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CHORAL JOURNAL

Examining Shifts in Repertoire Programming Practices: Pre- and Post-Pandemic

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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

Finding Harmony in Uncertain Times

I hope this summer has brought you time to rest and rejuvenate. As the school year begins and concert seasons take shape, I want to pause and recognize the courage, care, and creativity each of you brings into your rehearsal rooms. We all feel it—the weight of uncertainty, the tension in our communities, the shifting ground beneath our feet. It's an anxious time, and our choral spaces are not immune. But even in the midst of this unease, you return to your choirs with open arms and open hearts. That matters.

Our rehearsal spaces have always been more than rooms filled with risers, pianos, and music stands. They are sanctuaries. They are places where singers—students, professionals, and community members alike—come to breathe, to connect, to release, to feel safe. They come to be reminded of who they are and who they can be. In your choirs, people find belonging and respite. They find their voices. They find moments of peace that carry them through the noise of the world outside your rehearsal doors.

The start of a new season is full of unknowns. Will the voices blend? Will the repertoire land? Will we have enough basses? But it's also full of possibilities. Because every time you invite someone into your choir, you're offering them more than a musical experience. You're offering them a place to be seen, to be supported, and to be part of something bigger than themselves.

This year, as the headlines swirl and the pressures mount, let's double down on what we know works: compassion, encouragement, and the transformative power of music. Let's recommit to making our classrooms and rehearsal spaces the kind of places where people feel safe to take a breath, take a risk, and raise their voices.

You are not alone in this work. You are part of a vast network of choral leaders across the country who are holding space, building community, and lifting others through song. That is powerful. That is necessary. And that is worth celebrating.

May this season bring you moments of beauty, deep connection, and the joy of shared music making. And may your choirs—each and every one—remain a haven where people are reminded that harmony, in all its forms, is still possible. WELCOME BACK!

Robyn Hilger

From the **President**

Edith Copley

My column last month focused on gratitude. More specifically, I thanked the many individuals who contributed to the success of 2025 ACDA National Conference. One individual, however, was not mentioned: Craig Hella Johnson. Craig was our keynote speaker on Wednesday evening, March 19. After his impassioned and inspirational talk, he led us in singing a short and gentle refrain, "We are the ones we are waiting for." Craig reminded us that who we are and what we do can make a difference.

Choir is sometimes compared to sports, and I agree they're both "team" activities. However, if a young athlete successfully tries out for the team, they go home and say, "I made it. I'm ON the team!" If a young singer wants to sing (and, yes, they may have to audition), they go home and announce, "I'm IN the choir."

I've taught for over fifty years, and I've always considered choir to be the definition of INclusion. Singers of every gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation were welcomed into the ensemble. It's a place where we can be vulnerable and our singers can be who they are without judgment. It's particularly important that we now provide a space for those who feel alone, scared, or hurting, and let them know they have a safe community in the choir room. A place where singers can discover friendship, empathy, poetry, music reading, history, expression, languages, listening, kindness, and experience that real sense of community. I also can't think of another profession that regularly gives you goosebumps! On occasion, I've cried in the classroom and on the concert stage—not because I'm unhappy, but because there is such beauty in the air that the tears just start to fall.

As I write this column, the 28th Song and Dance Celebration is taking place in Tallinn, Estonia, where over 30,000 singers and instrumentalists perform in the massive outdoor shell with over 100,000 people out on the festival grounds. The event began in 1869 and is celebrated every five years. In 1988, thousands sang their patriotic songs at the festival in what became known as the Singing Revolution—an act of defiance against Soviet occupation that played a decisive role in Estonia regaining its sovereignty in 1991. Thank you again, Craig, for reminding us that as choral musicians we can truly make a difference for our singers, our communities, and the world. "We are the ones we are waiting for."

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From the **Editor**

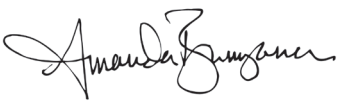
Amanda Bumgarner

As this issue goes to press, we are looking forward to the start of a new school year. Likely by the time you read this, you are deep in the weeds of rehearsal and classroom preparation, or perhaps you are a composer working on a commissioned piece for performance this year. Those working in colleges and universities may be interested in the article "Rising Voices," in which author Eric Rubenstein interviews four choral directors who are within the first five years of their careers in higher education; questions include topics related to culture, curriculum, recruitment, and resources.

This issue's cover article is written by Mark Helms and explores shifts in repertoire programming practices before and after 2020 as part of what the author calls a "natural experiment" due to the break in live choral performances during the height of the pandemic. The author outlines three primary research questions and two hypotheses that guided this work. In the Rehearsal Break column, Elena Bird Zolnick shares perspectives on "Running a Vocally Efficient Rehearsal." Finally, we have a selection of book reviews and a section focused on vocal jazz. The National R&R Chair for Vocal Jazz, John Stafford II, shares "Strategies for the Vocal Jazz Ensemble," and then as a complement, we have included excerpts from the June/July 2015 issue of *Choral Journal*, which was a focus on vocal jazz edited by the late Patrice Madura Ward-Steinman. We hope you enjoy a refresh on that material, which is excerpted with the permission of the authors. To read the full articles, visit acda.org/choraljournal and choose June/July 2015 from the dropdown option in the sidebar.

For those working in the K-12 sector, don't miss the "Ask a Conductor" column in the previous issue (August 2025), which is part of our *ChorTeach* publication. Four choral directors answered this question: "What are some ice breakers/community-building activities I can use for our first choir rehearsal of the season? My choir is very new and unsure of the idea of choir warm-ups and singing together with each other." The August 2023 issue also included a specific K-12 focus content section, which might be of interest.

As always, you can read and download a PDF version of this or any other *Choral Journal* online at acda.org/choraljournal. The entire archives are available by choosing a month/year from the dropdown menu on the right sidebar. If you are having trouble logging in, make sure to clear your browser history or close your browser and try a new session. You can also visit acda.org/ijrcs to read ACDA's research publication, *The International Journal of Research in Choral Singing*



2025 Brock Prize for Student Composers Winner
"In effect it is this: that I love you" by Ethan Soledad

Brandon A. Boyd and Alex Canovas, co-chairs of the 2025 ACDA Brock Student Composition Competition, are pleased to announce this year's winners. The competition received a large number of submissions from a talented group of student composers across our membership.

The winning composition is **"In effect it is this: that I love you"** (SATB and piano) by Ethan Soledad. Soledad is a PhD candidate in Musical Arts in Composition, University of Michigan. The runner-up is "A Clear Midnight" by Kahan Taraporevala, a PhD Candidate in Music Composition at the University of North Texas.

Congratulations to both composers. Special thanks to all who submitted your work. We are very grateful to our panel of talented judges for their thoughtful evaluation and commitment to supporting the next generation of choral composers. We encourage all participants to continue writing and to please submit again in future years.

Bold, dramatic, with an exquisite attention to detail, **Ethan Soledad** (b. 1999) is a Filipino American composer whose work aims to express emotions in their most raw form. His musical style is marked by unapologetic expression, dynamic extremes, and the ability to do more with less but never shying away from doing more with more.

His music has been performed and recognized by organizations such as the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, Musiqa, Hub New Music, True Concord Voices and Orchestra, DACAMERA Houston, the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, Seattle Chamber Music Society, and Chamber Music Northwest.

He graduated with his bachelor of arts in music at Florida State University (2021), studying under Liliya Ugay and his master of music in composition at Rice University (2024), studying under Karim Al-Zand, Shih-Hui Chen, and Pierre Jalbert. He is currently pursuing his doctorate of musical arts at the University of Michigan, where he has studied under Kristy Kuster.

About the Brock Prize for Student Composers

To further its mission to promote choral music and ensure its future, ACDA established the Raymond W. Brock Memorial Student Composition Competition in 1998. The objectives of the competition are to acknowledge and reward outstanding high school, undergraduate, and graduate student composers; to encourage choral composition of the highest caliber; and to further promote student activity in ACDA.

The winner is awarded a $5,000 cash prize and complimentary conference registration at the regional ACDA conference of their residence. The winning composition is performed at the home region of the composer and may be performed at other regions.

EXAMINING SHIFTS IN REPERTOIRE PROGRAMMING PRACTICES: PRE- AND POST-PANDEMIC

Mark Helms

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Few decisions made by a choral conductor are as important as the selection of repertoire. Just as the selection of a textbook has a profound effect on the design and nature of an academic course, the selection of choral literature forms the "curriculum" for a choral ensemble. The characteristics of the music programmed determine which composers, time periods, historical and cultural contexts, styles, musical concepts, and languages (among other factors) singers will experience during their time as members of the ensemble.

The impacts of repertoire selection are even more profound in the context of conducting graduate programs, which are one of the primary avenues through which future leaders in the field are trained. Although students within these programs encounter repertoire in other contexts such as academic courses and studio classes, the repertoire these students prepare for performance is almost certainly the repertoire they learn and internalize most deeply. Those works, therefore, will likely be front-of-mind as they become conductors of their own ensembles and engage in their own process of repertoire selection.

Despite the importance of these programming decisions, it is difficult to capture a complete image of the body of music performed, as there is no standardized method by which programmed repertoire is catalogued. There has been a substantial amount of writing in this journal and elsewhere regarding the repertoire performed in festival settings, such as ACDA conferences and all-state festivals,[1] likely due to the relative ease with which these records can be accessed. However, the characteristics of the repertoire programmed in festival settings may not represent the wider body of repertoire performed on individual campuses for a variety of reasons, including restrictions placed on conference programs (including time limits and rubric guidelines), the selectivity involved in the audition process, and the social pressures of performing for other practitioners in the field. As such, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding repertoire norms outside festival settings.

