

Planning Ahead: Five Considerations for Future Choral Music Classrooms

Andrew Lusher

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My school community has an unwritten rule: When something goes wrong, take four minutes and fifty-nine seconds to be emotional. Then it's time to move forward. It took me a bit longer—nearly six weeks—to fully grieve losing the remaining performances of last school year. When the quarantine mandate was issued, my students and I were two days away from premiering a commissioned piece from an internationally known composer, five days away from our annual state assessment, and just over a month away from our annual musical pro-

duction. It felt like the house that we had been designing and building together suddenly disappeared.

Seeing the choral music community adjust to our new reality has been interesting. Virtual choirs of all qualities grace social media, and videos of past concerts from amateur, educational, and professional ensembles are continually featured online. Classroom teachers used virtual classrooms to review theory skills, suggest creative projects, and try social-emotional activities to encourage developing a deeper musical identity. It's been wonderful seeing the energy and inventiveness with which colleagues have adjusted to the new reality.

But, let's face it: when you take the human connection out of cho-

ral music making, you've taken the very soul out of the music. Virtual choirs were cute for a few weeks and asynchronous learning provided momentary instruction, but the heart of it all is missing. Without a practical context in which to implement theory skills, vocal warm-ups, or social-emotional reflections, the value of participating in a choral ensemble diminishes. Our musical life will not return to normal soon, so let's embrace the new look of our profession.

Any assumption that the coming school year will resume as in years past is wishful thinking. It is erroneous to expect normal class sizes of twenty to fifty students, combined large ensembles of 100-200 singers, and that traveling to competitions,

performing at state assessments, or giving various concerts throughout our school and local community will remain. Looking at the far future, the optimist in me believes that when the pandemic finally ends, as people recuperate from their loneliness and isolation, individuals will feel encouraged to join a choir. It's the perfect antidote for our innate need to be a part of a community and to revive a sense of belonging. Cross our fingers that chorus class, as well as church and community choirs, will experience a renaissance.

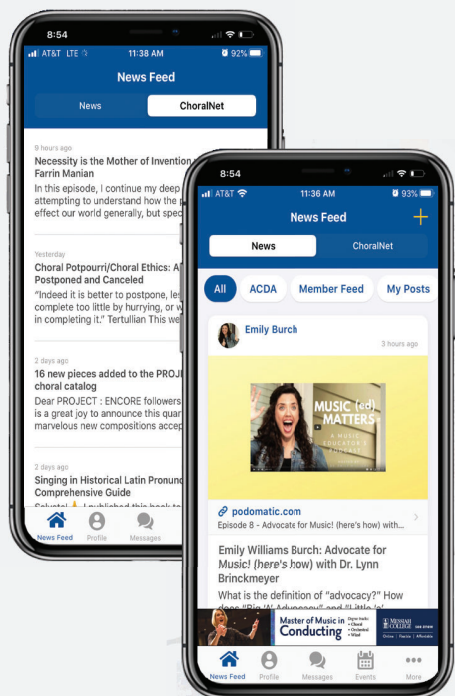
That said, we need to embrace the present. As I write this, we still have no concrete answers regarding

the plan for the academic year. Various studies predict likely educational accommodations, including class sizes of twelve or less, staggered schedules, new calendars, different attendance policies, and the long-term continuity of distance learning. The impact to music classes, to our profession, and to our personal vocation is unknowable. We are treading new territory, and we must embrace the possibilities.

If history is any indication, vocal music performing ensembles will adapt and endure. During the Thirty Years War, Heinrich Schütz famously had to compose with depleting resources. One Sunday he

may have had two people on a voice part and a full consort of instruments, whereas the following week he had only a baritone, a soprano, a viol, and a small organ. Yet, due to his resourcefulness and ingenuity we have some of the most flexible, dramatic, and beautiful choral music ever composed. Similarly, the descants sopranos love belting out in church on Sundays were the result of World War II. The number of available men was so reduced in the average church choir that the remaining men and lower voices sang the melody of the tune while the upper voices were given a special harmony—the descant. It was a way of

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coping with the strain on the church choir from the ravages of war; now we can't imagine Christmas or Easter without them. Choral ensemble music making will endure, but it will require creativity to maintain the integrity of our unique musical experience. Here are five considerations for our new reality:

1) Heightened Ownership: With class sizes intentionally small and student schedules staggered, the size of our ensemble will be dramatically reduced. Having a mass choir with all of our students may be out of the question for the next couple of years. This provides an interesting opportunity for ensemble music making to become more intimate. Our repertoire and our performances will be more like the chamber music of Schubert and less like a full symphony orchestra of Berlioz.

My favorite part of watching chamber ensembles perform is the in-the-moment musicality, where the violin player passes the melody to the viola, their bodies reaching toward one another, their eyes making contact for the handoff. The awareness of the melody, of each part knowing their relationship to the whole harmonic texture, elevates the artistic level of the performance. It's difficult to be tender and assertive with ninety singers, but when the number of performers is reduced, ownership of musical ideas and execution falls more greatly on each performer. This will give the music a level of personality and musicality that is difficult to experience en masse.

