jester Hairston, *Jester Hairston: My Black Hollywood and the Legacy of the Spiritual*, ed. Richard Hatch (2013), 95.

[9] Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*.

[10] Jester Hairston, "ACDA Jester Hairston Video." According to Hairston, this musical training took place every day due to a lack of employment opportunities during the Great Depression.

[11] Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 128.

[12] Juilliard Office of the Registrar, e-mail to author, January

3, 2025.

[13] Micah Bland, "Jester Hairston's Film Music Career," *The Journal of Film Music* 11, no. 1 (2024): 5–21, https://doi.org/10.1558/jfm.23542.

[14] Micah Bland, "Jester Hairston's Film Music Career."

[15] Jester Hairston, "ACDA Jester Hairston Video."

[16] The exact number of Hairston's film music credits is unfortunately unknown as he was frequently uncredited.

[17] A thorough discussion of Hairston's film music career is beyond the scope of this article. For more information about Hairston's career in Hollywood, see Bland, "Jester Hairston's Film Music Career."

[18] Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 289.

[19] A musical theatre production about the life of Jester Hairston is currently in the works. See, https://jestermusical.com/ for more details.

[20] *Negro Spirituals and Folk Songs* by Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson has been excluded from the statistical analysis in this article, as the work is a collection of sixteen arrangements, which cannot be accurately categorized in a statistical analysis.

[21] J. Terry Gates, "A Historical Comparison of Public Singing by American Men and Women," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 37, no. 1 (1989): 32–47, https://doi.org/10.2307/3344951.

[22] Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 428.

[23] Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 429.

[24] Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood.*

[25] Tim Sharer, "Jester Hairston: Background and Interpretation of 'Elijah Rock,'" *Choral Journal* 20, no. 1 (1979): 34.

[26] Tim Sharer, "Jester Hairston."

[27] Tim Sharer, "Jester Hairston."

[28] Jester Hairston, "Jester Hairston: The Afro-American Slave Song (1978)," YouTube Video, 2:19:06, August 6, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLTRyEK2i2s&t=1s.

[29] Jester Hairston, "The Afro-American Slave Song."

[30] Based solely on listening, it cannot be determined if it is the entire tenor section or a small group singing the solo. Jester Hairston, "Hold On! Arr. Jester Hairston," YouTube Video, 2:37, July 7, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dpYx_NDFrY.

[31] Jester Hairston, *Mary's Little Boy Chile* (Bourne Co., 1956).

[32] John Shearlaw and David Brown, *Boney M* (Hamlyn Paperbacks, 1979), 105.

[33] Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 318.

[34] Jester Hairston, "*Mary's Little Boy Chile* arr. Jester Hairston," YouTube Video, 3:08, July 6, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFRDQrOkG7s.

[35] Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 395.

[36] Jester Hairston, "The Afro-American Slave Song."

[37] Jester Hairston, "The Afro-American Slave Song."

[38] The Voices of Walter Schumann, "Christmas Gift: The Voices of Walter Schumann, Jester Hairston (Baritone Soloist) (1955)," YouTube Video, 2:27, December 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CYZTqOpImE.

[39] J.M.T. Dosoo and Jester Hairston, *No Ne Li Domi* (New York: Bourne Co., 1971).

[40] Jude Nwankwo, e-mail to author, June 4, 2025.

[41] Jude Nwankwo, e-mail to author.

[42] Jude Nwankwo, e-mail to author.

[43] Jester Hairston, "Teaches the Story Song: Black American Folk Songs," YouTube Video, 12:40, August 23, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W32GNt72kuY&t=3s.

[44] Jester Hairston, "Teaches the Story Song."

[45] Albert McNeil, "Albert McNeil Jester's Choral Contributions," YouTube Video, 8:41, August 19, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duyhxaq_6Qw.

[46] Additional works utilizing sound effects include, *Dis Ol' Hammer, Dis Train, Gossip Gossip, Hold My Mule While I Dance Josey, Home In Dat Rock, Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho, Our Troubles Was Hard, Ring de Christmas Bells, Swing a Lady Gum-Pum*, and *That Ole House*.

[47] Jester Hairston, "Teaches the Story Song."

[48] Jester Hairston, "'Goin Down That Lonesome Road' Rowen College," YouTube Video, 5:29, August 24, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkV_l71q8kU.

[49] For more information on performing spirituals, see André J. Thomas, *Way over in Beulah Lan'*; Felicia Raphael Marie Barber and Andre J. Thomas, *A New Perspective for the Use of Dialect in African American Spirituals: History, Context, and Linguistics* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021); Randye Jones, *So You Want to Sing Spirituals: A Guide for Performers* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); and Anton E. Armstrong "Practical Performance Practice in the African American Slave Song," in Heather Buchanan and Matthew W. Mehaffey, eds. *Teaching Music Through Performance in Choir, Volume 1* (GIA Publications, Inc., 2005).

[50] Jester Hairston, *Home in Dat Rock* (Bourne Co., 1957), 5.

[51] Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 127.

[52] Jester Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson, *Negro Spirituals and Folk Songs* (Bourne Co., 1960), 6.

[53] Hairston and Wilson, *Negro Spirituals*.

TeachMusic.org

IS A HOME FOR MUSIC EDUCATION RESOURCES FOR ALL.

From young, aspiring music educators and their parents to current music teachers and counselors, TeachMusic has assembled helpful articles, websites, videos, and print materials to benefit everyone.

ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION PATHS. This resource points aspiring educators–particularly those who have a degree in music, but not music education–in the right direction to begin their music education career, based on their state's requirements.

RESOURCES FOR COUNSELORS. Many counselors do not have a background in music education, and music college admissions can be tricky to navigate. We're here to help counselors and their students.

NEW Resource: The TeachMusic Job Board!

A full service job board for all things music education, serving both job seekers and employers.

teachmusic.org

DO YOU HAVE A STUDENT INTERESTED IN BECOMING A MUSIC TEACHER?

Have them check out
TeachMusic.org!

DID YOU KNOW?

Your student loans may be forgiven if you teach music for a qualifying employer like a public school or non-profit. Learn more at TeachMusic.org.

The New Canon Project: Bringing New Voices to the Canon

by Robyn Hilger
ACDA National Executive Director

A version of this article was originally printed in Tactus (Spring/Summer 2025), a publication of Western ACDA Region.

This is a project developed on a napkin while sitting on a patio. Lynn Tuttle, the Director of the American String Teachers Association, and I found ourselves at a conference together almost three years ago. While we did not know each other before this meeting, we quickly found kindred spirits in each other. Through conversation, we recognized that each of our organizations had a similar need: more works for developing ensembles written by composers of the global majority. At the same time, the Sphinx Organization had a call for proposals open for ideas that supported artists of Black and Latine backgrounds with a focus in classical music. We knew we had matching ideas and the potential for funding!

Unfortunately, we didn't save the napkin, but we do have the results of that work. Three years ago, ACDA, in partnership with the American String Teachers Association (ASTA), Rising Tide Music & Arts (RTMP), and with generous support of $100,000 from the Sphinx Venture Fund, launched the New Canon Project—a groundbreaking initiative designed to build a vibrant new body of repertoire by commissioning works from Black and Latine composers specifically for school-based choral and string ensembles.

As choral educators, we understand the power of music to shape identity, build community, and reflect the world around us. Yet when we look at the repertoire most commonly found in our developing school music classrooms, it can tell a narrow story—one that fails to fully reflect the diversity of voices in our communities or the richness of musical expression that exists beyond the traditional canon.

This project is not just about creating new music. It's about shifting systems.

Why Now?

There continues to be awareness in our profession about the need to diversify the music we teach and perform. But simply wanting to program more inclusive repertoire is not enough; we need to create the conditions in which that repertoire is created, supported, and sustained. The New Canon Project addresses these needs head-on by specifically supporting composers starting from the commission through professional development, workshopping, and all the way through publication and distribution. This project has created a pipeline for composers and their works.

Composing for school ensembles—especially developing ones—requires a specific skill set. Composers must understand voicing, ensemble size, technical abilities, and performance contexts. Yet many brilliant Black and Latine composers have not had the opportunity to learn how to write effectively for these ensembles. Without that training and a pathway to publication, their music remains out of reach for teachers and students.

The New Canon Project was created to purposefully close that gap. And now, with the help of experienced mentors and school ensemble partners, twenty-one composers have written new works (ten choral and eleven strings) that are available for your school music classroom. Visit www.risingtidearts.org/ncp-collection to learn more.

A Network of Collaboration

At the heart of this project is collaboration between composers and mentors, teachers and students, national organizations and publishing partners. ACDA and ASTA were joined by Rising Tide Music & Arts Press, Hal Leonard Publishing, and the Sphinx Venture Fund to bring this vision to life.

The project began with a call for composers. Selected composers were divided into Year 1 and Year 2 cohorts. Each cohort met together monthly for inspiration, guidance, and support. Through workshops, mentoring, and school-based collaborations, the composers worked to bring their compositions to life.

As a unique feature, each composer had a composition mentor and also worked closely with educators and student ensembles in real classrooms, getting hands-on feedback and the rare opportunity to workshop their drafts with actual performers. These interactions not only strengthened the final compositions but allowed students to engage with the creative process in a meaningful way—demystifying composition and showing young musicians that their voices matter.

The first cohort works are completed and are published through Rising Tide Music Press and distributed by Hal Leonard's ArrangeMe. The pieces can be purchased directly through RTMP but also through Hal Leonard. This ensures the music reaches a wide audience of educators and becomes part of the living repertoire we all have access to. Composers retain the rights to their works and receive sales income from both RTMP and Hal Leonard, creating sustainable career support beyond the scope of the initial commission. You can view the works at risingtidearts.org under Rising Tide Music Press or by looking for the titles on ArrangeMe.com. Please check back often for the newest works.

Centering Equity Through Structure

Importantly, the project is intentionally designed to address systemic inequities in how music is created and shared in our profession. Too often, commissioning and publication processes privilege programs with the most resources, visibility, or skill. In contrast, the New Canon Project lifts up developing school programs—those that may not have historically been selected for participation but have students and educators who are ready, willing, and able to participate in this kind of project.

By inviting smaller, developing skills, or less-resourced programs into the commissioning process, we're not just diversifying who writes music—we're also expanding who gets to be part of shaping it.

Meet the Composers

We want to celebrate our ACDA composers in the project. They are:

Andrés Ballesteros is a Boston-based composer, educator, and administrator whose work chases threads of curiosity and social justice. His compositions blend classical with diverse genres and narrative arcs. He often collaborates with youth and community groups in centering themes of immigration, climate justice, and more. A graduate of Harvard University, Andrés holds an artist diploma from the Academy's Gabriela Ortiz Composing Studio and has been recognized as a Boston Latino 30 Under 30 honoree, spoken at the League of American Orchestras National Conference, and been profiled in Ana Francisca Vega's book *Corazón de Mexicanos Como Yo.*

The New Canon Project: Bringing New Voices to the Canon

Evan Blaché is a non-binary choral composer and artist based out of San Marcos, Texas. Never known to mince words, Evan has composed a lot of work combining the classical style with topics of social justice. They are currently in their undergraduate program at Texas State University for their bachelor's in music studies and composition while singing in the Texas State University Chorale under the direction of Joey Martin and studying composition with Dr. Jack Wilds. Evan currently sings in the groups Tinsel Singers, San Antonio Chamber Choir, Inversion Ensemble, and is an insight fellow in Conspirare.

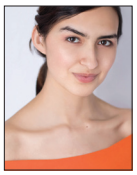
Brian Harris Jr. is currently a high school choir director in Waco, Texas. At University High School, he serves as the assistant choir director for the University Trojan Singers. Brian enjoys working with and meeting new people as a teacher and composer. Originally from Houston, Texas, he is a product of the Houston Independent School District and Wichita State University, where he earned a bachelor of music education.

Taleya Jordan is a senior music education student at Southeastern Louisiana University, where she studies classical, jazz, and musical theatre. She has performed for Southeastern's Mozart Opera Scenes was a featured soloist in Vivaldi's *Gloria* at First United Methodist Church of Hammond. She has performed in productions with Swamplight Theatre such as "Oliver" (Mrs. Bedwin) and "Wilber's Disco Inferno of Love" (Cabaret Performer). She also competes in the Musical Theatre Division of the NATS competition. Taleya owns "Cantante Music Lessons," where she helps both newcomers and seasoned performers achieve whatever goals they have.

Cristian Larios (he/él) is a composer, conductor, and educator from Joliet, IL. He currently teaches at Plainfield North High School and writes choral music that centers storytelling and connection. His work has been performed by Tonality, SWIC Chamber Singers, and others, with his piece *In This House* featured on Tonality's 2024 album *America Will Be*. Recent commissions include *Our Land* (New Canon Project) and *The Good* (William Ferris Chorale). Cristian holds degrees from Illinois State University and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and advocates for equity through music and education.

Juan-Carlos Mackay currently teaches high school and jr. high choirs in Utah. He earned a degree in music composition at Utah State University. Since then he has written for orchestras, jazz bands, and choirs. He's even written for glass bottle ensembles. Encouraged by his wife, he has recently begun writing music for developing musicians and singers. As a child of U.S. and Mexican parents, his favorite music to write celebrates cultural heritages through a Classical style. Juan-Carlos hopes that those who hear his pieces feel a sense of hope and wonder about their world.

Hugo Madera is a choral composer, conductor, and educator based in Nebraska. Born in Jalisco, Mexico, he brings a distinct Latin-American perspective to his works and is an advocate for social change and the diversification of the choral canon. His compositions have been performed by ensembles such as Cantus, The Nebraska Festival Singers, and the UNT University Singers. He leads choral activities at Adams Central Public Schools and is active with arts organizations across central Nebraska. Hugo holds a master's in music education from the University of Nebraska at Kearney and a bachelor of music from Hastings College.



Marina Quintanilla is an Oklahoma City-based composer and musician from the studio of Dr. Edward Knight (OKCU). Marina has sung with OKC's semi-professional choirs—Canterbury Voices and Canterbury Chamber Voices—since 2021, has had numerous performances with the OKC Philharmonic, and premiered her own works. In 2023 she began her journey with the New Canon Project and is currently working on a commission for OKCDA's 2027 All-State Treble Choir. In her free time, Marina teaches at El Sistema, an organization whose mission is to provide free music learning opportunities to students in the Oklahoma City Metro area.

David García Saldaña (he) is an emerging Los Angeles-based Mexican-American Chicano composer whose choral work draws on folk music and traditions. His compositions have been performed by the Los Angeles Master Chorale, SACRA/PROFANA, and The Sunday Night Singers, and he has received commissions from the Los Angeles Unified School District and Cortines High School for the Arts. He approaches Latinidad as a dynamic identity, expanding Latin American music narratives to include the U.S. Latino voice. His "Nochebuena Choral Series" features vibrant new arrangements of Latin American Christmas villancicos. He currently teaches music theory and composition at Pasadena City College. He serves as Western ACDA Composer Track Co-Chair.