The summer of 2020 marked a turning point in a national conversation in the United States around racial justice and policing, and so too did it mark a change in the conversation around diversity in the field of choral music. The *Choral Journal* devoted both its November and December 2020 issues to racial inequality in choral music and to highlighting the music of historical and contemporary Black composers. These two issues provide a "snapshot" of the choral conversation surrounding race and representation as it was taking place in late 2020.

While the articles in these issues, along with myriad other writings, provided important and much-needed contributions to the choral field's reckoning with issues of race and representation, they do not capture the extent to which such programming suggestions were subsequently adopted on actual concert programs. At the same time, pandemic-related shutdowns, which began in March 2020 and in many places continued through the 2020–2021 academic year, have created a natural experiment: There is a clear break between concerts that occurred before and after 2020, with a significant gap during which few live choral performances occurred. This disruption in choral singing may have had its own impacts on the types of repertoire performed, extending beyond issues of racial representation.

This article is based on the author's dissertation, which examines repertoire performed in choral conducting graduate programs both before and after 2020 in order to answer three primary research questions:

1) What are the overall characteristics of the body of repertoire performed during the years studied?

2) How did the repertoire programmed at these schools change?

3) How much and in what ways do programming practices differ among the individual schools examined?

Two principal hypotheses came from the social and cultural contexts outlined above:

1) Composer diversity, particularly with regards to race, would generally increase; and

2) Composition difficulty would generally decrease.

Methodology

In order to focus the study on institutions with similar characteristics, schools were only deemed eligible for participation if they met all three of the following criteria: (1) Issue a degree in choral conducting at the master's level or higher, (2) Are classified as "R1: Doctoral Universities with Very High Research Activity" by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, and (3) Are located in the United States. Of the seventy schools that met these criteria, sixteen submitted complete and useable programming records.

Because the typical length of a master's degree in choral conducting is two years, the study covered a two-year period of repertoire performed at each school before 2020 (academic years 2017–2019) and a two-year period after (academic years 2021–2023). In this way, the repertoire experienced by a prototypical master's student in the class of 2019 can be compared with that experienced by one in the class of 2023. Each participating school submitted a complete list of the titles and composers performed by all ensembles in their choral department with which choral conducting graduate

students would have had direct contact, whether as a singer, conductor, or rehearsal assistant.

These data were tabulated in a database.[2] In order to mask the identity of the participating schools, each school was assigned a letter A–P. The following additional data were stored for each school:

(1) Whether the school issues choral conducting degrees at the master's level only or whether it also has a doctoral program

(2) The region of ACDA in which the school is located

(3) Whether the school is public or private

(4) Whether the school experienced any change in its choral faculty during the study period, and if so, during which year

Each composer appearing in the database was coded according to the composer's race/ethnicity, gender, and nationality.

Each work appearing in the repertoire database was coded according to seven characteristics:

(1) Approximate year of composition

(2) Approximate duration

(3) Sacred/secular status

(4) Language of text

(5) Accompanied/unaccompanied status

(6) Difficulty rating according to three distinct resources that catalogue works by difficulty

(7) Whether the work belongs to the spiritual, gospel, folk, or world genres (or none of the above)

Finally, each performance of a work was coded according to five factors:

(1) The school performing the work

(2) The approximate date of performance

(3) Whether the work was conducted by a faculty member or a student

(4) Whether the work was performed by the school's top ensemble

(5) Whether the work was performed by a treble, tenor/bass, or mixed ensemble

Results and Analysis

A total of 3,757 performed works were reported across all sixteen schools, with 50.3% (1,891) from 2017 to 2019 and 49.7% (1,866) from 2021 to 2023. The number of submitted titles varied substantially between the schools, from 133 works at one school to 409 works at another. Much of this difference is likely attributable to school-related factors such as program size—a larger choral program may have more singers, more choral ensembles, and more graduate student "recital choir" performances, for example—but may also result from variations in record-keeping practices and differing levels of completeness in the repertoire data submitted by each school.

This created a need to control for program size so that programming practices of a school submitting a large number of titles did not weigh too heavily when examining the complete pool of repertoire. For this reason, although some of the percentages reported in this article reflect the percentage of the *entire pool of repertoire* that meet the given criteria, many of the reported percentages instead reflect *the average percentage of repertoire at each school* that meet the criteria, thus giving each school's repertoire equal weight.

Frequencies of Distinct Composers and Compositions

Across the 3,757 performances of works recorded in the database, there were performances of 2,527 distinct works by 1,093 distinct composers. Of these, 1,902 (75.3%) of the distinct works and 567 (51.9%) of the distinct composers received only a single performance, which itself indicates considerable variety among the works and composers performed by the participating

schools. Even so, several specific composers and works received many performances, and examining those composers may reveal emerging trends. Table 1 displays the forty-five composers who received at least one performance at nine or more of the sixteen schools.

Among all the composers on this list, half were living as of the end of the study period and are known primarily for their choral music. The other half comprise primarily historical composers from the Western classical music canon, most of whom are known for a variety of compositional genres that extend beyond choral music, along with two more recently deceased composers known primarily for choral music (Hogan and Thompson). Perhaps the composers listed in Table 1 could be considered a snapshot of the "choral canon" for university-level ensembles during the years covered by this study, as they represent the composers that students were most likely to encounter through perfor-

Table 1. Most Broadly Performed Composers by Unique School Count

Unique Schools	Composer
15	Brahms, Johannes
14	Bach, Johann Sebastian
13	Betinis, Abbie
13	Britten, Benjamin
13	Copland, Aaron
13	Hogan, Moses
13	Vaughan Williams, Ralph
12	Elgar, Edward
12	Ešenvalds, Ēriks
12	Hagen, Jocelyn
12	Handel, George Frederic
12	Kirchner, Shawn
12	Lauridsen, Morten
12	Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus
12	Powell, Rosephanye
12	Runestad, Jake
12	Whitacre, Eric
11	Haydn, Franz Joseph
11	Johnson, Craig Hella
11	Mendelssohn, Felix
11	Stanford, Charles Villiers
11	Walker, Gwyneth
10	Bernstein, Leonard
10	Byrd, William

mance at least once during their program of study.

One of the primary research questions posed by this study concerns the way the repertory changed between the first and the second time periods studied. In Tables 2 and 3 on the next two pages, the composers with the greatest *change* in number of performances between the time periods are listed, along with the raw number of performances that each composer saw in each period studied and the size and direction of the change.

Some of the changes seen in these two tables may reflect specific circumstances surrounding the particular composer. Leonard Bernstein, for example, was born in 1918, making 2018 the one hundredth anniversary of his birth; a large number of performances in 2018 celebrating that milestone would explain the subsequent drop in performances in the 2021–2023 timeframe. Other shifts may reflect the larger cultural or programming changes that are the subject of this study. For example, the five composers with the greatest increase in performances are all women, with the sixth- and seventh-greatest rise in performances belonging to two Black men. In fact, only four of the sixteen composers with the greatest rise in performances are White men, while all sixteen of the composers with the greatest fall in performances are White men, an early finding that is explored further in this article.

Table 1 (continued)

Unique Schools	Composer
10	Dilworth, Rollo
10	Esmail, Reena
10	Forrest, Dan
10	Gjeilo, Ola
10	Hailstork, Adolphus
10	Quartel, Sarah
10	Rachmaninoff, Sergei
10	Ramsey, Andrea
10	Schubert, Franz
10	Thompson, Randall
10	Tormis, Veljo

Unique Schools	Composer
9	Holst, Gustav
9	LaBarr, Susan
9	Monteverdi, Claudio
9	Moore, J. David
9	Palestrina, Giovanni Pierluigi da
9	Parker, Alice
9	Smiley, Moira
9	Trumbore, Dale
9	Victoria, Tomás Luis de
9	Vivaldi, Antonio

Table 2. Composers with the Greatest Increase in Count of Performances

Change	Composer	2017-2019	2021-2023
+17	Hagenberg, Elaine	3	20
+17	Powell, Rosephanye	8	25
+16	Esmail, Reena	0	16
+14	Ramsey, Andrea	12	26
+12	Quartel, Sarah	3	15
+11	Hailstork, Adolphus	2	13
+11	Thompson, Joel	0	11
+10	Fauré, Gabriel	2	12
+9	Dunphy, Melissa	1	10
+9	Smiley, Moira	1	10
+9	Thomas, André	1	10
+8	Johnson, Craig Hella	9	17
+8	Kirchner, Shawn	12	20
+8	LaBarr, Susan	3	11
+7	Beach, Amy	3	10
+7	Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus	14	21

Table 3. Composers with the Greatest Decrease in Count of Performances

Change	Composer	2017-2019	2021-2023
–14	Victoria, Tomás Luis de	16	2
–13	Bernstein, Leonard	15	2
–12	Bradford, Barlow	23	11
–8	Copland, Aaron	17	9
–8	Mendelssohn, Felix	21	13
–8	Pärt, Arvo	11	3
–8	Tormis, Veljo	16	8
–7	Ives, Charles	7	0
–6	Elder, Daniel	6	0
–6	Holst, Gustav	12	6
–6	Memley, Kevin A.	6	0
–6	Morley, Thomas	6	0
–6	Poulenc, Francis	10	4
–6	Rudoi, Paul John	8	2
–6	Schubert, Franz	12	6
–6	Uusberg, Pärt	9	3

