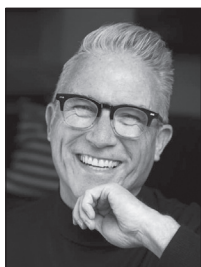


CHORAL CONVERSATIONS



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 per-

formance 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 child-like 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.

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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

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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? 

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.