Reinforcing the needs of students to be solely responsible for their

phrases, managing their breath, and creating clear textual articulations all while creating cohesion among voice parts best exemplifies the unique relationship between the individual and the collective in the choral ensemble. This greater sense of ownership will help every student feel a heightened responsibility and accountability for the success of the team. In music making there are no bench warmers, and this experience is going to ensure that singers of every skill level will feel a personal contribution to the ensemble. A fun activity might be giving individual students the opportunity to lead

their small ensemble—be in charge of everything from deciding breath marks and dynamics to assessing articulation and tone color.

2) Flexible Repertoire: The reduction of student numbers brings into play a whole new set of skills. With a larger ensemble there is safety in numbers, but in a smaller setting, in addition to being confident and secure on the musical part, one has to be acutely more aware of their volume, balancing to the other voices within a section or across an ensemble, and consistently monitoring vowel modification, clarity of



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text, and clean phrases. Reducing the number of singers is going to change the force, impact, and overall sound of the ensemble, but it will offer new nuances with which to experiment.

The key to finding success in our new ensembles rests in choosing flexible repertoire. Finding pieces with lyrical vocal parts, accessible harmonies, and a gentler style will help individuals refine skills to successfully contribute to the small ensemble. This involves knowing your voices; while one set of eight singers may find success with a Moses Hogan arrangement, another set of singers may need a more accessible setting

by André Thomas. Choose repertoire that sets your students for success. This experience is new for us all, and the last thing we want is to place expectations and responsibilities that are too high on our singers. Just because level five music was performed last year does not imply it will have to be performed this year; there is nothing wrong with stepping back. If a piece has quality text with quality musical writing, it can still be educational and rewarding.

3) **Differentiated Instruction:**

This experience will give us better opportunities of working with in-

dividual voices. Cultivating vocal growth and training greater aural skills through differentiated instruction will ensure that no student falls through the cracks. Traditionally, it's easy to let some individuals slide. When you have one hundred singers and one individual with poor intonation or breathy tone, you count your blessings if they don't stick out. With fewer numbers, we will better recognize, develop, and track the growth of individual voices in our ensemble; this is a real opportunity to focus on the quality of individual instruction. It will challenge us to be better teachers with those students who



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cannot match pitch, who struggle with singing an independent part, or who may lack reading abilities. Working together as a team, identifying individual needs and nourishing collective support for one another, is going to give each student a refreshing level of confidence and interaction with the curriculum.

4) Composition: Creativity and composition are buzzwords being added to curriculum plans and state standards, but, as a profession we have been rather lethargic in implementing truly engaging lessons that give students original opportunities for creativity. Taking advantage of the new classroom is the perfect time to commit adding these concepts to our instruction.

In the Middle Ages, not only were standards of notation rudimentary at best, but there was little need to actually write out early polyphony because the singers were expected to be trained in creating and composing the harmonic lines on their own. The cantus firmus would have been known by all singers, who would then use their aural and vocal abilities to create the harmonies around that theme, effectively creating a totally original song. Even though those singers in the Middle Ages did not have the technology, resources, and professionalized standards that we do today, they still used their voices, their cognitive abilities, and their aesthetic experience to create music. That's what we have been trying to do in our classrooms, and now is the opportunity to try.

Start with students writing or


finding a text (preferably something that can be verse/chorus). Discover the inherent rhythm in the text and develop the language's meter. Then, create a melody for the chorus and then for the verses. Notate as you go along, but do not root the experience in notation; let it be an aural and aesthetic experience. This would be a great partner or small group project that students can work on through breakout rooms in Zoom.

5) No Trophies: On the very first day of my very first teaching job, I asked my students what our goal was as an ensemble. Their answer: to win. I strongly disagreed then, and I still do today. Although I understand the appetite for winning, have we become too caught up in winning trophies, titles, and blue ribbons?

It's similar with state assessments. I once witnessed a fellow teacher cuss out parent volunteers, organizers, and judges when given his score sheets with an Excellent and not Superior rating. Shouldn't it be about the feedback and not the adjective? Have we reduced the magic of what we do to competitions and state assessments, letting the drive to get a Superior or the biggest trophy direct our instruction? Maybe the changes coming are what we need to step away from these habits and reexamine what it is we're doing and why. How can we give students the same thrill and satisfaction of being "winners" without making that the whole goal of the chorus experience? That's what we should be experimenting with this

year. There is more to a great music program than trophies and blue ribbons: keep the students excited and engaged while fostering a love for music making.

In June, I asked students for their vision looking ahead. If class sizes are reduced or school remains virtual, how could I design a learning experience that will continue to engage and excite them? Overwhelmingly, they just want to work together and communicate with each other. So that's what we'll do. We will take things slow, be realistic in our expectations, and continue being open as we push forward together.

In navigating these new waters, let us continue asking: how are we going to keep the chorus experience a human experience? How are we going to preserve the magic of what we do—a group of individuals coming together to sing and communicate? Are we going to change our content into purely theory, philosophy, or vocal lesson curriculums? Or, will we channel our inner Schütz to create something new and lasting that preserves the integrity of our profession? Take four minutes and fifty-nine seconds to accept that our classrooms will be different, and then get excited to embrace something new. 

Andrew Lusher is Vocal Music Director at Old Donation School for Gifted Arts and Academics in Virginia Beach, Virginia.
Andrew.Lusher@vbschools.com