Racial and Ethnic Representation

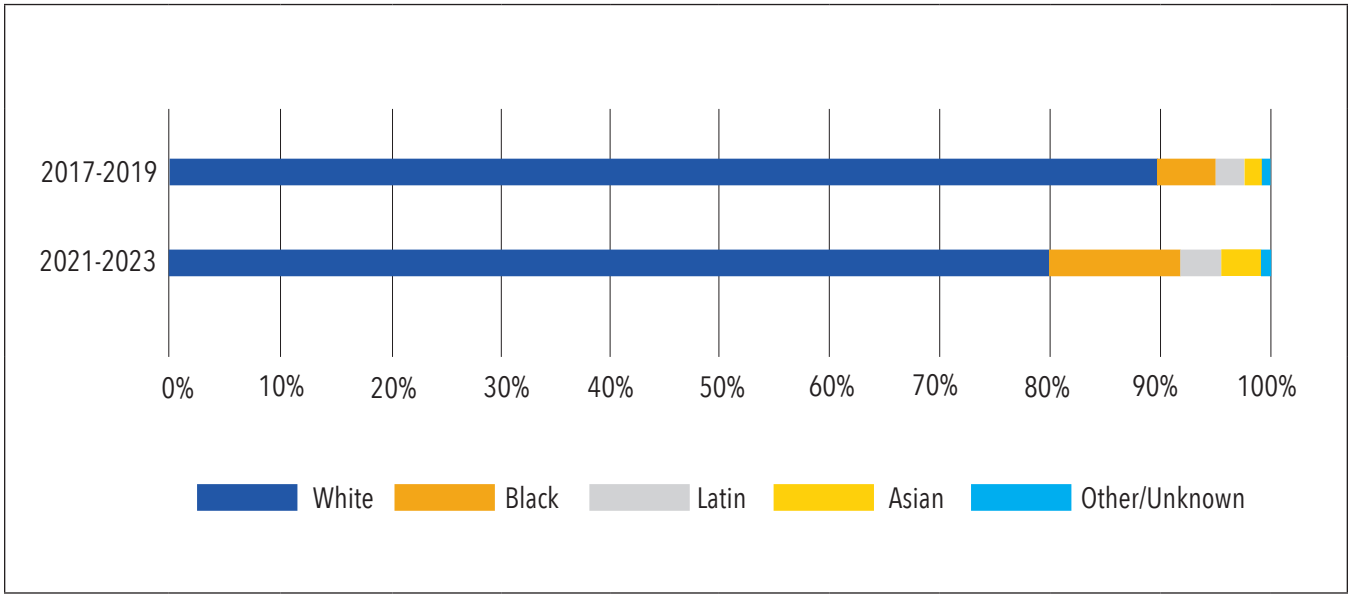
As a result of the evolving conversation in the choral field and in the broader culture surrounding issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and representation, it was hypothesized that composer diversity and representation would increase between the two sample periods. Figure 1 displays the percentage of works performed by composers of various races and ethnicities across all schools.

It is immediately clear that performed works skewed heavily toward White composers. However, the share of White-composed works decreased by nearly ten percentage points (from 89.6% to 79.8%) between the two study periods.[3] At the same time, the percentage of Black-composed works doubled (from 6.6% to 13.1%), the percentage of Latin-composed works increased by roughly 50% (from 2.0% to 3.1%), and the percentage of Asian-composed works nearly tripled (from 1.3% to 3.7%).

Within the discussion of increasing racial and ethnic diversity in choral repertoire, recent literature has promoted the increased performance of non-idiomatic music by non-White composers. For example, when working to increase the performance of music by Black composers, writers such as Marques L. A. Garrett have encouraged conductors not to pigeonhole Black composers by only programming their spiritual and gospel arrangements, but instead to program music by these composers in a wide range of styles.[4] This study tracked whether each work performed belonged to certain specific genres, including gospel, spiritual, and world music categories that would be considered idiomatic under Garrett's framework. These genre categories were cross-tabulated with racial/ethnic groupings to determine what shifts may have occurred in the performance of this music.

The author coded works into these categories based on the following definitions: Spiritual (any work that uses as source material the traditional texts and tunes of the enslaved African peoples of North America and the Caribbean), Gospel (any work based upon the Black gospel tradition, either through the use of pre-existing gospel songs or new works based on the styles of this tradition), Folk (any work that uses as source material the traditional folk melodies and texts of Europe, as well as those people of the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand of European descent), and World (any work that uses as source material the traditional texts and tunes of cultures not included in the above categories). Note that for the spiritual, folk, and world categories, the work must feature a traditional text and melody that fit these definitions. Completely

Figure 1. Total Performed Works by Composer Race and Ethnicity



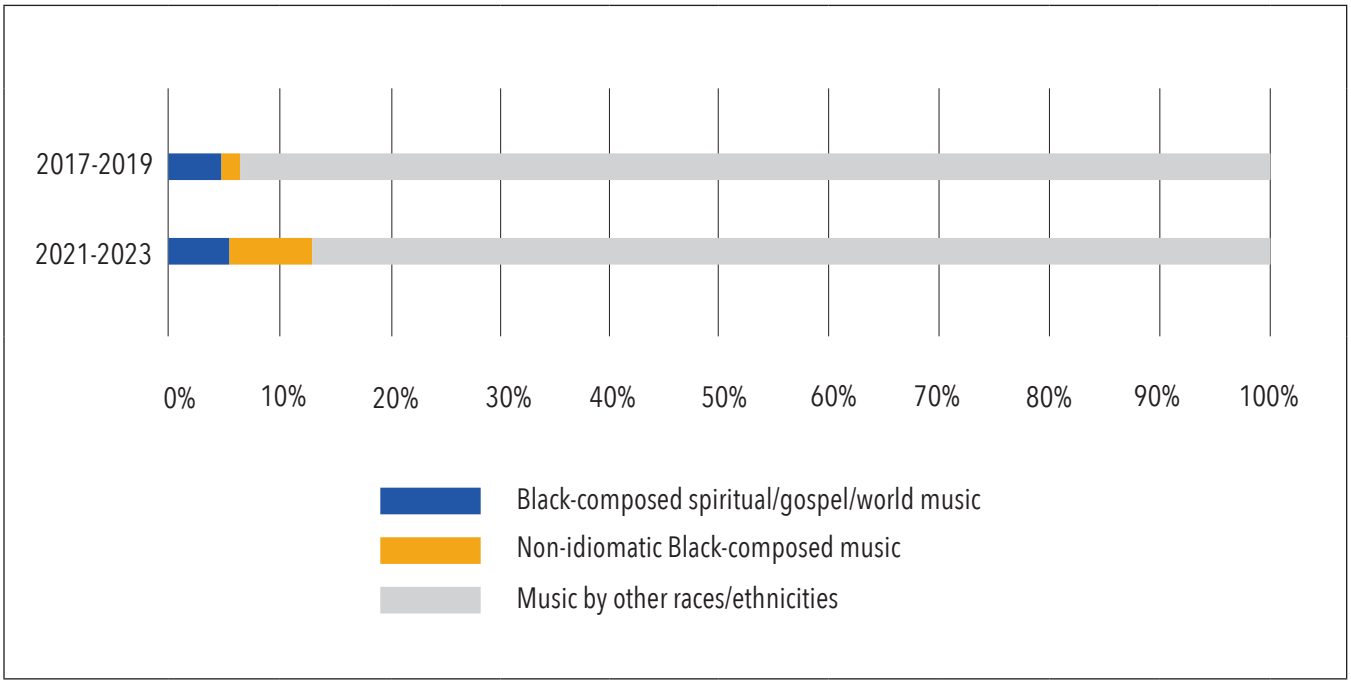
original works "in the style of" a culture's traditional songs are therefore excluded from these categories. A visualization of this analysis for Black-composed music can be seen in Figure 2.

Several observations can be made from these data. First, as discussed above, the overall percentage of Black-composed music rose significantly, from 6.6% to 13.1%. However, there was no significant change in either direction in Black-composed spiritual, gospel, and world music programmed as a percentage of the entire repertory, rising only from 4.9% to 5.6%. At the same time, the proportion of Black-composed music performed that was not from one of these non-idiomatic categories increased dramatically, from 25.8% to 57.4%.[5] In other words, we can conclude that the increase in Black-composed music programmed at these schools is almost entirely attributable to increased performances of non-idiomatic Black-composed music, but, importantly, that this increase did *not* occur at the expense of performances of idiomatic Black-composed music, which remained constant.

A similar statistical analysis was attempted for composers of other minority races and ethnicities, but the relatively small number of works by these composers performed at each school prevent any definitive conclusions. The total number of Latin-composed works performed in the dataset increased by more than 50% from 37 to 57, even as the number of those works in the "world" category remained flat at 20 and 19, respectively, suggesting again that the increase was primarily attributable to non-idiomatic works. Meanwhile, the total number of Asian-composed works performed nearly tripled from 25 to 68, with the number of those in the "world" category only roughly doubling from 10 to 18. The remaining racial categories amounted to only a few performed works across the entire dataset, but of the 8 performed works by Pacific Islander, American Indian, or Other Race composers, all but one were in the "world" category.