Khyle B. Wooten (he/him), a Philadelphia native, is assistant professor of music performance and director of choral activities at Ithaca College. A conductor, educator, researcher, and composer, he previously served at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and taught in Philadelphia and Atlanta schools. His research focuses on Lena McLin and choral works by Black women composers. An inaugural Future of Music Faculty Fellow, he has received commissions from the Cincinnati Song Initiative, Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra, and MINA String Quartet. Khyle holds degrees from Lincoln University of PA (BS), Georgia State University (MM), and Florida State University (PhD).

We hope our ACDA members will explore these new pieces with open ears and hearts. These works are not "add-ons" or side projects—they are powerful, pedagogically sound additions to your repertoire library. They are written with care, tailored to the realities of school ensembles, and infused with the creative voices of composers who reflect the students in our classrooms.

Looking Ahead

We also invite you to be part of the broader movement to reimagine our repertoire. Programming these new works, offering your feedback, and advocating for structural change in your local and state networks helps carry the momentum of this initiative into the future.

In five to seven years, we envision a choral landscape where diverse, high-quality works by Black and Latine composers are not rare gems but standard options in our festival lists, state contest libraries, and daily classroom use. We hope more publishers will invest in this kind of intentional, equity-focused work, and that more composers from underrepresented backgrounds will find both a home and a livelihood in school music spaces.

And most of all, we hope our students—those sitting in choir rooms across the country—will see themselves reflected in the music they sing and understand that their stories, voices, and creative spirits belong in the canon too.

Let's continue to build that canon together. CJ

Rehearsal Break

Jennifer Rodgers, editor

Beyond the Attendance Sheet: Addressing Assessment in the Choral Classroom

by Skyler Bluemel

Grading principles that rely solely on attendance and participation fall short of capturing a student's true development in musical skills and knowledge. While these measures offer some insight into engagement, they do not fully reflect a student's understanding of musical content such as theory, aural skills, or their ability to reflect on their own musicianship. As educators, it is essential to move beyond these traditional indicators and embrace authentic assessment,[1] or methods that provide meaningful, individualized feedback and measure student growth more accurately. This article will explore the principles of authentic assessment and how adopting these practices can enrich both teaching and learning in the choral classroom.

Framework

Professional development in P-12 schools includes support and dedicated research for assessment practices, including readily available resources; those offerings, however, often prioritize core subjects, leaving music educators to adapt generalized approaches to their specialized classrooms. This discrepancy between available resources and a lack of addressing the unique needs of music instruction presents ongoing challenges.

Common problems related to assessing students are: time constraints, workload, large class size, managing diverse student abilities, and limited guidance from administrators with minimal changes to assessment practices despite the adoption of standards-based curricula. Many choir teachers grade students heavily on non-achievement skills such as attendance, participation or effort, and attitude.[2] Music educator Benjamin Kambs suggested that reliance on non-achievement criteria prioritizes logistical convenience over fostering musical growth, noting a disconnect between what teachers believed was important and the actual practices they employed, with most assessments being based on ease and practicality.[3]

The National Association for Music Education (NAfME) does provide music educators with the Model Cornerstone Assessments (MCAs). The MCAs are described as "focused on student learning and are not evaluations of teacher quality or effectiveness. They are to be used by teachers to inform instructional decisions and curricular choices."[4] Although the MCAs are certainly helpful in providing supports such as scaffolding, sequencing, and assessment criteria, they have not been updated since 2017, and the size of the documents can be overwhelming.

Notably, the body of assessment research and resources available for non-music classes is much broader. For meaningful evaluation and growth in musical knowledge, choir teachers should consider exploring more effective and efficient methods for individually assessing students on musical content rather than non-achievement skills. Rather than create systems from whole cloth, the following existing resources could be adapted for effective use in music education settings:

• The Classroom Assessment Scoring System.[5] This system assesses the quality of teacher-student interactions using a 1–7 scale in three domains: (1) emotional support, (2) classroom organization, and (3) instructional support.

• Heidi Andrade's contributions to self-assessment,[6] which is a formative feedback process that promotes learning and enables students to adjust and improve their performance.

• Agnes Smale-Jacobse and colleagues' systematic review on differentiated instruction,[7] or tailoring instruction to students' diverse learning needs within the same classroom.

• Sherri Scott's headings of assessment: (1) assessment *of* learning, (2) assessment *for* learning, and (3) assessment *as* learning.[8]

• Brian Wesolowski's work of meaningfully connecting district-suggested student learning objective frameworks with music classrooms.[9]

The purpose of this article is to provide choral educators with strategies to evaluate their students by providing meaningful, specific, and research-based approaches to assess musical content knowledge instead of non-achievement skills. Some suggestions will involve technology while addressing potential limitations. Some technology tools are mentioned multiple times to highlight that teachers do not need to learn a myriad of new technology in order to implement these ideas.

All content in this article aligns with the four strands of the National Coalition for Arts Standards with the accompanying Anchor Standards found in their National Core Arts Standards: (1) Creating, (2) Performing, (3) Responding, and (4) Connecting,[10] and should be applied or adapted to meet the individual needs of each class and student. The strategies presented here are those I have successfully implemented in public school choral classrooms. Asterisks (*) are included next to select sample assessments in the provided tables to indicate tools that could be used as teaching plans for substitute teachers. Additional supplemental materials—including reading recommendations, sample grading rubrics, and assignment templates mentioned in this article—are available by scanning the QR code at the end of this article or visiting acda.org/choral-journal and clicking the link on the October 2025 issue page.

Assessments in Creating

Assessments in Creating do not need to be difficult or stressful. Example content in the creating strand often includes tasks associated with composition or improvisation, though they look different depending on the experience of the students, the experience of the instructor, and the interests of both (Table 1 on the next page). A sample assessment in composition that my students enjoyed was a daily melody or rhythm journal as a class starter option during a particular timeframe, such as a four-week unit or between two concerts. Students were asked to document musical ideas in a digital journal using a simple and accessible cloud-based program like Google Docs or Google Slides. Google Slides can be particularly helpful because each slide can represent a different day or idea.

Students' compositional brainstorming can be guided by providing a slide template that includes convenient "drag and drop" notation symbols. Providing the notation for students to drag where they want proves helpful for many inexperienced students, while also allowing the instructor to introduce new concepts as they see fit to best cater to the scaffolding of each class. If students are still at the beginning stages of learning how to read music, consider using shapes, letters, or pictures instead of traditional music notation. Students should submit their journal periodically for feedback and grading, which is made easier by having them all digitized. Physical journals work if technology is not as

accessible for all students, though educational supports will look different such as using stickers instead of digital "drag and drop" items.

One method of assessing Creating through improvisation without assigning dedicated projects is implementing improvisational ideas or skills organically through routine teaching. For example, foster student creativity and leadership by involving them in warm-up creation and extension: changing or adding words with guidance, varying rhythms, and guiding them to create new melodies to use. Each day, the improviser should rotate so all students have an opportunity to participate.

To help formalize the structure, provide clear expectations and grading criteria and take care to not turn the experience into a "boring assignment." The act of grading the assignment takes little time if you thoughtfully create a rubric with a simple "check the boxes" process. If you prefer more specific feedback, consider leaving space in the rubric for your comments. By implementing improvisation this way, students are overall more engaged in the warm-up sequence, and most express excitement when it is their turn to be the improviser.

If you have already included Assessment in Creating tasks in your curriculum, consider extension projects such as utilizing Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) like Audacity or GarageBand to record, edit, and mix audio. Students could work with recordings from previous rehearsals or concerts, or they could record their own audio to use. They could then apply their work to making podcasts or social media videos to advertise concerts, promote recruitment for the choir, or teach musical concepts.

Assessments in Performing

According to NCAS and implications from research,[11] assessing Performing should include content beyond tracking attendance at a concert. This is often

Table 1. Creating Table and NCAS Anchor Standards

Creating			
Anchor Standard 1		Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.	
Anchor Standard 2		Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.	
Anchor Standard 3		Refine and complete artistic ideas and work.	
Example Content	Anchor Standard	Sample Assessment	Tool or Strategy
Composition: Assess original musical creations based on given parameters	1, 2, 3	Melody/Rhythm Journal	Google Suite (Slides or Docs)
Improvisation: Evaluate ability to spontaneously create music within a given structure.	1, 2, 3	Improve text, rhythm, or solfège in warm-ups; daily rotations	Rubric to assess selected criteria; "check the boxes"

the area where I have experienced frequent barriers. It seems impossible to accurately assess every singer on performance standards when you have forty-nine minutes in a class period and more than fifty singers in a choir. I found separating Performing assessments from actual concerts to be difficult but noticeably worthwhile for my teaching goals. I began by separating evaluative qualities and Performing tasks into categories (Table 2 on the next page), then developing assessments that would both accurately assess them and cause the least amount of disruption to my routines.

One assessment I quickly adopted into my "teaching toolkit" was Speed Dating,[12] or as I call it "Speed Sharing" in an educational setting. The concept is simple: students teach each other learned concepts to demonstrate content mastery and collaboration in their learning process. After learning a concept, such as proper alignment, students stand in groups of two lines facing each other. Their task is to teach information about the topic to the student they face, rotating regularly.

Table 3 on page 44 shows the rotation process, separating the stationary orange students with the mobile blue students. Each orange student could teach a part of proper alignment so each blue student will learn the entire lesson after a complete rotation through the line, or each orange student could teach an entirely different concept from alignment, providing a broader educational experience for the blue students. It is important to set clear objectives and expectations, and I have found it helpful to have a visible timer to signal rotations.

To assess an activity like speed dating, include yourself as a blue student to determine the orange students' understanding of the topics. Alternatively, move around and take notes during the activity; rubrics could also come in handy here. This activity offers flexibility for varying group sizes, time available, and experience-appropriate topics. "Speed Sharing" works well as a summative assessment at the end of a class period or lesson, or as an opening review at the start of class. Consider introducing the process by allowing the students to teach anything they want (within your school's guidelines). You might be surprised to learn what your students enjoy doing and learning!

Vocal technique, musicianship, and accuracy can also be assessed through singing checks using clear rubrics and cloud-based video submissions. Video recordings are helpful to minimize disruptions to class routines, and they allow you to pause for comments, rewind for accuracy, and speed up to save time. I recommend using either excerpts from class literature or software like Sight Reading Factory to generate musical examples so you do not have to create the content yourself. Also, Sight Reading Factory allows students to record themselves with each generated example and can connect to some learning management systems such as Canvas or Blackboard, further preserving your time.

Other ensemble skills include balance, blend, and coordinated singing and can be assessed through small-group performances. These performances can happen in class or for an event like a dedicated concert or a "Parents' Night." When assessing it for a grade, consider giving the students their own rubric to assess themselves, each other, or both to deepen the learning process.

Practicing is an important part of performance,[13] so teaching and assessing practice habits is paramount to effective teaching in music.[14] After teaching appropriate procedures and elements of effective practicing, hold a "practice day" where your students demonstrate what they have learned. If you do not have an entire day to dedicate, set aside at least fifteen minutes for this activity. While your students practice in front of you, move around the room to observe, correct, and provide specific feedback as necessary. After a couple iterations of this activity, "practice days" lend themselves well as plans for substitute teachers.

Finally, the NCAS anchor standards four and six suggest there is merit in teaching your students how to appropriately select literature for a concert program. A simple assessment activity includes students creating a concert program using accessible software like Google Slides or Google Docs. More advanced programs like Canva are also effective, though they may entail learning curves for you or your students. I enjoy seeing which songs the students programmed, finding a few gems for my own choral library along the way. Consider selecting a song or two from this project to perform with that group. Students will feel overjoyed when a song they selected becomes part of the concert!

Table 2. Performing Table and NCAS Anchor Standards

Performing			
Anchor Standard 4		Analyze, interpet, and select artistic work for presentation.	
Anchor Standard 5		Develop and refine artistic work for presentation.	
Anchor Standard 6		Convey meaning through presentation of artistic work.	
Example Content	Anchor Standard	Sample Assessment	Tool or Strategy
Vocal Technique: Assess proper alignment, breath support, vowel shapes, etc.	5, 6	Peer-teaching	"Speed Dating" or "Speed Sharing"
Accuracy: Evaluate pitch, rhythm, and note accuracy	5, 6	*Singing Checks	Sight Reading Factory, Video/Audio Submissions
Musicianship: Assess phrasing, dynamics, and expression	5, 6	*Singing Checks	Sight Reading Factory, Video/Audio Submissions
Ensemble Skills: Evaluate students' ability to blend, balance, and sing in sync with others	5, 6	Small Ensemble Performance	Rubric: Students' and Teacher's
Practice Habits: Assess students' ability to practice effectively	4, 5, 6	*"Practice Day(s)"	Procedure and Rubric
Programming: Assess students' ability to effectively select literature for performance	5, 6	*Organize a Concert Program	Google Suite (Slides or Docs)

*Indicates sample assessments that could easily be used as sub plans

Assessments in Responding

Responding is a strand that integrates well into assessment strategies of the other strands, offering many "two for one" assessments (Table 4 on the next page). The Responding content of sight-reading, for example, can also be used as the content for the previously discussed singing checks. Although listening skills can be assessed with ensemble skills and even composition and improvisation, I chose to focus on the context of analyzing musical recordings to broaden students' musical experiences, as well as to learn how to study and discuss their own rehearsals and performances.

A guided listening journal has proven to be a simple and efficient assessment method. I often use it as the starter during a unit or grading term and choose excerpts or songs that are appropriate for the singers' age, interest, and ability. Frequently, I select recordings of music from my choral library, selections from other concerts I have seen, or otherwise engaging music like unaccompanied vocal mashups. The journal document itself includes prompts, specific questions, and sentence stems as scaffolding tools to guide their thoughts. I recommend the journal be a cloud-based digital document to keep it readily available, organized, and easy to submit; again, Google Docs is a great option.

