

The Robert Shaw Choral Award is given to a choral leader who has made unusual contributions to the art of choral music. The recipient is chosen by the ACDA Past Presidents' Advisory Council and presented with the award during each national conference. The following criteria for selection were approved by the council in November 1990:

- The recipient should be a member of ACDA (though there may be exceptions).
- The recipient should be someone whose primary career is/was in the United States.
- The recipient has made a significant contribution to the cause of the choral art in America.
- Such contributions may have been through teaching, conducting, or leadership.

Donald Neuen was presented the award in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the 2023 ACDA National Conference. The following pages contain an edited transcript of his acceptance speech. The transcript was edited for ease of reading. View the full video from the conference on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCaKasvqEDg> or by scanning the QR code below.



Donald Neuen's acceptance speech.



Donald Neuen giving his acceptance speech.

I have to thank ACDA for being the very heartbeat of the choral art in America for over sixty years, and specifically the Past Presidents' Council for this indescribable honor. I'm also grateful that I was able to work until full retirement at age eighty-four, and that could only have happened with the support, encouragement, and a lot of help from my loving wife, Sue.

I want to express my deep appreciation for the legions of singers who sang in my choirs. I often told the choirs, "I love you." Because I did love them—sitting in the front half of the chair and holding the music up chest high. I also want to thank the

hundreds of graduate students who trusted me enough to give me their lives for two, three, and four years.

Last, I thank my many teachers. I was always aware of how much I didn't know, and I knew there was someone, someplace who knew exactly what I needed. So, I would call people who didn't know me at all and say, "May I please just come and study a Saturday afternoon with you? I'll pay you whatever you say." And they would say, "Sure, come on." That "afternoon" often evolved into days and weeks.

Sometimes they wouldn't charge me anything. I worked with Julius Herford for eighteen years. I went there on a Saturday once a month for several years. We started at nine and quit at five, and he said, "I think you should pay me fifteen dollars because I know you want to pay me something." And his wife had made home-

made soup that we then had for dinner. These people just knew everything, and I didn't know anything.

I told Julius at our first session (that was 1963 and I was thirty), "Julius, I don't know anything." And he said, "Neither did Bob." Robert Shaw studied with him from 1937 to 1967. Thirty years, and he never made a move without Julius Herford telling him how to do it. That's humility of the finest degree. I would also bring people like Jester Hairston to wherever I was teaching, and we would have all the ensembles sing Spirituals. He taught me how to feel the "inside" of the Spiritual—maybe the greatest element of American music we have.

I'd like to just offer six reminders. **First:** I originally taught that excellence was the thing to strive for at all times in all things, and then I read a book by Vince Lombardi. I was teaching at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in the late '60s, and Vince was the

head football coach of the Green Bay Packers. He went down in history as arguably the greatest NFL football coach of all time. After a couple of bad seasons, in the team meeting before their practice sessions started, he said, "Gentlemen, this year I will accept only perfection—in passing, receiving, blocking, kicking, tackling, and running. In everything we will only accept perfection. And when the season starts, and we run up against excellence, we will defeat it," and they won the next two Super Bowls. Perfection is possible—not by everybody all the time, but by most of the people, most of the time—if the teacher knows what to teach and how to teach it, then demands (with love) the best of what students have to offer.

When it comes to a concert, and we've been talking about perfection during the whole semester, most of the people will sing perfectly, and I will also try to conduct perfectly. We will achieve "collective perfection"



Don Neuen with three previous Shaw Award recipients who were in attendance: André Thomas, Ann Howard Jones, and Rodney Eichenberger.

from everybody. It's possible. Vince Lombardi proved it, and I found it also works with a choir.

I was working with an all-state somewhere in a big arena, and the pro football team came in to practice. A few of them stood at the door and watched the rehearsal. Some choral directors overheard them say, "That's the Vince Lombardi of music." I think it's okay to be really, really, really tough if you love them. I had no reason not to love the singers in the choir. Together, our common goal was perfection.

Second: Robert Shaw's admonition to me (which I'll never forget) was, "Don, 90 percent will never be good enough." That doesn't mean one hundred percent of your time. God and your family must come first. It means one hundred percent of what you know—coming out of you at every rehearsal. The more you know, the more you always bring to the rehearsal. And there's no limit to our singers—except for their director. They can go as far as we're able to take them.

Third: What's our number one priority over everything else? Teach great singing! That's it. Everything else comes second. Teach great singing. Great singing for a tenth-grade tenor. Great singing for a middle-school choir. Great singing for college chamber singers. The thing is, in order to do that we have to know what great singing is for a tenth-grade tenor, a collegiate opera singer, or anybody we might conduct. We know what great singing is, and we must teach them to do it. They must be taught to sing beautifully, musically, "alive" and energetically. These are all a part of that "100 percent."

Fourth: Every rehearsal is a voice lesson. An orchestra conductor does not teach an orchestra to play their instruments. The players know more than the conductor about that. Singers do not know more than you know, so every rehearsal, year in and year out, becomes a voice lesson.

Fifth: Your priorities will come true. You can't help it. If you want to prioritize being a phenomenal teacher and choral director, you can't help but become one. Know the music. Study every note, syllable and word—before the first rehearsal—until you know the function of each one. Usually this equates to one hour



Don with Lynne Gackle and his wife, Sue, after the reception.

of study for each minute of music. Three minutes of a song means three hours of study before the first rehearsal.

Sixth: Inspire and teach communicative passion. There is no great music without expressive passion. Whether it be a song of love, religion, or war, the personal communication of our feelings is crucial. The conductor must be able to demonstrate this uninhibited expression, then teach the singers to do the same. There is no success without passion. No one remembers Alexander the Average.

Again, I thank you more than I could ever say. I'm so humbled that you are here. And I thank the ACDA! 