Finally, several notable observations were made regarding other variables tracked in the study that may correlate with composer race and ethnicity.[6] Firstly, if a work was composed by a female-identifying or nonbinary composer, the odds that it was also composed by a non-White composer increased by 78% from the baseline odds. This suggests that conductors may choose "two for the price of one" when programming with an eye toward representation by selecting a single

Figure 2. Idiomatic and Non-Idiomatic Black-Composed Music as a Percentage of All Performed Repertoire



work that fulfills both gender- and race-based diversity goals. Secondly, for every minute a work increased in duration, the odds it was composed by a non-White composer decreased by 3%, suggesting that conductors are more likely to perform shorter works by non-White composers. Thirdly, the odds of a work being composed by a non-White composer decreased when the work was performed by a treble ensemble, tenor/bass ensemble, or the school's top ensemble. Additional research may be warranted to determine whether these differences in odds reflect a relative lack of availability of non-White-composed music for treble, tenor/bass, and/or more advanced ensembles, or whether these differences in odds merely reflect discrepancies in programming practices.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, no correlation was found between composer race and whether a school experienced a faculty change during the study period. For this reason, we can conclude that changes in racial and ethnic representation discussed in this section occurred independently of any faculty changes at the responding schools.

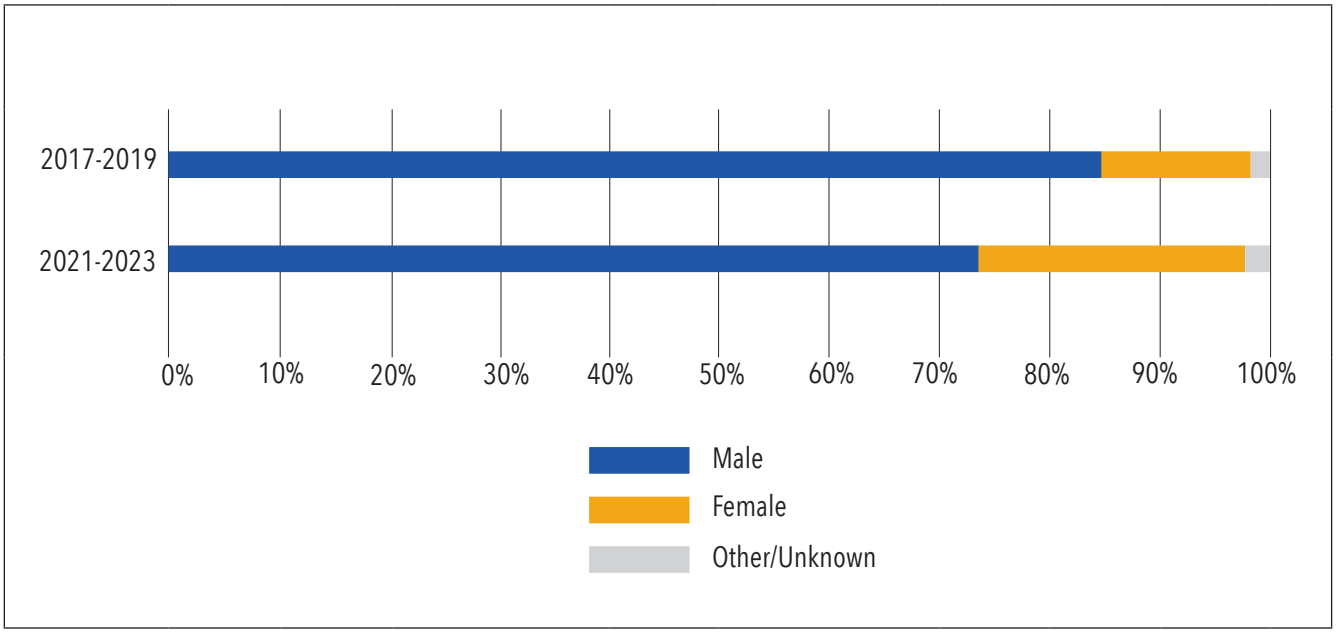
Gender Representation

Beyond composer race and ethnicity, the other major aspect of composer identity examined by this study is gender. Figure 3 displays the percentage of works performed by composers of various genders during each study period.

Similar to trends observed in composer race and ethnicity, performed works skew heavily toward male composers, though also like composer race and ethnicity, a notable shift is seen between the two study periods: in this case, of approximately twelve percentage points toward female-composed rather than male-composed works.[7] Notably, the percentage of male-composed works programmed decreased at all sixteen schools in the study.

As with composer race and ethnicity, a model was employed to determine which other variables tracked in the study may correlate with composer gender. By far, the greatest predictive factor for composer gender is the voicing of the ensemble: a work performed by a treble ensemble was more than two-and-a-half times as likely to be composed by a female composer than a work performed by a mixed ensemble, and a work performed by a tenor/bass ensemble was only about half as likely to be composed by a female composer than a work performed by a mixed ensemble. Similar to findings regarding composer race, both older and longer works were disproportionally male-composed, and schools' top ensembles were found to perform less

Figure 3. Total Performed Works by Composer Gender



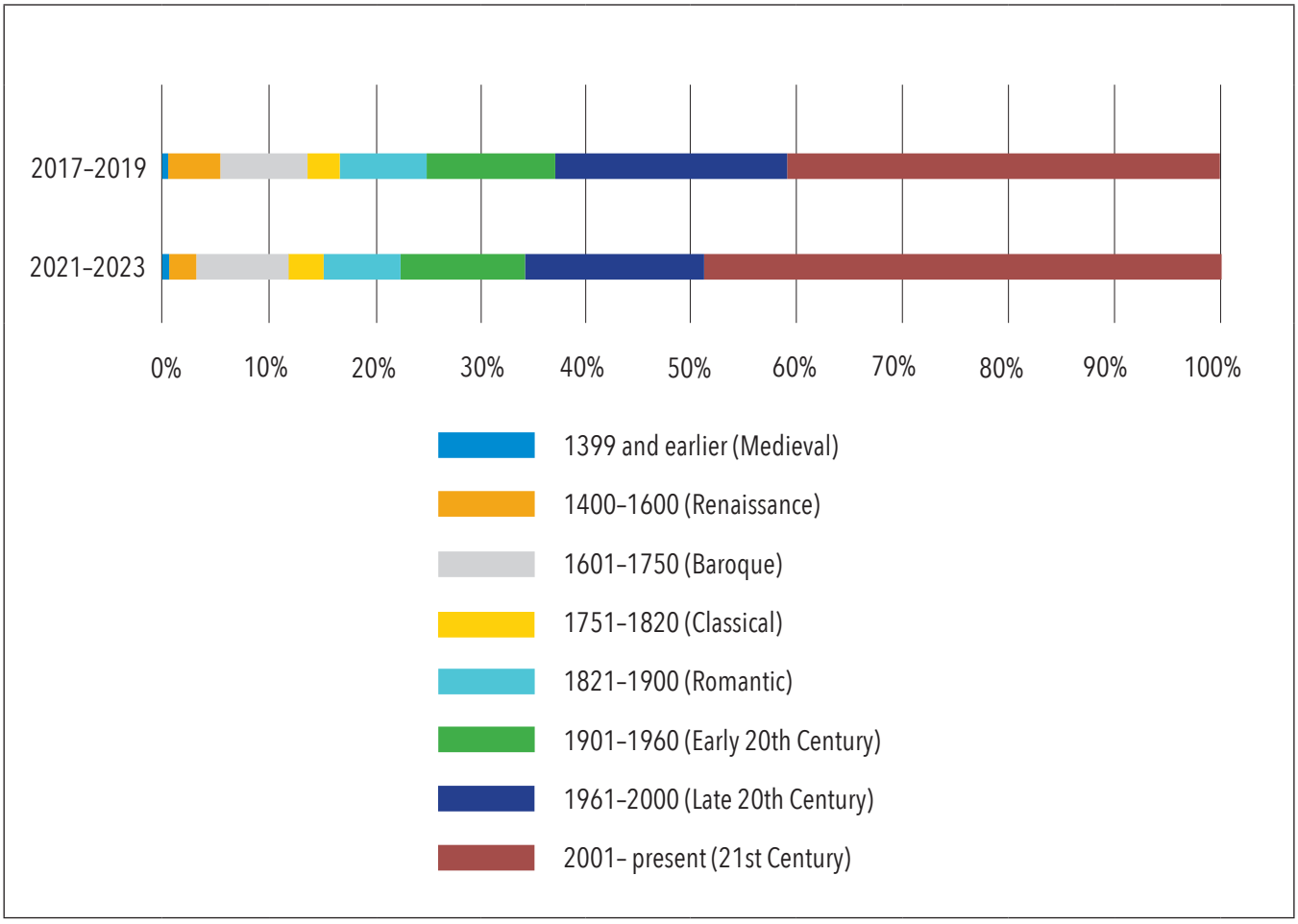
female-composed music.

Year of Composition

Repertoire diversity extends beyond composer demographics and identity. Articles in previous issues of this journal, for example, have addressed a relative lack of historical repertoire performed at recent ACDA conferences.[8] Findings from this study reveal a similar skew toward more contemporary works. Across all sixteen schools, the average median composition age showed no significant change between the two time periods, remaining steady at approximately thirty-six years old,[9] with the median composition across the entire dataset being composed in 1997. Around 45% of all repertoire performed was composed in the twenty-first century, and less than one quarter of the repertoire performed was written prior to 1900. Relative consistency between the two study periods can also be seen when examining works based on historical style periods, as displayed in Figure 4. Note that throughout this study, works are categorized strictly by their approximate date of composition, not by their adherence to stylistic elements traditionally associated with period labels.