Although worksheets and handouts are common formal assessment tools to determine music literacy and knowledge of music theory, many students prefer games. Educational online games and applications are often fun and simple while connecting directly to appropriate knowledge and content. They also lend themselves nicely to serve as substitute plans or activities for extension or review. Consider game services like Blooket, Gimkit, or Kahoot (links available at the end of this article). Similar to Sight Reading Factory, some games might be able to be integrated into your district's

Table 3. Speed Dating or "Speed Sharing" (Comprehensible Classroom, 2014)

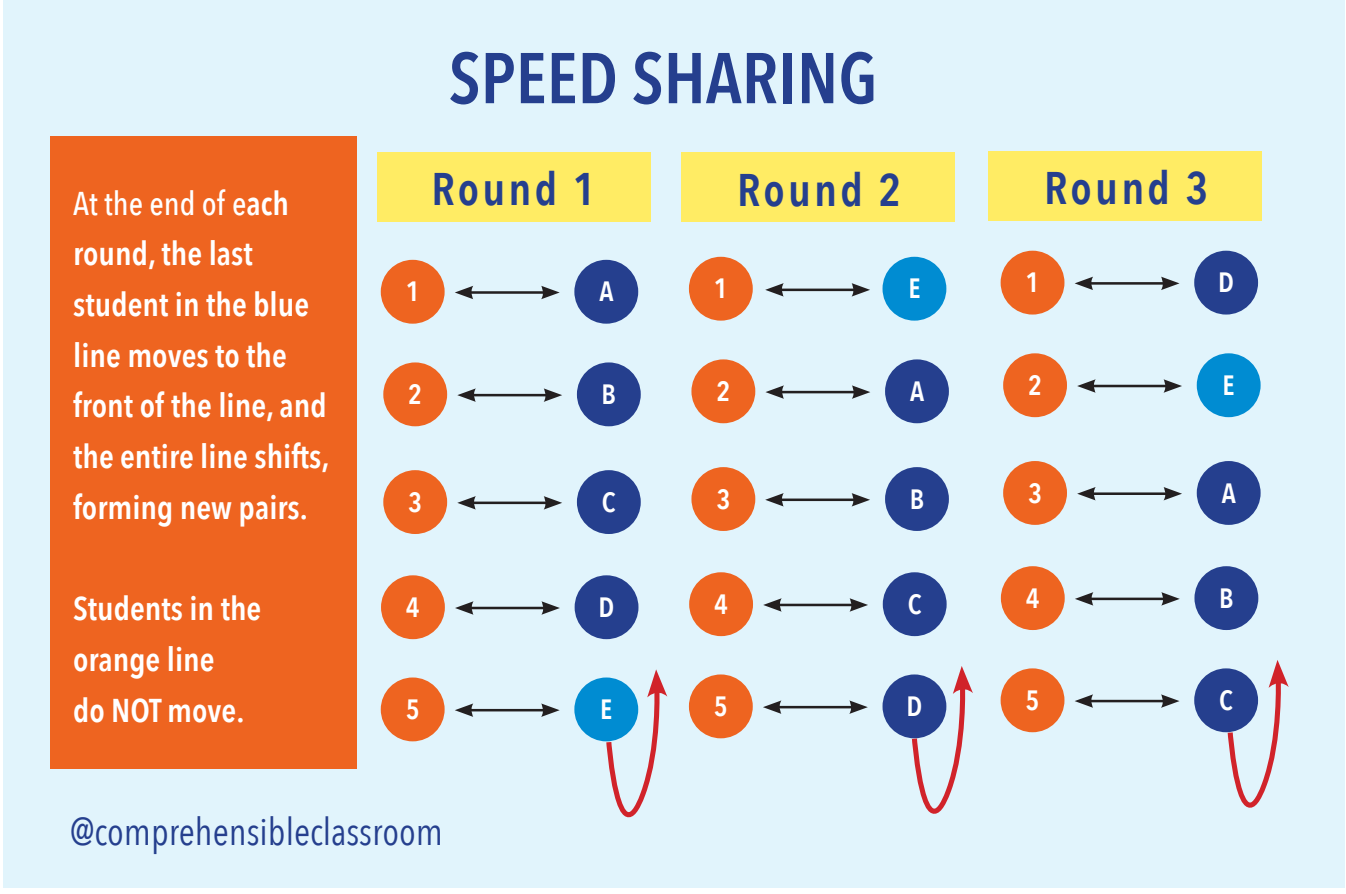


Table 4. Responding Table and NCAS Anchor Standards

Responding			
Anchor Standard 7		Perceive and analyze artistic work.	
Anchor Standard 8		Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.	
Anchor Standard 9		Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.	
Example Content	Anchor Standard	Sample Assessment	Tool or Strategy
Music Reading: Assess ability to read musical notation, including rhythms, pitches, musical symbols, and proper use of terms	7, 8, 9	*Educational Games: Blooket, Gimkit, Kahoot, etc.	Screenshot of "score" or results
Sight Reading: Evaluate students' capacity to perform unfamiliar music at first sight	7, 9	*Singing or Rhythm Checks	Sight Reading Factory, Video/Audio Submissions
Music Theory Knowledge: Assess understanding of scales, key signatures, chord progressions, etc.	7, 8, 9	*Educational Games: Blooket, Gimkit, Kahoot, etc.	Screenshot of "score" or results
Listening Skills: Assess ability to analyze and describe musical elements in recordings	7, 8, 9	Guided Listening Journal	Google Docs
Self Assessment: Evaluate personal performances and progress	7, 9	Regular Reflections (Post Concert)	Google Forms or another survey tool

*Indicates sample assessments that could easily be used as sub plans

learning management system, providing you with the capabilities to easily create activities, assignments, and assessments.

Self-assessment is always included in my post-performance routine. I have a pre-made Google Form duplicated and adjusted for each performance that asks questions about their recent experiences at the performance and throughout the rehearsal process. I also have singers set specific individual goals to work on before the next performance, giving me insight into their concerns, priorities, and musical understanding. The bulk of the self-assessment reflection instructs the students to rate themselves in areas I have identified as my focus objectives for the year. Some examples include pitch, behavior, sight-reading, and musical notation. As a bonus, parents have usually shown more interest and support when I bring the responses to parent-teacher conferences, especially if they can see trends and progress in their child's educational experiences in choir.

Assessments in Connecting

Connecting has always proven difficult to assess without assigning large papers or projects, and I used to think that I could not spare that valuable instruction time. However, after experiencing a shift in priorities during my early teaching years, I began to include a few graded tasks throughout my regular teaching. Almost immediately I noticed a difference in the way students discussed music and culture, so I began dedicating time in my curriculum to teach and assess the Connecting strand (Table 5).

A favorite assessment to reinforce historical and cultural context in our music and community is a collabo-

Table 5. Connecting Table and NCAS Anchor Standards

Connecting			
Anchor Standard 10		Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.	
Anchor Standard 11		Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historic context to deepen understanding.	
Example Content	Anchor Standard	Sample Assessment	Tool or Strategy
Historical/Cultural Context: Evaluate knowledge of music history, styles, and cultural influences	10, 11	*Collaborative slideshow on an era, style, or culture; Present at PTC	Mentimeter, Nearpod, Google Slides
Personal Connection: Applying meaningful transfers between personal experiences and musical literature.	10	* Self "interview" on a class song; "new hit single"	Google Docs or Forms; video project

*Indicates sample assessments that could easily be used as sub plans

rative slideshow for each choir using software programs like Mentimeter, Nearpod, or Google Slides. Each student takes ownership of a single slide and contributes to the topic of the slideshow, or they can choose their own topic within set parameters. The content must relate to what we are singing or studying, or what they are learning in other classes, to ensure a connection is made to their personal lives. Students have expressed how much they ended up enjoying the experience, noting feelings of collaboration and satisfaction when the slideshow is finished. I display the running slideshow next to my area at parent-teacher conferences as well as email a link to all of my students' parents/guardians and the rest of the school's faculty, staff, and administration; this often receives quite a bit of positive feedback.

A "self-interview" can be a helpful way to assess students' connections to class content and their personal experiences. Students will choose a current class song and conduct an "interview" either by filling out a simple digital document using Google Forms or Google Docs, or by including actual video footage of the students responding to the questions using recording tools such as a camera application. I especially like the assessment for its flexibility, relevance to social media, and technology integration. Students enjoy the creativity of the assessment, which often results in engaging and sometimes hilarious interviews.

Exit Ticket

Addressing effective assessment in the choral classroom is crucial for fostering genuine musical growth and aligning teaching practices with educational standards. This article has explored various strategies for evaluating students based on musical content knowledge rather than non-achievement skills, addressing the four strands of the National Core Arts Standards: Creating, Performing, Responding, and Connecting. By implementing innovative assessment methods such as those discussed in this article, choral educators can more effectively gauge their students' musical development while maintaining engaging and efficient classroom practices.

The shift toward content-based assessment not only enhances the educational experience for students but also provides teachers with more meaningful data to inform their instruction. By embracing these approaches, teachers can create a more comprehensive and equitable evaluation system that truly reflects students' musical abilities and progress, ultimately leading to more effective and rewarding choral education experiences. CJ

Skyler Bluemel is a graduate teaching assistant at Louisiana State University. sbluem1@lsu.edu

QR code for
Supplemental Resources

Suggested Technology Tools

Apple Inc.,
GarageBand Computer software
https://www.apple.com/mac/garageband/

Audacity Team,
Audacity Computer software
https://www.audacityteam.org

Blooket LLC,
Blooket Educational platform
https://www.blooket.com

Canva Pty Ltd.,
Canva Graphic design software
https://www.canva.com

Gimkit LLC,
Gimkit Educational platform
https://www.gimkit.com

Instructure,
Canvas Learning management system
https://www.instructure.com/canvas

Kahoot! AS,
Kahoot Educational platform
https://www.kahoot.com

Mentimeter AB,
Mentimeter Presentation software
https://www.mentimeter.com

Nearpod Inc.,
Nearpod Educational technology platform
https://www.nearpod.com

Sight Reading Factory,
Sight Reading Factory Computer software
https://www.sightreadingfactory.com

NOTES

[1] Thomas Palm, "Performance Assessment and Authentic Assessment: A Conceptual Analysis of the Literature," *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation* 13, no. 4 (2008): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.7275/0qpc-ws45.

[2] A list of suggested reading related to assessment practices is available in the supplemental resources document. See the QR code on page 47 or visit acda.org/choraljournal and view the October 2025 issue page.

[3] Benjamin Kambs, "Assessment Practices and Beliefs of Secondary Choir Teachers," *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* (2024): 1–10, https:// doi.org/10.1177/875512332412366.

[4] National Association for Music Education, "Music Model Cornerstone Assessments." NAfME, accessed October 10, 2024, https://nafme.org/resource/music-model-cornerstone-assessments/.

[5] Christopher A. Hafen, Bridget K. Hamre, Joseph P. Allen, Courtney A. Bell, Drew H. Gitomer, and Robert C. Pianta, "Teaching through Interactions in Secondary School Classrooms: Revisiting the Factor Structure and Practical Application of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System–Secondary," *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 35, no. 5–6 (2015): 651–80, https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431614537117.

[6] Heidi L. Andrade, "A Critical Review of Research on Student Self-Assessment," *Frontiers in Education* 4 (2019): 87, https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00087.

[7] Agnes E. Smale-Jacobse, Adrie Meijer, Madeleine Helms-Lorenz, and Rindert Maulana, "Differentiated Instruction in Secondary Education: A Systematic Review of Research Evidence," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019): 2366, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02366.

[8] Sherri J. Scott, "Rethinking the Roles of Assessment in Music Education," *Music Educators Journal* 98, no. 3 (2012): 31–5, https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432111434742.

[9] Brian C. Wesolowski, "Tracking Student Achievement in Music Performance: Developing Student Learning Objectives for Growth Model Assessments," *Music Educators Journal* 102, no. 1 (2015): 39–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432115589352.

[10] National Coalition for Arts Standards, National Core Arts Standards. Accessed October 10, 2024, https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/.

[11] Elizabeth R. Hearn, "Assessment in the Choral Classroom: A Case Study of a Secondary Choral Program," *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing* 9 (2021): 41 -67; Benjamin Kambs, "Assessment Practices and Beliefs"; Edward J. Kotora, "Assessment Practices in the Choral Music Classroom: A Survey of Ohio High School Choral Music Teachers and College Choral Methods Professors," *Contributions to Music Education* 32, no. 2 (2005): 65 –80; Julie A. Russell and James R. Austin, "Assessment Practices of Secondary Music Teachers," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 58, no. 1 (2010): 37-54, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429409360062.

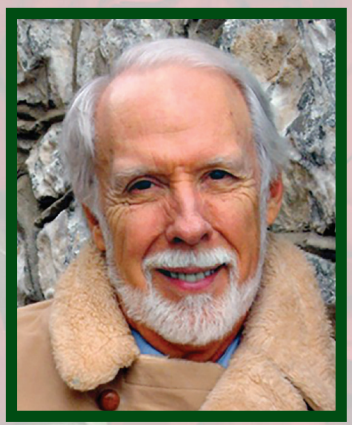
[12] Comprehensible Classroom, Speed Dating, "The Comprehensible Classroom," 2014, https://comprehensibleclassroom.com/2014/11/28/speed-dating-cooperative-learning.

[13] Aaron Williamon and Elizabeth Valentine, "Quantity and Quality of Musical Practice as Predictors of Performance Quality," *British Journal of Psychology* 91 (2000): 353–76, https://doi.org/10.1348/000712600161871.

[14] Katie Zhukov, "Effective Practising: A Research Perspective," *Australian Journal of Music Education* 1 (2009): 3–12, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ912405.pdf.

In Memoriam

James Laster (1934-2025)



James H. Laster Jr. was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on April 19, 1934. He was professor emeritus at Shenandoah Conservatory of Shenandoah University, Winchester, Virginia. He held degrees in music history and biology from Maryville College, Maryville, Tennessee; a master's in musicology and PhD in church music from George Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee; and a master's in library science (music emphasis) from Catholic University in Washington, DC. He also held a certificate in organ from the Mozarteum Summer Academy, Salzburg, Austria.

Dr. Laster held teaching positions at George Peabody College; Grove City College in Pennsylvania; the Community School of Tehran, Iran; the Beirut College for Women, Beirut, Lebanon; and was a member of the faculty of Shenandoah Conservatory for twenty-seven years. He served as a reference librarian in the Alson Smith, Jr., Library on the Shenandoah campus. For twenty-three years he was the director of the Cantus Singers, a women's choral ensemble that appeared regularly on campus as well as in the Northern Virginia area. He also directed the Shenandoah Singers, a show choir of twenty-two singers, for ten years. He was active in theatre both on and off the stage; he was musical director for fifty-two musical theatre productions, and he earned Actors Equity and SAG cards, appearing in nearly eighty productions, predominantly live theater plus a handful of commercials and movie cameos.

He was past president of Virginia ACDA and past state chair for the R&R committee on women's choruses. His choral works are published by Augsburg-Fortress, Concordia, Mark Foster, Boosey & Hawkes, Hinshaw, and Treble Clef Press. He served as guest conductor and clinician for workshops and regional choral festivals. In 2006, the Virginia General Assembly enacted a resolution commending James for his cultural contributions to the Commonwealth.

PennState
College of Arts
and Architecture

The Fifth International Meeting of the

Symposium for Research in Choral Singing

A hybrid symposium held in person and remotely

April 30 - May 1, 2026

The Big 10 Conference Center
Chicago, Illinois

AMERICAN
CHORAL
DIRECTORS
ASSOCIATION

On the Voice

Matthew Hoch, editor <mrh0032@auburn.edu>

Warming Up the Choir: Bridging the Domains of Singing Voice Pedagogy and Voice Science

by Regina McAllen, Melissa Forbes, and Diane Hughes

For many singers, the choral director[1] serves as their most influential teacher of singing.[2] Additionally, choral directors may also be singing voice teachers and provide singing lessons to individual students. Warm-up exercises are used in both contexts. However, noticeable differences in terminology arise not just between choral directors and singing voice instructors but also among speech-language pathologists and voice scientists. The introduction of newer terminology adds to the existing confusion, requiring clarification in cross-disciplinary discussions and within the field of voice education.[3] Moreover, scholarly research on the most effective methods for teaching vocal technique in a group setting is scarce.[4] Similarly, there are a range of perspectives on the utility of warming up the voice within the voice science community.[5] Such divergences in both practice and research present an opportunity to explore the purpose and objectives of choral warm-ups, with a view to bridging the gap between the pedagogical and voice science domains and fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the warm-up for choral directors.

Vocal Exercises and Their Contexts

A fundamental step in teaching students to sing involves warming up the voice. In the following discussion, we specifically focus on those exercises that fall within "warm-ups," as these are central in preparing and facilitating students to sing. In doing so, however, we do not discount the inclusion of a cooldown routine. Rather, we view this as a discrete category of vocal exercises that is intended to produce different physiological effects from warm-ups.[6]

The literature firmly establishes that warm-up routines are widely practiced in both choir rehearsals and singing lessons.[7] One of the most prominent figures in the field of voice pedagogy, Richard Miller (1926–2009), characterized the choral director as a voice teacher, emphasizing their need to possess exceptional qualifications to develop the singer holistically, both as a soloist and chorister.[8] Through warm-up exercises, teachers may strive to deepen students' understanding of their voices, address their unique vocal needs, and foster confidence in their singing abilities. Choral directors and singing voice teachers, however, often hold contrasting viewpoints regarding the purpose of warm-

ups. The terminologies applied to vocal exercises are not universally standardized either, with different exercises adopting varying practices related to voice function and/or vocal efficiency.[9] This complexity extends to vocal education where terms such as "warm-ups," "singing exercises," "vocalises," "functional exercises," and "exercises for vocal technique" may be used without establishing a clear distinction.

Choral directors often use the term vocal (or choral) "warm-ups" as a comprehensive phrase encompassing singing preparation, skill acquisition, and preparation for performance. Patrick Freer states that a vocal warm-up is "a sequence of activities focused on the coordination of vocal skills in preparation for the requirements of a specific rehearsal."[10] On the other hand, Miller emphasized the need for a clear distinction between vocalization for technical development purposes and vocalizing before a performance.[11] Supporting Miller's perspective, Matthew Hoch and Mary Sandage agree that the nature and purpose of a warm-up varies depending on whether it is used for vocal training preparation or as a preperformance exercise.[12]

During individual singing voice lessons, warm-ups may be used to prepare the student for exercises in the vocal technique to follow, or beyond the lesson, and may be used for performance preparation.[13] The singing voice teacher can exclusively concentrate on a warm-up tailored to individually targeted functional and vocal technique exercises. Here, distinctions can be made between exercises that prepare the voice to sing, exercises to render the initiation of healthy and efficient singing, and those targeted toward technical development. The nature, purpose, and duration of these exercises are therefore context dependent. In contrast, choral directors may use the term vocal "warm-ups" more broadly to encompass creating group focus, achieving a unified blend, intonation, aural and function exercises, and for performance preparation.[14] Choral directors will often use solfège during warm-up time to assist singers in learning aural and music theory skills[15] that their instrumentalist counterparts usually already possess.

Performance preparation is another point of departure between choir rehearsals and individual voice lessons. In a choir setting, the director plays a crucial role in guiding the preparation process, eliminating the need for singers to independently devise their own routine. Consequently, the choral director must carefully choose exercises so that the vocal warm-ups comprehensively address both voice and function.[16] In contrast, the individual singer will customarily assume responsibility for warming-up prior to a performance, employing their own distinctive systematic warm-up procedure.[17]

Choral directors and singing voice teachers share the common objective of addressing technical issues and promoting skill acquisition. However, there remains a notable difference between the two. Since it is usually not practical for choral directors to predict each singer's individual vocal requirements, they tend

to incorporate vocal exercises into the warm-up, aiming to provide a comprehensive and balanced opportunity for skill development across the ensemble.[18] On the other hand, singing voice teachers have the advantage of working one-on-one with singers, allowing them to provide specific technical exercises tailored to each student. This personalized approach enables the singing voice teacher to address specific technical challenges and facilitate targeted skill development.[19]

For a choral director overseeing a large and diverse ensemble, engaging all students simultaneously can be challenging, which makes the inclusion of focusing exercises crucial.[20] High school students exposed to constant noise during bus commutes, in hallways, cafeterias, lively classrooms, the school bell, and during sports activities must transition to focused listening when they enter rehearsals.[21] It therefore becomes challenging for choral directors to enhance the auditory sharpness and mental alertness of singers.[22] The choral director faces the task of motivating and sustaining the interest of multiple singers with different vocal needs in a group setting. To achieve this, the choral director employs diverse content, energetic pacing, and efficiently covers a wide range of choral concepts in innovative ways.[23] When comparing individual singing voice lessons and choir settings, however, there is a distinction in the application of focusing exercises. In individual voice lessons, these exercises are generally considered unnecessary due to the one-on-one setting, which tends to promote individual motivation and focus throughout the lesson.[24] In this setting, there is less need to direct the student's focus, allowing for extensive and detailed work to be undertaken during warm-up through both functional and technical exercises.

Voice Science and Warming Up

Of note for this discussion is that voice science and singer perceptions can vary regarding the role, nature, and effectiveness of the warm-up.[25] There also appears to be no clear consensus among practitioners regarding the definition and purpose of warming up.[26] Despite this, some studies provide evidence supporting the physiological advantages of warming up. For example, research has shown that warming up can enhance vocal quality in female singers, albeit with variations observed across voice categories.[27] Furthermore, warming up has been found to promote more resonant and in-tune singing in particular choral contexts, to impact phonation threshold pressure (though effects may differ between individuals), and to enhance the regularity and stability of vibrato for some singers.[28] A study by Edward Połrolniczak and Michał Kramarczyk aimed to assess the potential positive impact of vocal function exercises on vocal quality. Their analyses yielded noteworthy improvements across a wide range of parameters. The findings indicate that engaging in vocal technique exercises as part of a warm-up enhances "the regularity of the acoustic signal of singing."[29] According to Jo Levett and Tim Pring's research, including choir warm-up sessions is important for amateur singers who may lack awareness of vocal health risks and how to address them.[30] Although some studies propose that tailored voice function exercises conducted over several weeks could potentially improve a singer's vocal range,[31] Frank Ragsdale and colleagues determined that there is no uniform or optimal duration of warm-ups that results in both objective and subjective improvement in voice quality.[32]

The complexity of warm-up considerations and the self-perception of singers is further evident in a study conducted by Lynda Moorcroft and Dianna Kenny, who recorded singers performing eight measures of a classical aria.[33] Six highly trained listeners then rated the singers' vocal quality and attempted to identify if the recording was pre- or postvocal warm-up. Based on their self-ratings, all singers agreed that their tone quality had improved significantly after twenty-five minutes of vocal exercises. However, the expert listeners could not reliably determine whether the voices had improved. Similarly, Carla Ann Helmbrecht's study on warm-ups also found that some singers believed their warm-up routine improved their vocal quality, although analyses of voice quality (objective measurements of vocal perturbation and formant structure) revealed that their warm-up method was ineffective and produced "the opposite of the desired effect, which might even be harmful to the voice."[34] Another study that aligns with these findings is the exercise duration research conducted by Ragsdale and colleagues who examined nine classical vocalists over five weeks.[35] Again, expert listeners found no significant differences in vocal quali-

ty before or after the singers had warmed up. However, all participants *felt* their voices responded positively to a five or ten-minute warm-up. Perhaps the differences in these results between measures, ratings, and self-perception, may relate to the singers' kinaesthetic awareness and a perceived improvement in the ease of their vocal delivery which are beyond objective measures.

Comparisons are often made in the literature and in practice between singers and dancers or athletes, who warm-up muscles before their practices and performances. The underlying assumption here is that warming up the vocal folds stimulates blood circulation and enhances overall function.[36] However, Rima DeFatta and Robert T. Sataloff examined research that compared the muscles of athletes and singers. Following a comprehensive view of the available literature, they concluded that making a comparison of results was "challenging."[37] Nonetheless, the authors proposed that incorporating warm-up (and cooldown) exercises, as suggested by experienced voice pedagogues, remains "appropriate and prudent."[38]

While warming up for singing remains "hotly contested,"[39] the disparity in the research findings reported above may be influenced by a lack of consistency in research parameters, participant abilities and experience, and musical styles. This inconsistency makes it difficult to align results in such a broad field. Furthermore, while some uncertainty surrounds the specific physiological benefits of warming up, it is important to highlight that none of the studies examined in this discussion reported any serious adverse outcomes associated with engaging in appropriate vocal warm-up. While the prevailing belief among singers supports the relevance of vocal warm-ups and further to the kinaesthetic reasoning offered above, a psychological factor may also influence singers' beliefs in the positive impact of vocal warm-ups. Confirmation bias may also play a role here, as singers may interpret their experiences in line with the commonly held belief that warm-ups are beneficial.[40]

Beyond the Physiological

Perhaps significant merit in warming up lies in its psychological advantages. For solo singers, warming up provides an ideal opportunity to quieten the mind, focus attention on the body and sound production, and even begin to move psychologically into "performance mode." In addition, for choirs, warming up is an opportunity for singers to tune into the group sound and focus on becoming part of the collective. While not necessarily denying the physiological benefits of warm-ups, Stuart Barr asserts that preparation for singing requires nurturing both the body and the mind: "We have a vocal instrument that follows physiological rules, but which is controlled by a brain that follows emotional ones."[41] Webb agrees, stating, "While singing is physical, it also requires a great deal of mental effort. Mental warm-ups are a great way to get singers' minds involved."[42] Edward Byrom concurs and emphasizes that fostering a collective mindset takes precedence over technical objectives in the choral warm-up process.[43] Highlighting the engagement of both mental and physical abilities in a choral context, Robert Briggs suggests that the term "activation exercises" may be more fitting for the choral warm-up process. This encompasses the concept that one of the purposes of the warm-up is to enhance focus.[44] In line with this perspective, Peter Hunt recognizes that some groups may require additional support aligning their mental focus with their physical presence. Hunt, therefore, advocates for a group warm-up that not only establishes a musical connection but also serves as a focusing activity.[45] Similarly, John Hylton recommends the use of focusing activities to encourage singers to think as a cohesive ensemble.[46]

Recommendations and Considerations in Defining Vocal Warm-Ups for Choirs

Despite the distinct pedagogical differences between choral singing and solo singing, the choral director is in a position to address and accommodate dual goals by supporting individuals within the group setting by focusing on essential vocal concepts and techniques.[47] However, Duane Cottrell reports that choral directors express a sense of being underprepared to integrate the most recent discoveries in voice science and pedagogy into their practice.[48] Frauke Haasemann and James Mark Jordan highlight the convergence of teachings, emphasizing that both voice instructors and choral instructors prioritize key aspects such as proper breathing, posture, vocal range, creating resonating capacity, and

vocal flexibility.[49] By leveraging these shared principles, the choral director can effectively nurture individuals and foster their growth, paving the way for their success within the ensemble and beyond.

In recognition of the duality of choral directors' influence, there is an opportunity to provide guidance and instruction to choral singers for the development of essential skills for effective participation while equipping them with the necessary tools to enhance individual vocal technique. It is appropriate to note though that both solo and choral singers must adjust their vocal technique to accommodate the distinct requirements of each context.[50] This entails adapting phonation and articulation to achieve a vocal "blend" while also maintaining engaged respiration, physical freedom, and vocal flexibility. The latter essential elements are shared by both solo and choral singing.[51] In the context of any singing training, teachers should adopt distinct and intentional approaches to warm-ups used in lessons, rehearsals, and preperformance.[52] Simply going through a standard routine of vocal exercises without intent serves no purpose.[53]

To attain optimal outcomes, it is crucial for teachers and directors to set clear objectives for both choir and solo singers and to customize vocal exercises accordingly.[54] By adapting their methods to support the unique needs and goals of individual performers, singing voice teachers can provide tailored guidance and ensure that warm-up routines align effectively with the specific requirements of solo singing. Similarly, in adopting a dual role, choral directors can design warm-ups that account for the types of warm-ups suited to their groups and to the development of the singers within them.

When preparing for performance, in our experience it is crucial to create warm-up routines that recognize both the physical and psychological aspects of singing, all aimed at achieving captivating and engaging performances. Such warm-ups may encompass a range of rituals, vocal exercises, and mental strategies designed to enhance confidence, concentration, and overall stage presence. Unlike vocal function and technique exercises geared towards voice production and development, pre-performance warm-ups create a state of readiness and cultivate an optimal performance mindset for both solo singers and choir members alike. Therefore, choral directors might wish to reflect on how to best tailor their warm-up routines for the different requirements of rehearsal and performance.

The duality of the choral director's role presents immense potential for integrating effective warm-ups that address both the physiological and psychological dimensions of the singing voice. However, to fully leverage this potential, it is essential for voice professionals (choral directors, singing voice teachers, speech pathologists, voice researchers) to bridge the gap in terminologies and methods. This has the potential then to establish a cohesive and comprehensive framework for warming up. The first step in this direction is to recognise that any singing—whether choral or solo—exists on a continuum, from initiation of tone (where warming up is usually undertaken), to more targeted and technical exercises, to rehearsing repertoire, and ultimately, to performance. When seen this way, warming-up a choir for routine rehearsal (including achieving mental focus and technical development) or warming up for performance (to achieve energized, confident performance readiness) should take different forms and contexts. Based on the literature detailed in our discussion, we make the following distinctions in categorizing choral warm-ups and their contexts that bridge the fields of singing voice pedagogy and voice science: (a) preparation exercises, (b) functional exercises for efficient and healthy vocal delivery, (c) vocal tech-

nique and expression exercises for specific skill acquisition, and (d) preperformance exercise routines. Table 1 provides a summary of these categories along with their context and related considerations, examples, or outcomes. These are broadly presented; each style of singing would have its own proclivities for classical and contemporary stylisms.

We envisage that the distinctions provided in Table 1 will assist in clarifying warm-ups and their contexts. This is particularly relevant to the duality of the choral director role. Despite conflicting research results identifying differences in the self-perception of singers and other measures, it remains judicious to continue warming up the voice. Broadly, though, research is needed to explore the impact of warm-ups on executive functions such as attention, focus, and memory in relation to performance preparation. Additionally, considering that singers perceive warm-ups as being beneficial, investigating the role of warm-ups as psychological or mind–body preparations, alongside their physiological aspects, is warranted.