The only significant shifts can be seen in a relative increase in twenty-first-century music alongside a relative decrease in late twentieth-century music; this is to be expected, since more twenty-first-century compositions (namely, those written between July 2019 and June 2023) would have been available for performance in 2021–2023 than in 2017–2019. All other style periods remained relatively stable, changing by less than a percentage point in most cases, though Renaissance music saw its already small number of performances cut nearly in half, from 4.1% of all repertoire per-

Figure 4. Performed Works by Historical Style Period



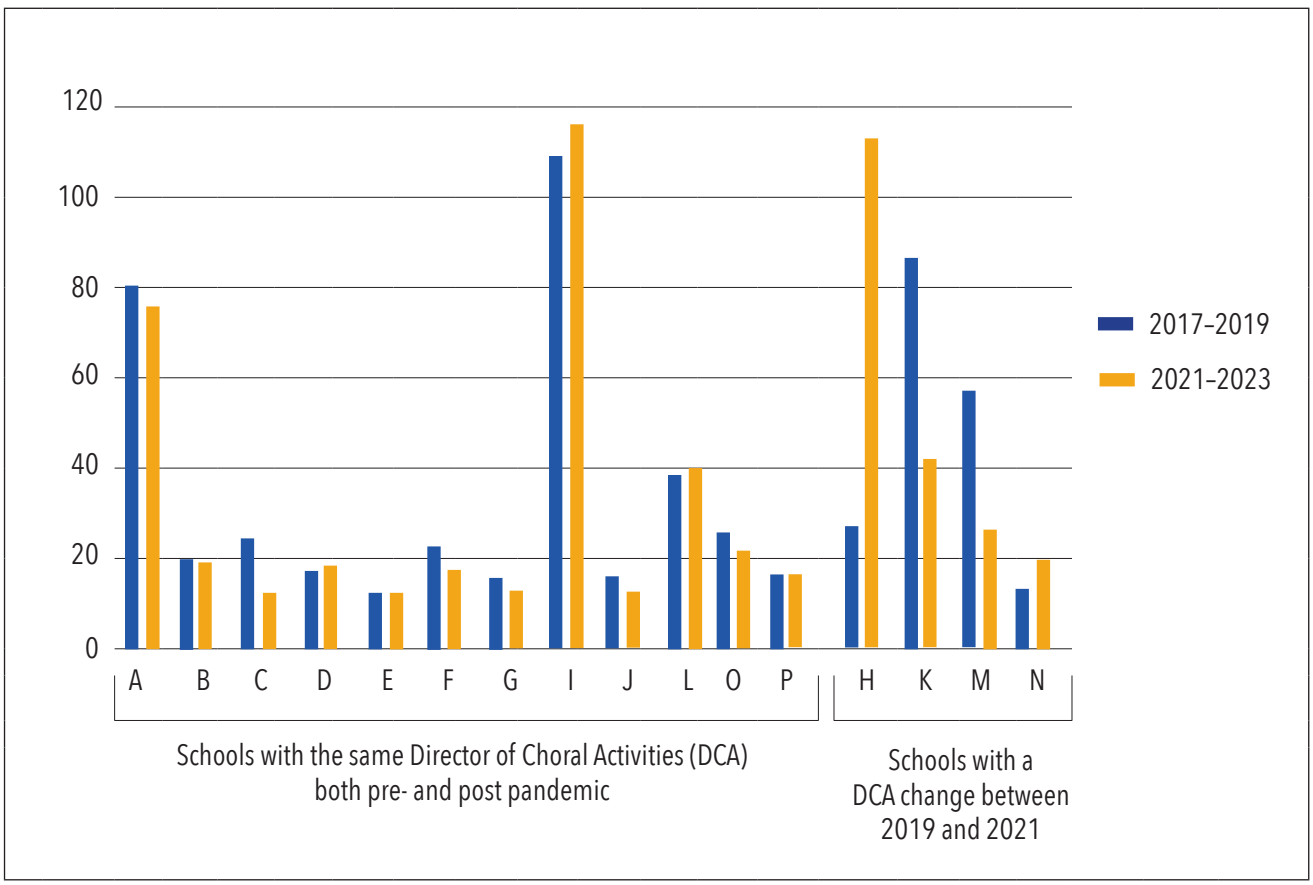
formed to 2.4%.

While the overall level of performance of historical music saw no significant change between 2017–2019 and 2021–2023, significant differences can be seen among the various schools included in the study. Figure 5 displays the median composition age (in years) at each school in each time period and indicates which schools did and did not experience a change in their choral faculty between 2019 and 2021.

This chart reveals stark contrasts when comparing one school to another. Whereas at School E the median work was 11 years old in both time periods examined, the median work at School I was over 100 years old in both time periods studied. Within this extreme range, a wide variety of median composition ages can be seen at other schools, though the distribution skews toward the low end. The prevalence of particular historical periods also varies widely among the schools studied. While twenty-first-century music was the highest single category for all but one school (School I), this music made up as little as 20% of all music performed at School I to as much as 65% of all music performed at School E. Similar stark contrasts exist for other style periods, albeit with lower overall levels of performance. Notably, School G performed not a single work from either the Medieval or Renaissance periods during any of the four academic years studied; the earliest performed work at that school dates to 1731.

While median composition age at most schools remained relatively stable, a few schools saw major shifts in median composition age: at School H, the median composition was more than four times older in 2021–2023 (108.5) than it was in 2017–2019 (25), while Schools K and M saw major shifts in the opposite direction, with the median composition age in 2021–2023 (41 and 25.5, respectively) being less than half

Figure 5. Median Composition Age (in Years) by School



the median composition age in 2017–2019 (87 and 58). Notably, these three schools all saw faculty changes occur in their programs during the years between the two time periods studied. These results suggest major differences among graduate choral conducting programs regarding the extent to which they program historical music, and that these determinations are largely tied to the faculty member(s) who lead(s) each program rather than being inherent to the particular school or program.

Composition Difficulty

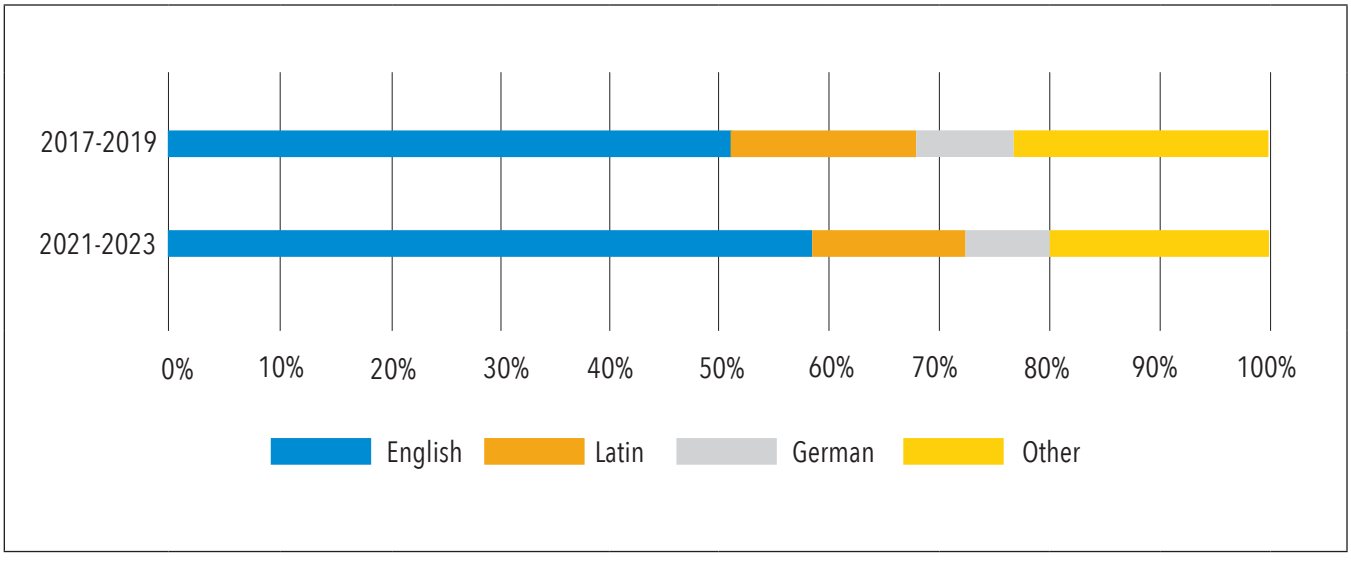
Just as one might hypothesize that the shifting conversation around racial representation would affect the racial makeup of composers programmed, one might hypothesize that, as a result of lost learning hours during the COVID-19 pandemic, the music performed immediately following the return to in-person singing may be of lower average difficulty than the music performed immediately prior to the pandemic.

In an attempt to answer this question, each performed work was first cross-referenced with three resources that rate compositions by difficulty, and the average difficulty under each rating scheme was compared across the two time periods.[10] The results were inconclusive, largely because a majority of the works performed did not appear on any of the lists. This led to the question of whether another variable in the dataset, such as a work's accompaniment status or language, might serve as a proxy for composition difficulty.

While accompaniment status (accompanied vs. unaccompanied) did not show any correlation with composition difficulty under any of the three measures used, language did. Among the works in the dataset, works performed in a language other than English had a significantly higher average difficulty score under all three measures than did works performed in English, suggesting that English vs. non-English works might be used as a proxy measure for difficulty. Figure 6 displays the percentage of works sung in various languages during the study period. Of note: no single language other than English, Latin, or German composed more than 2% of all performed works in either time period.

The percentage of works performed in English increased from an average of approximately 52% of works at each school to approximately 59%, an increase that was deemed to be statistically significant.[11] Considered together, these results establish two findings: (1) non-English-language performed works received statistically significantly higher difficulty ratings under all three measures than did English-language performed works, and (2) there was a statistically significant increase in the ratio of works performed in English between 2017–2019 and 2021–2023, therefore suggest-

Figure 6. Total Performed Works by Language of Text



ing a corresponding decrease in average difficulty.