Conclusion

As the literature identifies, the role of a choir director in music education can extend far beyond leading a choral ensemble. In recognizing the influential role of choral directors as primary voice teachers for many singers, a collaborative path between choral singing, singing voice pedagogy and voice science, that maximizes the benefits of warm-ups and nurtures the true potential of our students' voices is justified. In the context of the choir, warm-ups require consideration of the group context and its situation, the body/mind connection, vocal production for efficient delivery, the acquisition of vocal and musical skills, and the facilitation of preperformance confidence. These considerations cross physiological and psychological boundaries and bridge the knowledges afforded by singing voice pedagogy and voice science. CJ

Regina McAllen has been a choral music educator and voice teacher in New Jersey for thirty years and is a PhD candidate at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia.

Table 1. Choral warm-up contexts, categories, and considerations/examples.

Context	Preparation	Functional	Technical/Expressive	Pre-performance
Nonverbal	Movement	Breathing for singing	Breath management Gestures	Readiness Context dependent
Vocal	Sounds	Vowels Articulation Registration	Range extension Resonance	Selected exercises
Physiological	Breathing	Tone initiation Balanced/flow phonation Vocal health	Specific skill development Expressive techniques	Selected repertoire
Psychological	Focus	Focus	Focus	Focus Confidence

Melissa Forbes is an associate professor in contemporary singing at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia.

Diane Hughes is a professor and discipline chair of creative arts at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

NOTES

[1] While we acknowledge that similar terms may be used to represent the leadership of a choir, the term choral director is used throughout this discussion to denote the person who leads a choir in rehearsal through to performance.

[2] Jeffrey L. Webb, "Promoting Vocal Health in the Choral Rehearsal," *Music Educators Journal* 93, no. 5 (2007): 26–31; R. Paul Crabb and Randall G. Pembrook, "The Training, Experience, and Job Responsibilities of American College Choral Conductors," *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 9, no. 1 (1990): 31–34.

[3] Matthew Hoch and Mary J. Sandage, "Working toward a Common Vocabulary: Reconciling the Terminology of Teachers of Singing, Voice Scientists, and Speech-Language Pathologists," *Journal of Voice* 31, no. 6 (2017): 647–48.

[4] Matthew Hoch, "Building Bridges and Moving Forward: Practical Voice Pedagogy for Twenty-First-Century Choral Directors," *Choral Journal* 64, no. 7 (2024): 73–75.

[5] Hoch and Sandage, "Working toward a Common Vocabulary."

[6] Rima A. DeFatta and Robert T. Sataloff, "The Value of Vocal Warm-up and Cool-Down Exercises: Questions and Controversies," *Journal of Singing* 69, no. 2 (2012): 173–75.

[7] Lília Maria Gomes Falcão, Maria Lúcia Vaz Masson, Gisele Oliveira, and Mara Behlau, "Spectrographic Analysis of the Effect of Vocal Warm-up on the Voice of Choir Girls," *Audiology: Communication Research* 19 (2014): 380–86; Allison Gish, Melda Kunduk, Loraine Sims, and Andrew J. McWhorter, "Vocal Warm-Up Practices and Perceptions in Vocalists: A Pilot Survey," *Journal of Voice* 26, no. 1 (2012): e1–10; Ofer Amir, Noam Amir, and Orit Michaeli, "Evaluating the Influence of Warmup on Singing Voice Quality Using Acoustic Measures," *Journal of Voice* 19, no. 2 (2005): 252–60.

[8] Richard Miller, "The Solo Singer in the Choral Ensemble," *Choral Journal* 35, no. 8 (1995): 31–36.

[9] Maria Priscilla Portillo, Sandra Rojas, Marco Guzman, and Camilo Quesada, "Comparison of Effects Produced by Physiological Versus Traditional Vocal Warm-Up in Contemporary Commercial Music Singers," *Journal of Voice* 32, no. 2 (2018): 200–8.

[10] Patrick K. Freer, "Choral Warm-Ups for Changing Adolescent Voices," *Music Educators Journal* 95, no. 3 (2009): 59.

[11] Richard Miller, "Warming Up the Voice," in *On the Art of Singing*, ed. Richard Miller (Oxford University Press, 1996), 164.

[12] Matthew Hoch and Mary J. Sandage, "Exercise Science Principles and the Vocal Warm-up: Implications for Singing Voice Pedagogy," *Journal of Voice* 32, no. 1 (2018): 79–84.

[13] Janeal Marie Sugars, "Trends of Vocal Warm-Ups and Vocal Health from the Perspective of Singing and Medical Professionals" (DMA diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2009), 7.

[14] Yui Katada, Naomi Yoshida, and Ichiro Kita, "Effects of Warm-up Focused on the Mind–Body on Choral Performance," *Journal of Voice* 39, no. 2 (2025): 562e7–562e16.

[15] Sandra Frey Stegman, "Choral Warm-Ups: Preparation to Sing, Listen, and Learn," *Music Educators Journal* 89, no. 3 (2003): 37–58.

[16] Guillermo Rosabal Coto, "Meaningful Choral Development through Purposeful Choral Warm-Ups," *Canadian Music Educator* 48, no. 2 (2006): 57–58.

[17] Miller, "Warming Up the Voice," 164.

[18] Sally Louise Glover, "How and Why Vocal Solo and Choral Warm-Ups Differ," *Choral Journal* 42, no. 3 (2001): 18.

[19] Glover, "How and Why Vocal Solo and Choral Warm-Ups Differ," 17.

[20] Rosabal Coto, "Meaningful Choral Development through Purposeful Choral Warm-Ups," 57.

[21] David G. Tovey, "Warm Up to a Good Sound," *Music Educators Journal* 63, no. 9 (1977): 56.

[22] Tovey, "Warm Up to a Good Sound."

[23] Sally Louise Glover, "How and Why Vocal Solo and Choral Warm-Ups Differ," *Choral Journal* 42, no. 3 (2001): 17–22.

[24] Glover, "How and Why Vocal Solo and Choral Warm-Ups Differ," 22.

[25] Gish et al., "Vocal Warm-Up Practices and Perceptions in Vocalists"; Janeal Marie Sugars, "Trends of Vocal Warm-Ups and Vocal Health from the Perspective of

Singing and Medical Professionals": 1.

[26] DeFatta and Sataloff, "The Value of Vocal Warm-Up and Cool-Down Exercises," 173–5.

[27] Amir, Amir, and Michaeli, "Evaluating the Influence of Warmup on Singing Voice Quality Using Acoustic Measures," 252–60.

[28] Sheri L. Cook-Cunningham and Melissa L. Grady, "The Effects of Three Physical and Vocal Warm-Up Procedures on Acoustic and Perceptual Measures of Choral Sound," *Journal of Voice* 32, no. 2 (2018): 192–99; Ninni Elliot, Johan Sundberg, and Patricia Gramming, "What Happens during Vocal Warm-Up?," *Journal of Voice* 9, no. 1 (1995): 43; Lynda Moorcroft and Dianna T. Kenny, "Singer and Listener Perception of Vocal Warm-Up," *Journal of Voice* 27, no. 2 (March 2013): 258.e1–258.e13.

[29] Edward Połrolniczak and Michał Kramarczyk, "Acoustic Analysis of the Influence of Warm-Up on Singing Voice Quality," *Journal of Voice* 39, no. 4 (2025): 1132e11–1132e21.

[30] Jo Levett and Tim Pring, "Amateur Choir Singers—Does Good Vocal Health Matter?," *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders* 58, no. 4 (2023): 1–7.

[31] Marco Guzman, Vrushali Angadi, Daniel Croake, Christopher Catalan, Constanza Romero, Gabriela Acuña, Camilo Quezada, Richard Andreatta, and Joseph Stemple, "Does a Systematic Vocal Exercise Program Enhance the Physiologic Range of Voice Production in Classical Singing Graduate-Level Students?," *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 63, no. 4 (2020): 1044–52.

[32] Frank Ragsdale, Judy O. Marchman, Michelle M. Bretl, Jennylee Diaz, David E. Rosow, Mursalin Anis, Hang Zhang, Mario A. Landera, and Adam T. Lloyd, "Quantifying Subjective and Objective Measures of Singing after Different Warm-Up Durations," *Journal of Voice* 36, no. 5 (2022): 661–67.

[33] Moorcroft and Kenny, "Singer and Listener Perception of Vocal Warm-Up," 258.e11.

[34] Carla Ann Helmbrecht, "Changes in Vocal Quality as a Function of Warm-Up in Trained Singers" (MS thesis, Texas Tech University, 1993), 61.

[35] Ragsdale et al., "Quantifying Subjective and Objective Measures of Singing after Different Warm-Up Durations."

[36] Mary J. Sandage and Matthew Hoch, "Exercise Physiology: Perspective for Vocal Training," *Journal of Singing* 74, no. 4 (2018): 419–25.

[37] DeFatta and Sataloff, "The Value of Vocal Warm-Up and Cool-Down Exercises," 175.

[38] DeFatta and Sataloff, "The Value of Vocal Warm-Up and Cool-Down Exercises," 175.

[39] Stuart Barr, "Singing Warm-Ups: Physiology, Psychology, or Placebo?," *Logopedics Phoniatrics Vocology* 34, no. 3 (2009): 142.

[40] Barr, "Singing Warm-Ups."

[41] Barr, "Singing Warm-Ups," 143.

[42] Webb, "Promoting Vocal Health in the Choral Rehearsal": 28.

[43] Ingo Titze, "Edward Byrom's Reply to 'Choir Warm-Ups: How Effective Are They?,'" *Journal of Singing* 58, no. 1 (2001): 57.

[44] Robert Briggs, "Vocal Warm-Ups: From the Sublime to Ridiculous," *Teaching Music* 7, no. 5 (2000): 36–39.

[45] Peter Hunt, *Voiceworks 2: A Further Handbook for Singing* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.

[46] John Hylton, "Keeping Your Choir on the Move," *Music Educators Journal* 74 no. 3 (1987): 32–33.

[47] Gwendolyn Coleman Detwiler, "Solo Singing Technique and Choral Singing Technique in Undergraduate Vocal Performance Majors: A Pedagogical Discussion" (DMA diss., University of Cincinnati, 2008), 61.

[48] Duane Cottrell, "Voice Science in the Vocal Rehearsal," *Choral Journal* 47, no. 11 (2007): 8–15.

[49] Frauke Haasemann and James Mark Jordan, *Group Vocal Technique* (Hinshaw, 1991).

[50] Glover, "How and Why Vocal Solo and Choral Warm-Ups Differ," 21.

[51] Detwiler, "Solo Singing Technique and Choral Singing Technique in Undergraduate Vocal Performance Majors," 93.

[52] Sandra Frey Stegman, "Choral Warm-Ups: Preparation to Sing, Listen, and Learn," *Music Educators Journal* 89, no. 3 (2003): 37.

[53] Stegman, "Choral Warm-Ups."

[54] Guillermo Rosabal-Coto, *Meaningful Choral Development through Purposeful Choral Warm-Ups,* 58; Glover, "How and Why Vocal Solo and Choral Warm-Ups Differ," 22.

5th Symposium on Research in Choral Singing

April 30 – May 1, 2026
Big 10 Conference Center
Chicago, IL

Call for Proposals

The American Choral Directors Association is pleased to announce the fifth International Symposium on Research in Choral Singing from 8AM Thursday, April 30, to 6PM Friday, May 1, 2026. A forum for the dissemination of research and scholarly activity, the 2026 hybrid symposium will be held in person or remotely for ACDA members from North America and for international participants, no membership is required. We will combine diverse presentational formats and break-out sessions with opportunities for in-depth conversation, inquiry, and consideration of future research directions of all types. Penn State University will host the conference in Chicago, in conjunction with Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain) and De Montfort University (England).

The intent of the Symposium is aligned with the purpose of the *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing*: to advance knowledge and practice with respect to choral singing, choir sound, choral pedagogy, and related areas such as equity and inclusion in choral singing, school community partnerships, adolescent development, vocal development, and singing and well-being.

Sessions will be presented in person or synchronously via Zoom; time allotments will be determined by the program committee and communicated to presenters in acceptance letters. Unique to our symposium format: All attendees are expected to attend the entire duration of the symposium, and requests for specific time slots cannot be considered.

Typical duration for spoken presentations will be 10–15 minutes plus 5 minutes for questions/answers; poster presenters will describe their work in a lightning talk. We anticipate a schedule of morning/afternoon in the Americas, afternoon/evening Europe and late night/early morning in Asia/Australia. **Proposals must comply with the following guidelines**:

- Previously published research should not be submitted; however, unpublished findings from a published project may be submitted.
- Research previously presented at a Symposium should not be submitted.
- In-progress research is permissible for submission so long as preliminary data and findings can be discussed in the proposal and the author plans to have completed the project by the symposium. Prospective research projects are not suitable for this Symposium.
- Proposal submission implies intent to register for and present at the Symposium if accepted. The Symposium registration fee will be approx. $125 USD, and this year a special graduate student rate will be offered for $50 (in-person only).

Submit 400-word abstracts for presentations or the poster session online at
https://acda.org/conferences/symposium-for-research-in-choral-singing

The IJRCS Editorial Board will serve as the Program Committee and will rate each proposal according to relevance, originality, clarity, and validity. The Program Committee reserves the right to designate accepted proposals for either paper or poster presentation.

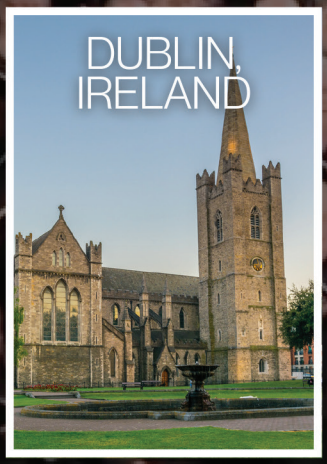
Proposal Deadline: Friday, November 14, 2025, at 5:00 PM CST (Chicago time)

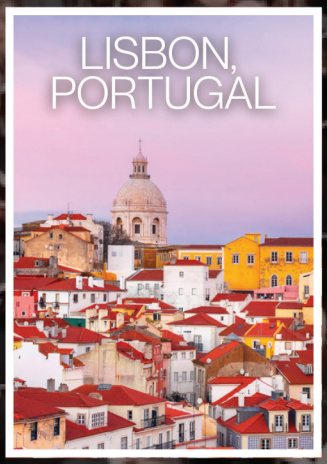
- All submissions will be blinded for review by the program committee.
- Applicants will be notified on or before January 15. Presenters will be asked to register by March 1.

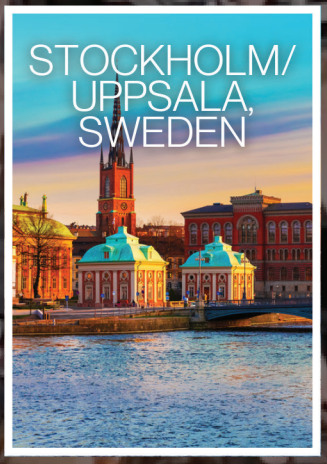
MAP MIDAMERICA PRODUCTIONS & MidAm International

STEP ONTO THE WORLD STAGE

JOIN US IN 2027!