Though the above discussion of language has centered on its implications for difficulty, it is also worth considering its implications for this article's earlier discussion of diversity and representation; language, after all, also has a connection to diversity and representation, as singing music from a variety of cultures and nations often involves singing in the languages of those peoples and places. However, even though this study established a significant increase in the share of music by non-White and non-male composers, the percentage of music performed in non-English languages decreased over the same time span, all while the median composition age (when considering all schools together) remained flat.

Here, we see the intersection between the two hypotheses posited by this study: that diversity and representation would increase, and that difficulty would decrease. "Diversity" can, however, encompass a variety of elements, each of which interacts complexly with other considerations. A work having a female composer does not make it inherently more difficult for the ensemble, nor does a work having a non-White composer, as these elements of identity do not necessarily have any effect on the musical style or elements of the composition. An aspect such as composition language, on the other hand, does have a direct effect on the difficulty of the work, as does the potential unfamiliarity that comes from performing a work from a time period other than our own. In any case, it would appear that, at least regarding composition language, considerations of difficulty may have weighed more heavily in the minds of choral faculty as they emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic than did considerations of linguistic diversity and representation.

Conclusions and Implications

As set out at the beginning of this article, the repertoire is the curriculum for any choral ensemble. Furthermore, the repertoire we select reflects our values both as a field and as a society. If we are to truly ascertain our values as a field as expressed through our repertoire selection practices, we must do so not by examining only the repertoire programmed in festival settings, where conductors are aware from the beginning that their musical choices will be evaluated by their peers in the field. Instead, we must also look closely at the more typical concerts we present within local contexts, which have historically been less closely scrutinized. This study marks the beginning of what I hope will be an ongoing effort to do so in our field.

What, then, do these preliminary data show? Certainly, there are trends common to all schools: most notably, an increase in racial, ethnic, and gender-based diversity among the composers performed. Any decrease in average composition difficulty appears to be small and may be a fleeting response to the COVID-19 pandemic; even so, the significant increase in the percentage of works performed in English is notable, as it would suggest an increasing homogeneity of repertoire performed, at least from the standpoint of this single attribute. This shift deserves further examination in order to determine whether this dip in linguistic diversity is temporary or if it emerges as an ongoing trend. Meanwhile, we should not take for granted that the trends toward increased racial, ethnic, and gender-based diversity seen in this study will continue. If those increases in diversity can be attributed to seismic shifts in America's conversation around race that took place in 2020, how will equally seismic shifts in the political conversation (and, for that matter, in federal policy) around diversity, equity, and inclusion in 2025 affect choral programming moving forward?

Perhaps more notable than overall trends, though, are those areas in which schools differ widely from one another, the most significant being in the relative prevalence of historical music. A student who matriculates at a program where the median composition performed is only 11 years old (as was the case at Schools E, G, and J during 2021–2023) will have a radically different experience than a student who attends a school where the median composition performed is over 100 years old (as was the case at Schools H and I during the same period).

Similar statements could be made regarding the schools' balance of sacred and secular repertoire and of accompanied and unaccompanied repertoire, both of which also varied widely between schools. At some schools, as much as 70% of repertoire performed was

sacred, while at others as little as 32% was sacred; similarly, percentages of accompanied music ranged from 36% to 72% of performed repertoire at each school.

Put bluntly, if the repertoire is the curriculum, then these are radically different curricula. And if our repertoire selections reflect our values as a society and as a field, then the repertoire selection practices observed highlight areas of commonality but also areas of stark disagreement about our values. Prospective students deserve to be informed about these differences when selecting an institution to attend. An ongoing project to collect, organize, and publish these data could prove valuable to not only these applicants but to the field as a whole. In any case, faculty are encouraged to consider whether their revealed repertoire selection practices truly reflect their stated values as educators of the next generation of choral conductors. Doing so could not be more important, as the repertoire we select leaves a lasting impression on the students who perform it and sets the stage for the future of the choral art, both inside and outside the academy. CJ

NOTES

[1] Recent examples include William McLean, "Representation in Choral Music: An Examination of Choral Literature Performed by All-State Mixed Choirs 2000–2020," *Choral Journal* 63, no. 8 (May 2023): 22–38; Jamie Spillane, "All-State Choral Music: Has It Changed in the Past 15 Years? A Comparison of the Music Selected 1995–2000 and 2014," *Choral Journal* 58, no. 8 (March 2018): 47–67; and Robert J. Ward and Leila Heil, "Repertoire at ACDA National Conferences 1960–2017," *Choral Journal* 57, no. 10 (May 2017): 36–42.

[2] For more details on how each field was coded, how terms were defined, how exceptions and ambiguities were handled, and how data were deemed valid or invalid for inclusion in the database, refer to the present author's dissertation, upon which this article is based: Mark Helms, "Resonance of Change: An Exploration of Repertoire Programming Shifts in Choral Conducting Graduate Programs in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic and George Floyd Protests" (DMA diss., University of Maryland, 2024).

[3] Similarly, a statistically significant decrease (from 89.3% to 80.8%) in the average percentage of White-composed works performed *at each school* was found, using a paired *t*-test: 2017–2019 (M = .8925, SD = .0610), 2021–2023 (M = .8075, SD = .0704), $t(15) = 3.52$, $p = .003$.

[4] Marques L. A. Garrett, "Unaccompanied Non-Idiomatic Choral Music of Black Composers," *Choral Journal* 61, no. 4 (November 2020): 17.

[5] These findings were confirmed using three paired *t*-tests: (1) Overall percentage of Black-composed music at each school: 2017–2019 (M = .0659, SD = .0455), 2021–2023 (M = .1252, SD = .0571), $t(15) = -3.79$, $p = .002$; (2) Black-composed idiomatic music as a percentage of the entire repertory at each school: 2017–2019 (M = .0500, SD = .0416), 2021–2023 (M = .0545, SD = .0302), $t(15) = -0.53$, $p = .606$; (3) Idiomatic music as a percentage of all Black-composed music programmed at each school: 2017–2019 (M = .7194, SD = .2804), 2021–2023 (M = .4226, SD = .2010), $t(15) = 3.42$, $p = .004$.

[6] Multiple logistic regression was used to determine the relationship between these variables. For the full results of the logistic regression model, see the author's dissertation.

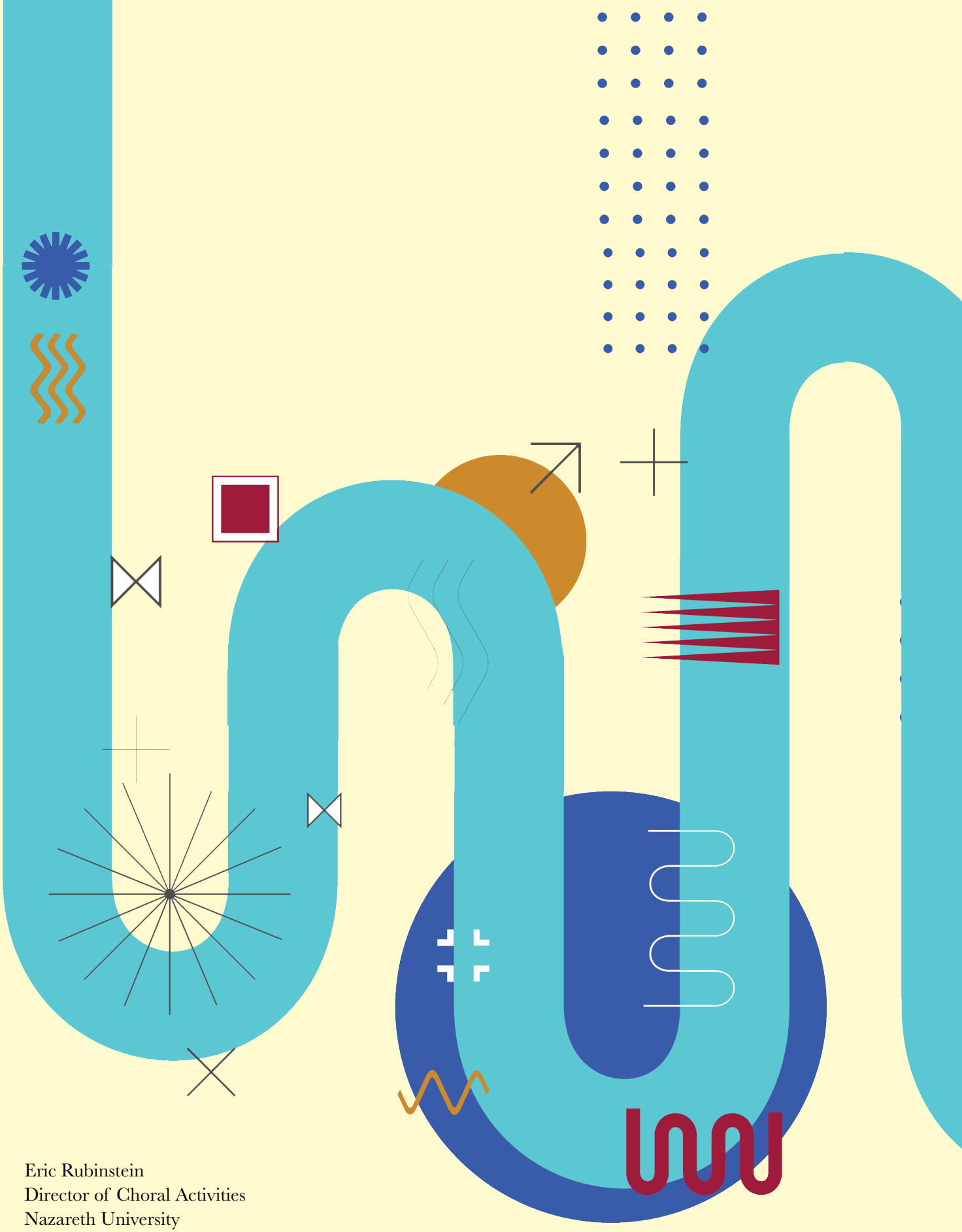
[7] Results of a paired *t*-test for percentage of male-composed works at each school: 2017–2019 (M = .8601, SD = .0625), 2021–2023 (M = .7356, SD = .0845), $t(15) = 7.24$, $p < .001$.