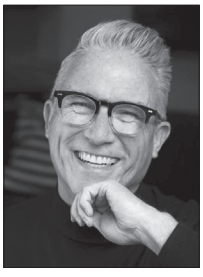
SCAN THE QR CODE BELOW TO REQUEST MORE INFORMATION ABOUT OUR 2027 INTERNATIONAL RESIDENCIES.

midam@midamerica-music.com
212.239.0205
www.midamerica-music.com

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS

A Conversation with Mark Lawley

with Donathan Chang and Yoojin Muhn



Mark Lawley is a retired choral director who currently teaches voice and piano lessons. He previously served as the president of the Southwestern ACDA Region, Missouri Choral Directors Association, and South Central Missouri MEA. Choirs under his direction have given invitational performances multiple times at conferences of ACDA, SWACDA, and Missouri MEA. He previously served on ACDA's National Standing Committee for Education and Communication, and he currently serves on the board of South Austin Academy of Vocal Arts and Teeter Leadership Group. He has received teacher of the year awards and the Luther T. Spayde Award.

When you reflect on your years in the classroom and on the podium, what moments made you feel most deeply connected to your calling as an educator?

In 1999 I was conducting the first conference performance in my life, and I was terrified. I felt so insecure and nervous that my lips stuck to my teeth. I wanted to smile when I turned toward the audience, but all that would form was what must have looked like a meager grimace. As I turned back toward the choir, it felt like home, safety, security, community. While I felt very small when facing the audience, that feeling juxtaposed with the peace that enveloped me when I faced the choir gave me a heightened awareness of what trust in the ensemble provided for each member.

That brief moment just before the first downbeat can hold so much—hand on heart, tethered together from many rehearsals and shared stories. The work is done. Trust has been established. We know what will happen, what our intentions are—the nuances, the ability to not manufacture music but to allow it to unfold again with some fluctuations in tempo, dynamic, tenuto, rallentando; it can be new this time too. Pulse increasing, eyes brimming… it's just about to happen. Yes, that brief moment can hold so much, and if we are awake and aware, that can be a treasured part of the performance too, and it is often a remarkably sweet one as time stands still.

Another moment that made me feel connected to my calling occurred in the rehearsal hall. Like most choral conductors, I have an affection for words. Sometimes

I would bring a song to the rehearsal that we were not practicing and just allow the message of the song to speak for itself. These were carefully selected songs with lyrics that I hoped might find a resting place deep within their hearts or cause a worried mind to relax a bit. On this particular day, I had selected *This Journey Is My Own* by Sara Groves. One of my students left the room that day with tears in her eyes and told me, "I needed every word of that song today." The connection these lyrics made with her served as an encouragement to me to keep choosing literature (both vocal and written) that would put words of hope, healing, and strength on the minds and voices of the singers in my classroom.

In an era that often prioritizes outcomes over process, how did you protect space for vulnerability, wonder, and joy in your rehearsals? Over four decades, were there core values or beliefs left untouched even as your methods and the world around you changed?

I think you can have it all: process/journey, outcomes/success, vulnerability, wonder, and joy! I certainly was not the same teacher in year one as I am now. When I was in seventh grade, I recall reading a poem where the author was swinging high over a green pasture-like setting. He allowed his mind to dream while determining that he would never lose that childlike sense of wonderment and awe. My seventh-grade self decided the same. I was never going to stuff my enthusiasm, my *joie de vivre*, or my exclamations when some thrilling sound made my spirit soar. So, when the choir was singing well, I would let out a whoop of joy! I once stopped a concert mid-song to just unload all the emotion that was welling up in my heart. I shared how there were so many "best sounds" that each singer brought to the chorus, but we had to come to an agreement about tone color, technique, and even vibrato. I shared with the audience that some of the singers had to abandon their "best sound" for the good of the ensemble.

In addition, I selected music that affected me emotionally. I recall sitting in my kitchen, listening to possible literature for the coming fall. One song stirred me so much that I felt my pulse quicken, and I had to stand up. Other songs tendered me; my body felt what can best be described as a melting heart. I shared all of these experiences with the choir while I explained why I had selected each song.

Another belief I have not changed is that I always wanted choir to be an experience; and while most rehearsals didn't allow much time for sharing, I made sure each week to have at least one opportunity for choir members to share. For example, I would ask the entire choir to stand and one at a time quickly share something they liked about another member in the choir. They were not allowed to say something shallow like, "Hey, nice shoes!" Some of their tributes were so heartfelt that either the speaker and or the receiver were moved to tears. As we began to know each other more deeply, appreciation grew in our hearts. I firmly believe that it influenced our sound as we bonded together. The sound of a choir who knows and loves each other is palpable.

Through the emotional highs and lows of teaching, what habits helped you sustain your passion and presence to show up fully for your students without losing yourself in the process?

I recall being in a rehearsal with eighty-five high school singers and feeling like I was the only one in the room who truly cared. I had a choice to be annoyed or draw a line in the sand and step over it with renewed vigor. And that's precisely what I did. I decided to care not only one hundred percent for myself, but also for the eighty-five others in the room. Undeterred by their apathy, I dug passionately into the rehearsing and sharing, and over time I think it caused the students to join me. I refer to it as not allowing the smudge of someone's lack of effort to dull your shine. Sing on! Shine on! Play on!

If there were specific lows, we would have what some refer to as a "choirside chat" where I addressed the elephant in the room. For example, "I was disappointed in yesterday's rehearsal, but it is in the past. We have today, and here are the specific things I need from each of you to bring this music to life as we honor the composer's intention."

I would also share with the choir if I had a day when

I felt low. I would tell them that they didn't deserve any less than my very best, so I was checking the luggage of my "low" at the door while bringing my best self to them. The luggage would be there for me to claim on my way out of the room. I encouraged them to do the same. I think this kind of openness built compassion and care in our ensemble, and again, I feel like it positively affected the sound of the chorus.

Finally, I kept every card or email I received from anyone that was positive. Over the years I placed the cards between books on the bookshelf, and to my great delight, when I pulled a book off the shelf, often a card or two would fall to the floor. After the reading them, my heart was encouraged to go on and provide the kinds of experiences described in the card for my current ensembles.

Do you recall a particular moment when your role shifted from conductor to mentor? Was there a moment when a student challenged your perspective or inspired you to grow in an unexpected way? What did that experience teach you?

The more I aged, the more often I received questions from students, parents, and colleagues, and I unofficially added mentor to my role in the classroom and in the profession over time. When I began my master's degree in choral conducting with Dr. Guy Webb, he said to me, "I know some things, and I would be glad to share them with you." That's precisely how I feel about mentoring and coaching: I share what I know. Whatever was speaking to me professionally and personally, I shared with the choir.

For example, when I was reading *The Fred Factor* by Mark Sanborn, I sometimes read a paragraph or just a line to the class. When I finished the book, I gave the choir an assignment to write a paper on a "Fred" that they knew. Some wrote about teachers, coaches, and youth leaders, and to my delight, some of them wrote about another singer in the choir. I read excerpts of the papers that were written about choir members aloud to the choir. I never revealed who wrote the paper, but often the choir would guess who the paper was about.

I did have a student challenge me one time. The student's supportive father informed me that his son had "cancelled" me. I was bewildered by this, as I had the student as a singer from childhood through high school. I learned that the student did not like that I sometimes used funny voices, and though he was not personally offended, he felt there could be others in the room who took my characterizations personally. I encouraged him to try to look at the heart of intention of the person who might be the offender and wonder if their intention was to offend. Though it took me off guard, in the end I was thankful for this encounter because it caused me to pause and more carefully consider the way I was communicating with the choir.

Choirs are often sanctuaries for those who do not fit elsewhere. What advice do you have for fostering belonging and trust within an ensemble?

I believe the best way to foster belonging and trust is to model it in the way you interact with the choir. I taught high school choir for most of my career, and there were discipline issues to deal with at times. I always made sure the student understood the day after the discipline that they had a clean slate. There would be no lording over them or grudge holding. If needed, we can incorporate restorative practices, which leads to healthy personal relationships as well as a supportive culture.

One of our goals was to really honor one another, to listen without judgment, and to replace negativity with redirection to positivity. While I was initially not a fan of ice breakers because they seemed like a waste of time, over time I experienced how a well-constructed ice breaker created a community of trust. I incorporated "Fan Mail Friday" at both the high school and the university level. At the high school level, students wrote letters to others in the ensemble, sharing with specificity ways they admired one another. Similar to the "Fred" assignment mentioned earlier, I never revealed the letter writer, but I presented the letter to the recipient after I had read it aloud. At the university level, I reached out to parents to write letters to their students. This sharing had a simultaneously softening effect while knitting us together as a community.

How did failure—whether artistic, personal, or institutional—shape your growth as a teacher and leader?

I once wrote an article for the MCDA Reporter titled "Embracing Failure." While we don't set out to fail, when you compare the lists of things you learn when you are successful to the list of things you can learn when you fail, the failure list is longer and, honestly, richer. So, without being bitter, press pause and see what there is to learn. One way I accomplished this was reading judges' remarks out loud to ensembles and sometimes to the audience at a concert. Early in my career, I cringed hearing constructive criticisms because I felt like I had failed the choir. Once I learned to embrace the imagined "failure," we all grew. When I read the positive remarks to the choir or audience, they were directed to respond with an audible "HUZZAH!" When I read constructive criticisms, the students and audience would respond with an equally enthusiastic, "WE CAN DO BETTER!" This grew to be fun and oh so healthy. It took the burden off me, as we agreed that we could join in on the solutions while zestfully celebrating the successes.

You now teach and mentor over seventy students in your private studio. What have you discovered about the art of teaching in this new chapter, and how does it compare to your years in public education?

Once I announced my retirement, I kept receiving inquiries about teaching private lessons, and it just seemed to grow itself. It is immensely rewarding to share what my teachers taught me with my private piano and voice students. It keeps me fresh, as I have

students from first grade through university. It is a new chapter for me and equally as rewarding as work in the classroom and rehearsal hall.

My vision for the studio included a very comfortable overstuffed chair for sometimes weary parents to sit in and enjoy hearing their child perform and grow. Recently a parent texted me this sweet sentiment: "This week has been physically and emotionally demanding. I'm struggling to just keep my head above water. But, in all the chaos there is this chair. When I sit here, my troubles disappear for thirty minutes. Here I listen to my favorite vocalist and get lost in the music." Mission for the parent chair accomplished!

I wondered if I would miss the podium after all those years of immensely enjoying conducting, but in addition to teaching privately, I also have the opportunity to guest conduct honor choirs, and I love it! While I don't have a choir I regularly conduct, I do have a couple of ideas about starting new ensembles in my community. The time is not now, but I can see myself having a choir or two again in the future.

Looking back at your career, what three things would you tell your younger self? (This question was supplied by the previous Choral Conversations interviewee. See "A Conversation with Pearl Shangkuan," *Choral Journal* March/April 2025.)

First, draw a circle around your choir and keep them at the focus of your care and leadership. Worry not about the stamp of approval from others at the school or in the area or in the profession. Resist comparison, as that will leave you feeling better or worse than you ought. Care for the choir, and they in turn will care for each other and often for you.

Second, you don't have to know everything! One hallmark quality of teachers and especially conductors is that they love to help. If you do not know the pronunciation, ask. If you don't know how to plan a tour, ask. If you do not know the rules and expectations for an event, ask. If you don't know IPA or solfège or performance practices, ask. And ask right away! You'll find, as I did, that the choral world will trip over itself to help you; you just have to ask.

Finally, take your choir out to perform often. I was so hesitant to do this when I was a young teacher. I had little confidence in my ability, and I felt insecure and embarrassed by my own work. However, once I got over myself and started having my choir perform more, they rose to the occasion. No one wants to be embarrassed, so they worked harder to bring excellence, and then the reward of the rush after an exciting performance paid off. If you're early for a performance, stop by a gas station and sing one of your songs. Sing at halftime of a basketball tournament. Sing for the school assemblies. Tour the elementaries, carol at Christmas, and take the choir to the office on the principal's birthday to sing!

I once took the choir to in-school suspension when one of our singers landed in there, and we sang for them. They loved it! Sing in the school commons as the school gathers in the morning. Audition to sing other places. We once auditioned to sing at the tournament of the sweet sixteen and sang for the Stanford game. What a rush! We sang for the St. Louis Cardinals, the St. Louis Rams, our home baseball and soccer teams, football games, basketball games, the Harlem Globetrotters, and we flash-mobbed everywhere we could. During COVID, we gave parking lot concerts and sang at a nursing home outside the building, making our way around the entire building singing songs for the residents. They cried and we cried!

Please provide a question for the next Choral Conversations interviewee.

What are some of your most memorable choral works you have programmed? Why did you program them, and what was the result for the singers and the audience? CJ

Donathan Chang is a former conducting student of Mark Lawley's, and his wife, **Dr. Yoojin Muhn**, is the director of choral activities at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Mark, Donathan, and Yoojin have remained in contact over the years while sharing conversations about the choral profession.

PROJECT : ENCORE™ NEWS

A Catalog of Contemporary Choral Music

ProjectEncore.org

QUARTERLY ENDORSEMENTS

Spotlights on compositions in the PROJECT : ENCORE Catalog

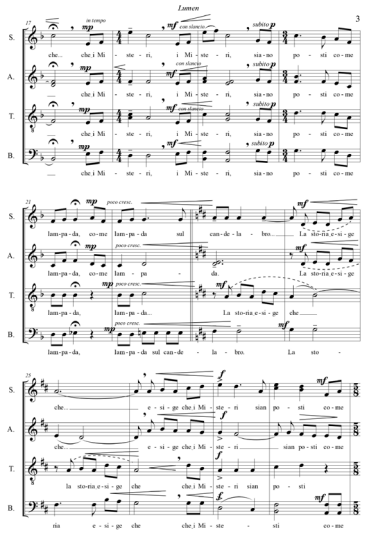
"Lux," the Latin word for "light," often represents such concepts as enlightenment, inspiration and even hope. Programming around the concept of light can include both sacred and secular text, as seen in the four beautiful selections below from the PROJECT : ENCORE Catalog.

Light of hope for world peace, for mixed ensemble ...