[8] Examples include William McConnell, "Examining Ourselves: Are We Living Up to Our Own Standards?" *Choral Journal* 51, no. 2 (September 2010): 67–69; and Robert J. Ward and Leila Heil, "Repertoire at ACDA National Conferences 1960–2017."

[9] Full results of paired *t*-test for median composition age at each school: 2017–2019 (M = 36.06, SD = 29.88), 2021–2023 (M = 35.22, SD = 33.57), $t(15) = 0.13$, $p = .900$.

[10] The three difficulty ratings included were the Musica International database, the Texas University Interscholastic League's 2023–2024 Prescribed Music List, and the thirty-third edition of the New York State School Music Association Manual.

[11] Full results of paired *t*-test for percentage of works at each school with English-language texts: 2017–2019 (M = .5192, SD = .1045), 2021–2023 (M = .5920, SD = .1075), $t(15) = -4.819$, $p < .001$.



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Rising Voices: Perspectives from Early-Career Choral Directors in Higher Education

ERIC RUBINSTEIN

In recent years, we have witnessed several historical and cultural moments that have given us renewed perspectives on the world: the COVID-19 pandemic, a widening political divide, and a growing mental health crisis, among others. While this has certainly made a lasting impression on our communities-at-large, it has also affected the academic and musical experiences of our students, and our roles as educators. In an effort to highlight different (and potentially new) philosophies and resources in choral music, four choral directors within the first five years of their careers in higher education were surveyed on the topics of culture, curriculum, recruitment, and resources. Each director represents a range of past experiences, personal demographics, and geographic locations spanning four ACDA regions.

As we continue to appreciate the work of all collegiate choral professionals, those newest to the field are positioned to develop their own voice in a space that is constantly evolving—from exploring the effects of social norms on choral music and academia, to the importance of balancing "tradition" with "innovation." The programs and ensembles referenced include a spectrum of enrollments, student populations, institutional leadership, curriculum priorities, and student abilities. While these experiences are not reflective of all early-career collegiate instructors, continuing to share and learn from those at the beginning of their careers in higher education will help to ensure the sustainability of choral singing in these spaces.

Margaret (Maggie) Burk is assistant professor of music and director of choral activities at Carthage College in Kenosha, WI, where she directs three of the college's five choral ensembles and teaches coursework in conducting and music education.

Matthew Myers is associate director of choral activities at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. He conducts the Treble Choir and University Singers, and teaches choral methods, vocal pedagogy, and conducting.

Dominique Petite is the assistant professor of choral music education at Kennesaw State University, GA, where she teaches courses in the music education sequence and conducts the KSU Treble Choir.

Khyle Wooten is assistant professor of music performance and director of choral activities at Ithaca College (NY). As a composer, Wooten had a piece commissioned for the 2024 Eastern ACDA Region Student & Community Honor Choir.

All of the directors surveyed discuss the continued importance of student-centered learning and administration (choir officers, section leaders), citing positive correlations with curriculum, recruitment, and community. Another shared perspective is the intentionality of access, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (ADEI) as a crucial role in their approach to programming and student engagement. Each participant also acknowledges the work of their own mentors and shares how they continue to be inspired by their master-teachers today.

A benefit of surveying directors from across four regions of ACDA is recognizing their various approaches and perspectives based on their lived experiences. Each director has their own personal and professional connection with the ideas of culture, legacy, and the future of our field.

Having recently been a student-performer yourself, do you feel the criteria for "good" or "successful" choral performances has shifted over time?

Burk: In the past few years (particularly since the pandemic, but not exclusively), I have reassessed my own criteria for what makes a "successful" performance. I grew up with incredible models for choral tone, expressivity, finesse, and spirit, and while those choirs, conductors, and sound ideals remain guiding lights in my practice, I have sought to reground myself in the humanity of choral singing. Given that many of us are working with reduced numbers of singers and less-experienced students, I have challenged myself to recommit to the individuals in front of me: meeting them where they are, giving them my best effort, and celebrating our collective choral pursuits. Do I still have standards for choral beauty? Absolutely, and those benchmarks are goals we will continually strive toward. Now more than ever, though, I think a truly successful choral performance is one where people are transformed by their efforts to listen and communicate, and I think that kind of success is measured by relationships rather than standards of beauty.

Another important part of this reassessment has been reckoning with my own privilege and upbringing. I was raised (even if tacitly) to value choral singing marked by certain aesthetic principles: Tenebrae, the

Cambridge/Oxford collegiate choirs, VOCES8, Bach Collegium Japan, and the St. Olaf Choir were definitely some of the top models. Why did I value *those* particular standards of choral beauty? How might a commitment to those types of sounds have limited me from valuing sounds that are, perhaps, unfamiliar to me or different from those "ideals"?

While I do love the sounds of those groups and deeply value their work, I now value more flexible criteria for successful choral performances: telling holistic and meaningful stories about the types of music we program, the ways we research and teach that music, and the lessons we learn in the process. Perhaps most importantly, those criteria need to center the *people* offering the music, rather than some ideal I have built up for what they "should" sound like. I am, more than ever, committed to this work of investigating and deconstructing those "sound hegemonies" I was both raised in and built for myself.

Myers: The biggest change I have noticed is that the modern concert takes the singers and audience on a journey in a different way. A decade ago, a great concert featured beautiful literature sung with note-perfect preparation, exquisite tone, and visible engagement. Now that most choral musicians have easy access to nearly perfect recordings, a concert is much more stirring when it can weave narrative elements between the pieces. Each piece is strategically placed within a larger program, almost curating how an audience should experience the concert as a whole. Contemporary audiences are also much more aware of social issues than they were even a few years ago, so choirs now have the ability to evoke even deeper visceral responses from listeners when they perform works that address our modern society.

Petite: The demand for technical mastery is still present. I think, however, there is more emphasis now on singers "performing" the repertoire. By this, I mean, we expect to see the meaning of the text on the faces of the performers. We want to see the passion and buy-in of the singers, rather than merely focusing on how closely the singers follow the conductor's interpretation. The singers' connection to the text and musicality directly affects the connection the audience feels.

Wooten: As a student-performer during my undergraduate and MM experience, I put all my faith in the ensemble conductors for a successful conducting experience. I had far less faith in my musicality, as I considered myself to be an insignificant part of the experience. As a burgeoning conductor during this period, I would stay the same. I trusted the choral concepts I learned and the information my hands would show, but I did not trust *myself*. It was not until doctoral study that I saw myself as an essential part of the whole—the choir as an instrument. Similarly, I underwent a personal renaissance of artistry. I trusted myself as an ensemble leader and learned holistic connection to the music. I count good, successful performances by the connective energy that permeates it… knowledge of score and skills intersecting with trust of self and all other performing forces.

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What do you value as curriculum priorities among your ensembles, and how does your philosophy of instruction reflect current trends in student engagement?

Burk: I try to keep my priorities fairly simple. First, I think about an entire year of choral programming: What skills do we need to build in the first quarter? What kinds of repertoire should we use to build those skills? Then, how do we use those skills as a foundation and build from there? Second, I think about a musical "diet" through a series of questions: How am I balancing styles and genres? How am I teaching vocal technique? How am I including or excluding people based upon my repertoire choices? Whose stories are we telling, and how? How am I meeting my students where they are, and where will I push them out of their comfort zones? How am I balancing the emotional and physical demands of each piece?

Finally, I try to establish a narrative that connects each piece together (sometimes this is the first step, depending on the kind of concert). Whether it is a textual theme, stories of composers or poets, or a musical connection between pieces, I find these bridges of knowl-

edge give meaning and depth to the musical collages we present.

My other big curricular priority is sight-singing and ear training. In all my choirs, I have a mixture of music majors, minors, and non-majors, many of whom come with minimal music literacy experience. I spend five minutes every day building ears first, then eyes, which has resulted in a more productive rehearsal and a more musical experience for the students.

When we tell stories with integrity, equip students with the tools to tell those stories, and reflect upon how those stories change us, student engagement becomes an organic and integral part of the process. At every stage of their learning, I ask students to take responsibility for their own interpretation including discussing texts, listening and offering feedback, or even inviting them to submit repertoire ideas for consideration.

Myers: I think it is vitally important to perform as varied a repertoire as possible. I try to expose my students each semester to music from different time periods, cultural backgrounds, and languages in addition to different voicings, textures, and modes. Since the ensembles I work with change significantly in membership each semester, I make it a priority to explore new themes and styles of music with each group I teach. At my university, all courses that provide a fine arts credit have writing and research components, and I use this requirement to help students explore the background of each piece and share their insight on our online forum.