"Lumen" by Giuseppe di Bianco

Giorgio La Pira, author of the text set by Giuseppe di Bianco, was an active, key figure in Italian history as a promoter of world peace. His "Lumen" is a message of hope and also of great responsibility. The composer describes his setting as "a hymn into the light of hope, into the future ... that belongs to all of us." Mix of meters and linear independence suggest a sense of forward movement. Stunning and unique. 3' 20" in length

Hear a complete recording and learn more about it here:
ProjectEncore.org/Giuseppe-di-bianco



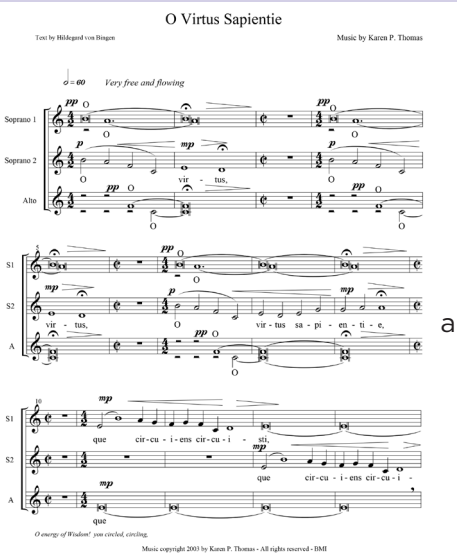
For your advanced treble choir ...

"Lux Lucis" by Karen Thomas

Wisdom and light are the subjects Hildegard von Bingen weaves through the three poems that Karen Thomas sets as her three-movement work for treble voices. The shimmering, close harmonies call for clean singing, and provide a truly exquisite experience in tone and texture. Substantial enough to serve as core concert element.

10' 00" in length.

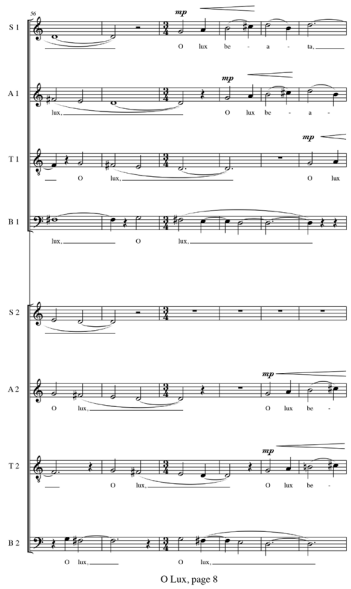
Hear a complete recording and learn more about it here:
http://ProjectEncore.org/karen-p-thomas



PROJECT : ENCORE™ is an online catalog of post-premiere, new choral music, reviewed and endorsed by an international panel of prominent conductors.

ember choral arts

Four times each year, P:E adds newly-accepted scores into its catalog. Score submission deadlines are the 15th of January, April, July and October.



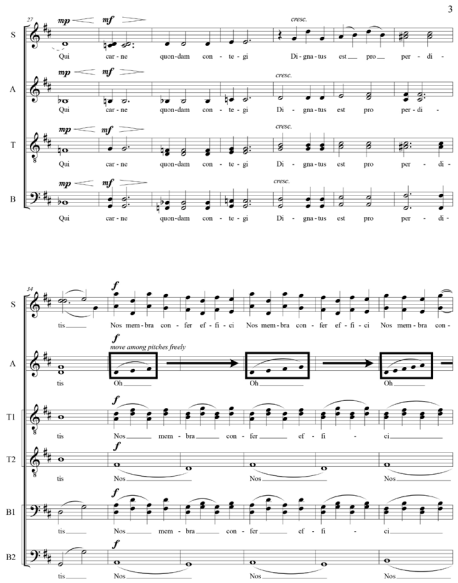
Double choir for mixed voices ...

"O Lux" by Caroline Mallonee

This imitative motet is a celebration of light, with cascading lines representing light streaming in, ascending lines a lifting of the spirit. Interrupting echoes of Renaissance motet writing are shifting meters and chromatic inconsistencies. Accessible to high school singers; interesting enough for professional ensembles.

2' 45" in length

Hear a complete recording and learn more about it here:
http://ProjectEncore.org/caroline-mallonee



For your large a cappella mixed choir ...

"O Nata Lux" by Matt Wetmore

For a gentle introduction to some aleatoric experimentation in a beautifully shimmering context, Matt Wetmore provides a treat for both singers and audience alike. Bursts of "light" emerge sometimes unexpectedly, as the theme initially introduced by a soloist weaves throughout the voices. The ensemble must be large enough to handle substantial divisi (SSAATTTBBB).

4' 00" in length.

Hear a complete recording and learn more about it here:
http://ProjectEncore.org/matt-wetmore

DEBORAH SIMPKIN KING, PHD.
Conductor
P:E Director and Founder
DeborahSKing.com

IU JACOBS SCHOOL OF MUSIC

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Hana Cai (D.M.‘21)
Associate Director of Choral Activities, Harvard University

Alex Koppel (D.M.‘25)
Associate Director of Choral Activities, University of Iowa

Nick Sienkiewicz (M.M.‘22)
Artistic Director, Lehigh Valley Chorale

Raoul Carlo “Miggi” F. Angangco (D.M.‘24)
Director of Choral Activities, Hastings College

Jae Eun “Genna” Kim (D.M.‘25)
Associate Director, National Chorus of Korea

Lawrence Abernathy (D.M.‘24)
Director of Choral Activities, William Jewell College

CHORAL FACULTY

Dominick DiOrio, *Chair, NOTUS*

Chris Albanese, *Singing Hoosiers*

Carolann Buff, *Choral Musicology*

Betsy Burleigh, *University Singers*

Walter Huff, *Opera Choruses*

Gwyn Richards, *Dean Emeritus*

Raymond Wise, *African American Choral Ensemble*

STUDY CHORAL CONDUCTING @ IU JACOBS SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Be part of our story of success.

- Full tuition assistantships, generous stipends, and health insurance for all doctoral students and second-year M.M. students
- Full scholarships for first-year M.M. students
- Ample podium time with numerous choral ensembles
- Mentorship from a varied and broadly skilled faculty
- World-class music library and facilities

JACOBS SCHOOL OF MUSIC
Indiana University Bloomington

Application Deadline:
December 1, 2025

Learn more at
music.indiana.edu

Choral Review

Rollo Dilworth's *Weather*

By Sarah Campbell

Music has a powerful influence over how we think, feel, and express ourselves. We can be influenced by the movement of melodies, richness of harmonies, power of lyrics, and styles that transport us to a different world, connecting us with people and stories outside our own lived experiences.

Culturally relevant music in education aims to "affirm diverse cultural characteristics, perspectives, and experiences and use them to form bridges"[1] among performers and the audience. This type of music often brings styles from outside perspectives into a different setting, exposing its audience to a new point of view on both the music and context from which that style can be found. Composers such as Omar Thomas, Michele Fernandez, and Mark Camphouse have pushed this idea even further by using their music as a way to highlight important social conversations. Topics such as the Civil Rights Movement, child neglect, and social injustice have all been subjects of recent culturally relevant pieces, and Rollo Dilworth's *Weather*, composed in 2021, is a powerful addition to this classification of music.[2]

Weather is a setting of New York University professor Claudia Rankine's poem of the same title to various musical settings that all reflect traditionally African American musical styles including spirituals, jazz, blues, and gospel. The poem "was written in reflection of the tragic and unnecessary death of George Floyd in May of 2020, influenced by racism and social injustice that remains in the United States today."[3] Rankine's words are striking and paint a clear picture of the African American experience during the pandemic:

Weather

On a scrap of paper in the archive is written
I have forgotten my umbrella. Turns out
in a pandemic everyone, not just the philosopher,
is without. We scramble in the drought of information
held back by inside traders. Drop by drop. Face
covering? No, yes. Social distancing? Six feet
under for underlying conditions. Black.
Just us and the blues kneeling on a neck
with the full weight of a man in blue.
Eight minutes and forty-six seconds.
In extremis, I can't breathe gives way
to asphyxiation, to giving up this world,
and then mama, called to, a call
to protest, fire, glass, say their names, say

their names, white silence equals violence,
the violence of again, a militarized police
force teargassing, bullets ricochet, and civil
unrest taking it, burning it down. Whatever
contracts keep us social compel us now
to disorder the disorder. Peace. We're out
to repair the future. There's an umbrella
by the door, not for yesterday but for the weather
that's here. I say weather but I mean
a form of governing that deals out death
and names it living. I say weather but I mean
a November that won't be held off. This time
nothing, no one forgotten. We are here for the storm
that's storming because what's taken matters.

Dilworth comments in the Composer's Notes that the title immediately resonated with him as a "contranym" (a word with contradictory meaning), and he saw how he could create music that would not "detract from such a powerful and multi-dimensional sequencing of words."[4] The word "weather" has several definitions: to withstand, to wear away, and the state of the atmosphere at a place and time.[5] In both the poem and piece for choir, wind ensemble, and piano, all three of these definitions can be found in subtle ways, showing the complexity of the art and the context that served as the composer's inspiration.

Musical Analysis

Dilworth breaks down this eighteen-minute work into six distinct sections: The Mediation, The Marginalization, The Memorial, The Meltdown, The March, and The Mobilization. Each of these sections represents the stages of a social movement, signifying the entire body of the piece as a reflection of the section title's course of action. Each section has its own character that builds off the section prior both harmonically and stylistically, implying that each stage of a movement needs the others to flourish.

Section 1: The Meditation

The opening section of *Weather* depicts a storm approaching in the distance brought to life by a thunder sheet that *crescendos* from *piano* to *forte* over a twenty-seven-bar intro. Not only do these first measures set the scene for the "storm" and melodic theme, they also serve as the second numerical reference to George Floyd—the first being the opening tempo marking of 46 bpm (his age at the time of his death) and the beginning twenty-seven measures referring to the number of times Floyd said, "I can't breathe," while under the police officer's knee.

This subset in the opening section is reflective and mimics the style of a traditional march. The melodic theme, based in E♭ major, stems from a traditional African spiritual *Stand the Storm*, which shares many similarities with Rankine's poem's themes of "remembrance, resistance, and resilience in the pursuit of social justice."[6]

The march-like style continues in accompanying instruments as vocalists enter in measure 28 with the text of the poem: "on a scrap of paper in the archive is written." This eighteen-bar section features heavily layered voices and strict rhythms in percussion. From this texture blooms a very intense invitation into the next musical style.

Measures 46–74 bring a new style into the piece reminiscent of classical and gospel music. As Dilworth begins the transition into the next section, chords and rhythms begin to deconstruct, layer, and reconstruct themselves before firmly landing in G major at measure 75.

Section 2: The Marginalization

In this section, Dilworth writes a twelve-bar blues accompaniment to a spectacular vocal display. The music transports the listener to a time where the blues were rising in popularity as a secular music style—the 1920s, where "African Americans faced poverty, discrimination, and an overall diminished quality of life…. It seemed appropriate to set this portion of the poem in a blues style, for the words reflect elements of a dark past that continue to linger in the present."[7]

While all the text in this section is important, one line stands out in relation to the style of music: "just us, and the blues, kneeling on a neck with the full weight

of a man in blue." The voice parts are arranged in such a way that the meaning of the word "blues" can be interpreted in two ways: first, in reference to the musical style of this section, or second, the way Rankine intended in reference to the police force. Either way, Dilworth is incorporating a significant style that is vital to the history of African American music that serves as an acknowledgement of both the musical and social experience of people of color in the United States.

The next subsection of "The Marginalization" is more impactful when looking at the score than it might be to the listener. Measures 114–62 rotate between 8/8, 4/4, and 6/8 to reflect the amount of time (8 minutes and 46 seconds) that Floyd spent under the knee of the police officer. This metric pattern continues for several measures while the text "eight-minutes and forty-six seconds" is layered on top (Figure 1).

As the choir sings "in extremis" in measure 147, the meter pattern changes from the original (8/8, 4/4, 6/8) to a pattern that reflects the actual time that Floyd was knelt on: 9:29 (9/8, 2/4, 9/8). Finally, Dilworth adds a woodblock line of even quarter notes, which represents a clock ticking. At the end of this section, the music becomes very intense with low brass playing accented eighth-note arpeggios that add to the tension in the text. The words "I can't breathe" are sung twenty-seven times in this section (Figure 2 on the next page).

The stressful cry for help in the music continues to build for several more measures with tense voice parts of "the sound of someone being choked to death," which add to the overall volume and intensity of the piece and create a sense of unity between the choir and wind ensemble. These gasping voice parts bring the meaning of the text and music to a much deeper level and call attention to how uncomfortable and disturbing these moments are.

Section 3: The Memorial

"The Memorial" is set to a spiritual style call-and-response. In this section, Dilworth offers a personal response to Rankine's invitation to "say their names." This is derived from #sayhername, a hashtag that originated following the death of Briana Taylor in 2020. In addition to this text, Dilworth provides sixteen names

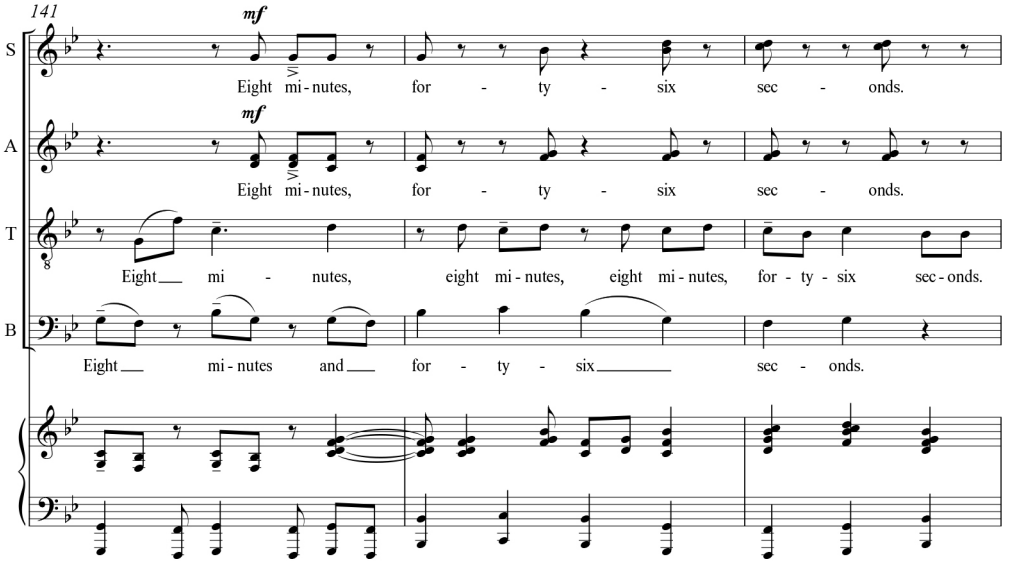


Figure 1. Rollo Dilworth, *Weather,* mm. 141–143.

of people of color who lost their lives due to systemic racism and policing in the United States and encourages the ensemble to learn their stories. Similar to how a choir will respond to a preacher or minister in a Black church, the choir repeats each name following a soloist speaker's "call," adding both to the interactivity and the social movement surrounding the hashtag.

While contextually this section is somber, the music is slighty upbeat in this gospel style. The juxtaposition of the music to text can be interpreted in many ways. One possible interpretation is guided by the history of the music style: spiritual music originated from African American churches in the nineteenth century, often expressing hope, faith, and resilience. Similarly, this section of music is transforming the darkness surrounding these deaths into a purpose for movement and mobilization.

Section 4: The Meltdown

Typically, before an idea can become a movement, there is an event or experience where those living through oppression break under the weight that has been forced on their shoulders. These are moments of confusion, stress, and angst, which are exactly the emotions Dilworth aims to portray. Built on an octatonic scale, this section is meant to feel "dark and unsettling."[8] The melody ascends chromatically over a D♭ chord from the bass, which adds to the agitated feeling of uneasiness and unrest that was felt throughout 2020 (Figure 3 on the next page).

The text in this section is reflective, working with the music to create the feelings it stirs in its audience. As said in the poem, "The violence of again, a militarized police force, teargassing, bullets ricochet, and civil unrest taking it burning it down." In terms of internal imagery, this is the most violent and literal section of the poem. The last line, "burning it down," melodically reaches the

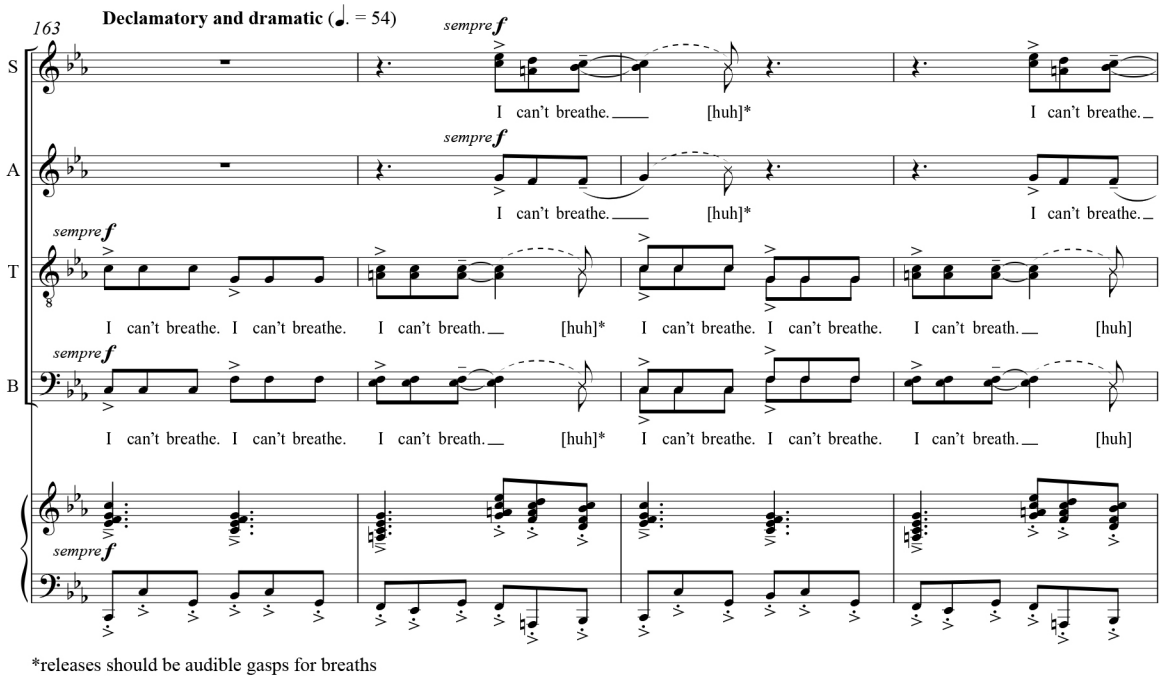
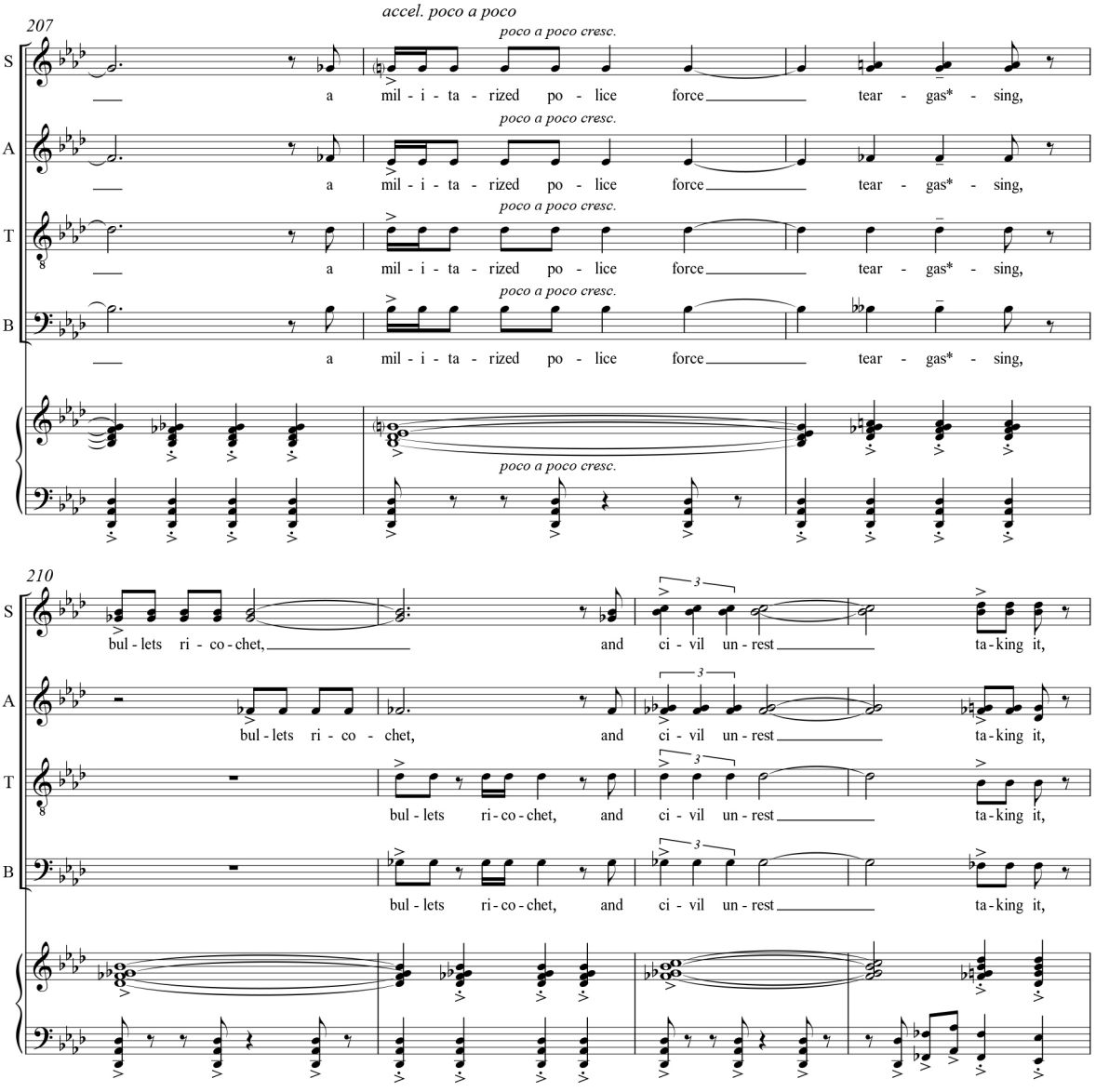


Figure 2. Rollo Dilworth, *Weather,* mm. 163–166.



*sustain the "s" on the syllable "gas"

Figure 3. Rollo Dilworth, *Weather,* mm. 207–213.

highest point in this section before descending rapidly on a vocal *glissando*. Following this symbolic auditory illusion of "burning it down," the instrumental part is fast, tense, and accented.

Section 5: The March

As the birth of this revolution continues in the text, the music arrives at the most active part of the movement. The music and text promote unity between the parts and in the larger context of the social movement. The melody in this section is complete with foot stomps from the choir to add to the imagery of the piece. When voices enter on the text, "whatever contracts keep us social, compel us now to disorder the disorder," they layer on top of each other in the style of a fugue (Figure 4).

As this section progresses, harmonies become stronger and more complex. Each part creates and supports lush, moving moments, particularly when the wind ensemble has a more supportive role in measure 243. The final measures in this section bring the return of the symbolic time signature pattern from Section 2—8/8, 4/4, 6/4—allowing the piece to become cyclical; its call to action is fed by pain of the past while looking into the future as the final section of this piece begins.

Section 6: The Mobilization

"Peace." One word shifts the tone of the entire piece. The final lines of the poem *Weather* are a signal to unity and resolve, giving direction and hope to the cause of social justice. Dilworth reflects this musically by bringing back "Stand the Storm" in the instrumental forces, this time in C major, in a gospel-style setting in 6/4. The music is hopeful, reminiscent, and familiar to the audience. Several moments in this section recall earlier moments from the piece, such as the thunder

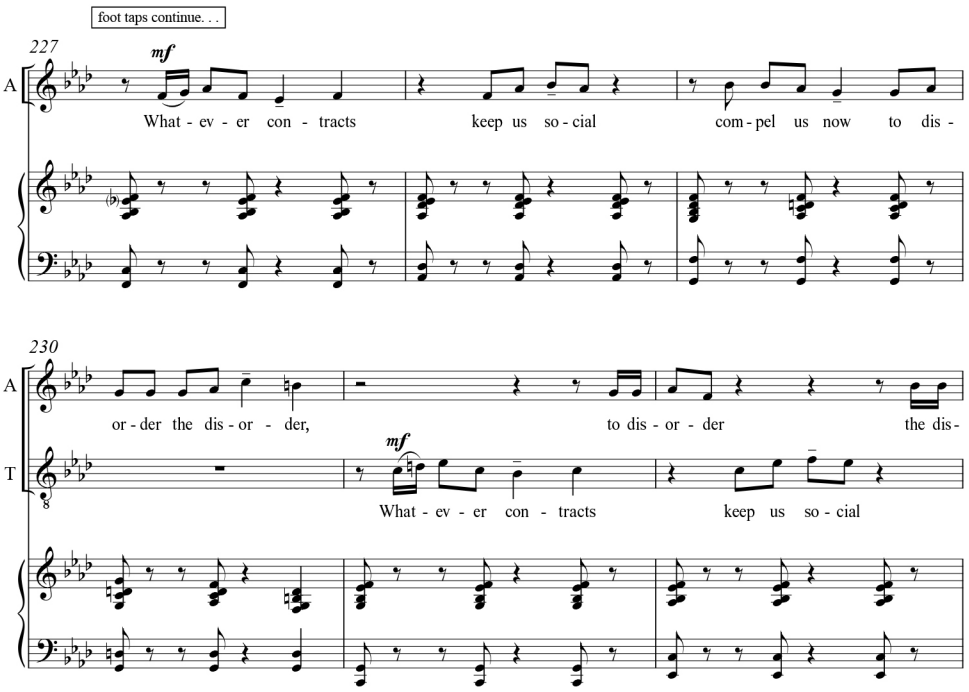


Figure 4. Rollo Dilworth, *Weather,* mm. 227–232.

sheet entrance in measure 271 to represent the "storm" that must be "weathered."

Dilworth takes his time building this section, carefully crafting harmonies to create a sense of stability in the key and chord choices before adapting the instrumentation to be reflective of the opening twenty-seven bars of the piece, once again making the music and movement cyclical. The ending is grand, full of fanfare and pride, an appropriate finale to the story. Built off a triumphant C Major chord, the final moments are hopeful and resolved.

Conclusion

Rollo Dilworth's *Weather*, with text from Claudia Rankine's poem of the same title, is a powerful composition that reflects, honors, and expands on the African American experience during the height of 2020. Dilworth writes in several different styles throughout the piece, each one adding musical and contextual symbolism. He draws inspiration from gospel, blues, spirituals, and classical traditions to support powerful and moving text, adding atmosphere and auditory symbolism to this work.

By connecting to the style, melodies, and rhythms of music, listeners can connect with Rankine's text on a deeper level. Dilworth creates incredible settings that are full of imagery and allusion and has provided space for the listener to connect with the African American experience of 2020, regardless of their prior knowledge or background on the broader context. With more culturally relevant pieces like *Weather*, social movements can propel forward into new communities and truly connect us as one people through the power of music.

Sarah Campbell is a music education student at Penn State University and a member of the Schreyers Honor College. sclillian77@gmail.com

NOTES

[1] Constance L. McKoy, "Culturally Responsive Teaching: What It Is and Why It's Important in Music Education," *Southwestern Musician* (2021): 22–25. See also: Julia T. Shaw, "Culturally Responsive, Relevant, and Sustaining Pedagogies: An Introduction to Seminal Contributions and Selected Empirical Studies in Choral Singing," *Choral Journal* 63, no. 3 (2022): 51–60.

[2] The editor would like to note that the composer was consulted on the final draft of this article.

[3] Claudia Rankine, "Weather." *The New York Times* (June 15, 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/books/review/claudia-rankine-weather-poem-coronavirus.html.

[4] Rollo Dilworth, *Weather,* Composer's Notes (2021): 1–8.

[5] "Weather," Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online.

[6] Rollo Dilworth, *Weather.*

[7] Rollo Dilworth, *Weather.*

[8] Rollo Dilworth, *Weather.*

CHORAL JOURNAL CONTACT INFORMATION

Book Reviews	Gregory Pysh	gregory.m.pysh@gmail.com
Choral Reviews	Amanda Bumgarner	abumgarner@acda.org
Lift Every Voice	Amanda Bumgarner	abumgarner@acda.org
On the Voice	Matthew Hoch	mrh0032@auburn.edu
Recorded Sound Reviews	Amanda Bumgarner	abumgarner@acda.org
Rehearsal Breaks	Jennifer Rodgers	rodgersj@iastate.edu
Research Report	Elizabeth Hearn Elizabeth Cassidy Parker	ehearn@olemiss.edu eparker@temple.edu
Student Times	Micah Bland	mbland1613@gmail.com

For feature article submissions, contact the editor, Amanda Bumgarner, at <abumgarner@acda.org>.
View full submission guidelines at acda.org

Book and music publishers should send books, octavos, and discs for review to:
Choral Journal, Attn: Amanda Bumgarner, P.O. Box 1705, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73101-1705

OTHER ACDA PUBLICATIONS CONTACT INFORMATION

ChorTeach	Amanda Bumgarner	chorteach@acda.org
International Journal of Research in Choral Singing	Bryan Nichols	bnichols@psu.edu

Advertisers' Index

Formal Dresses
Tuxedos & Vests
Neutral Separates

Stage ACCENTS

50 Styles in Stock for Quick Shipment

800-631-1611

stageaccents.com

American Choral Directors Association
P.O. Box 1705
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73101-1705
<www.acda.org>