I am also sensitive to varying the pace of our rehearsals as another way to promote student engagement. I keep the same basic structures in place but will often plan for some pieces to be rehearsed as smaller excerpts while others receive a full run-through. I find that giving all pieces equal time each day makes it difficult to maintain their attention, so some pieces will get fifteen minutes in the lesson while others will receive five. It is also quite helpful to rehearse in different formations as often as possible even within the same class period, as having students move throughout the space helps recharge their bodies and sound more engaged.

Petite: I want my ensemble to connect with a variety of repertoire. I want them to tell the story of each piece they sing through their vocal timbre, facial expressions, and energy. I want them to tackle concepts they found intimidating, and realize they have the skills and understanding to be successful when encountering challenging repertoire. When teaching context, rather than lecture, I ask students to contribute to class discussions. I help them draw parallels between the repertoire and their prior knowledge and experiences. I post detailed information on our Learning Management System for students interested in deeper explorations. I also post practice tracks after we have a solid foundation in our rehearsals because I do not want to encourage the perception that attendance is not important. COVID "Zoom" classes lulled students into thinking they could work on everything on their own without being present for class. "Zoom engagement" has obvious impacts on ensemble cohesion.

Wooten: I value the economy of time and awareness of rehearsal as much as the economy of motion, language, and perception in conducting. Additionally, I value the diversity and accessibility of the choral literature as much as its aesthetic pleasures. My philosophy of instruction requires an intentional knowledge of student background, strengths, areas for improvement, and inclinations to the choral art. Earnest engagement in any dispensation of the art is not possible without this living data.

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What strategies are you implementing to recruit and retain singers?

Burk: When I think about recruitment and retention, I think about how choral singing makes people *feel*. In this era of disconnection (or connection mediated by screens), choral singing is one of the best ways for people to feel connected to their peers. My first strategy is to join together with my students to build a culture that honors people in every sense: positive and supportive rehearsals, thoughtful music choices, clear expectations, student-generated constitutions, and purposeful communication (for me, this means starting the year with every choir reading Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" together and reflecting on it). Once those

goals are outlined, I work with our admissions office to send emails early to any incoming students who have expressed interest in music with an invitation to audition (which I call "vocal handshakes"), videos of the various choirs, and quotes from current students. We have Facebook and Instagram accounts for our choirs as well. We have merchandise like stickers, shirts, and bags, which my current students love showcasing all over campus and beyond. Finally, I make myself a fixture on campus as much as I can so people know me (e.g., concerts, games, ADEI events).

As far as retention goes, focusing on the student experience is everything. How am I making students feel seen on any given day? How are they experiencing musical success? How are they getting to know other students in the choir? We build time for inside jokes, moments to reflect in rehearsal, and the chance for students to hear their own voice in the room (if they so desire). Those are the magic moments that keep students coming back. A goal of mine for next year is to plan more outside-of-class activities, often assisted by my choir officers.

Finally, people love being a part of organizations or groups where they experience excellence. When people love what they do and are good at it, they become your best recruitment and retention allies. Having excellent choirs that sing their hearts out is still, perhaps, the most powerful way to both get new people in the door and keep them there.

Myers: My strategies for recruiting new music majors all boil down to the same concept: I try to be as present as possible for middle school and high school students in my region. This includes visits to area schools, contest adjudications, leadership retreats, and camps. I try to ensure that three things happen each time I interact with a choir: they can hear a noticeable improvement in their sound, they learn how to replicate that change later on, and they have a good time doing so! To recruit students already on campus, I try to encourage a more visible presence in our choral program, which may include participating in activity fairs, singing outside during class time or caroling throughout academic buildings, and maintaining an active social media presence.

Retention comes from a positive classroom culture. Students need to know that they are important members of the group who contribute both vocally and personally, and they also need to know that they are part of something larger than themselves. If they feel respected, if they know their performances are high quality, and if they know you want them to be successful in other aspects of their life, they will likely come back to choir.

Petite: I ask my singers to help me recruit by inviting their friends to join the ensemble and to come to our performances. We sang the National Anthem at basketball games to increase our exposure. I visit area high schools and work with their ensembles. I do this to give back because we ask local teachers to host our interns and student observers. I also do this to recruit potential future students. My hope is that high school students will be less intimidated to join a collegiate ensemble if they see that I am approachable and encouraging. I point out that many of our ensembles are non-auditioned, and we welcome all students regardless of major.

As far as retaining singers, I want students to feel a sense of belonging, where we enjoy each other's company. We do activities outside of class, such as cookie decorating for Halloween and Valentine's Day, hiking, movie nights, etc. I also set aside rehearsal time throughout the semester for students to get to know each other. Students share exciting news in class and on our GroupMe. I also want students to have a sense of ownership. I have a student assistant who helps with clerical duties and gets to teach and conduct repertoire. Other advanced students lead sectionals. I solicit class input about certain interpretive decisions (breaths, tempo, etc.), and I choose spring concert repertoire from student suggestions.

Wooten: In addition to planning tours for our flagship ensemble, I create conversations with teachers and program leaders from where our student populus is sourced. These conversations yield opportunities for visits and shared information with interested prospective students. Retention requires a great deal of investment. My choral students' lives comprise several components

of the campus experience. They are enthusiastic about coming to and staying in choir because I show up to their opera performances and non-music related campus-based events, I select repertoire that speaks to a diversity of human experience, and I check in with them regularly on their academic progress. The fruit of this investment often prompts students to spread the word about joining our upcoming choral activities.

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How has the cultural landscape shaped your coursework, including (but not limited to) ensembles, methods, conducting, literature, music education, etc.?

Burk: The single most prominent element of the cultural landscape for me has been my journey with access, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI). Understanding the legacies of race and racism, and how I am a part of those legacies, has led me to reshape my teaching across all my academic disciplines. On a fundamental level, I have interrogated my own upbringing and classroom experiences and have tried to better meet the needs of my students as a result. Among my coursework, I teach four ensembles, conducting, and choral literature. These interrogations have led to a research-based pedagogy that supports more inclusive, thoughtful programming, and a broader perspective that I often discuss with students.

Additionally, this ADEI work has enabled me to better prepare my music education students for the classrooms they will lead. Last year, I spent more time rote teaching in my Vocal Methods class. By affirming the rote traditions practiced by so many cultural and ethnic groups in this country, I worked to embrace other modes of learning that will better meet the needs of my preservice teachers, most of whom will not begin their careers in a thriving tradition of music literacy. However, if they can be efficient, effective, and engaging rote teachers, they can build the rapport and respect necessary to introduce those literacy systems. And I'm still learning myself: all of my ADEI work has led me to realize how much I still have to learn as a conductor and a teacher.

Myers: The cultural landscape looks so much different than just a few years ago, and this inspires me to stay fresh and never rest on my laurels. I am always seeking for more ways to let students share their thoughts and have more ownership of the choral experience, as the top-down conductor-knows-all model no longer seems relevant. I often delegate in-class ensemble experiences to choir officers and schedule sectionals to further provide leadership opportunities to students. I am continually educating myself on choral literature by composers who were historically excluded from the choral canon, and I make sure that the music we sing is representative of a wide variety of backgrounds. I am very specific about repertoire, and I try to ensure that the themes of each piece feel current to students. For example, social justice music feels relevant and important from the very beginning, and is very easy to connect to students' lives. For works that may not immediately seem relevant, I try to conceptualize as much as possible to help students connect academically. In music education courses, we frequently discuss equity and access so students are better prepared to experience real-world classrooms and meet the needs of every student.

Petite: I no longer assume that my *belief* in inclusivity results in all my students feeling welcome. I now realize that *overt actions* on my part are the only way to show my students I value each of them. I include pictures and biographies of the composers and poets of our repertoire, so my students see aspects of their identities in the music we are singing—and so they also see that people who are different from them can create art that resonates with them. I start my Choral Methods class with the second edition of *Teaching with Respect* by Stephen Sieck, hoping his message will influence our future discussions and their future decisions. We discuss marginalized voices in music education classes and seek out literature from under-represented populations. Throughout our discussions and assignments, however, I reiterate that I am not advocating for members of "privileged" demographics to feel a sense of guilt, nor am I suggesting that works from the European canon be "canceled." Since I teach in one of the many states with Divisive Concepts Laws, I make sure

my students are aware of the legal landscape. I would be negligent if I did not warn them about the statewide political environment.

Wooten: I am a Black conductor showing up in a predominantly white space for work every day. Unfortunately, whiteness often dares me to leave my authentic ways of knowing and being at the door. Such manifestations include, but are not limited to, the following: overt opposition to charged textual themes found in repertoire, blissful ignorance to composers of my race, daily confrontation of the reality that I am one of few Black people in my workspace, students and faculty limiting my knowledge and skills to Black idiomatic music, and navigating a pervasive institutional entitlement that demands ongoing partiality to Western-derived methods of learning, engaging, and creating. As a critical act of resistance and liberation, I insist upon drawing from the well of my musical experiences from the Black church to assist in my continued proficiency of music theory, using critical thinking skills in my teaching of score study and rehearsal analysis, programming and studying a diversity of repertoire that encompasses multiple abilities and stories of choristers, and centering voices of marginalized people in the promotion of our choral activities.

Choral performance and study have also welcomed an increased use of technology to facilitate learning and interaction. It is encouraging to know that choral students are welcoming worldwide connection via virtual symposia, composer/conductor mentorship programs, and virtual choral exchanges in the hopes of sharing culture, awareness, and joy. As a professor, the use of technology remains a foundational element to my commitment to cultural competency and innovative music education methods.

What, do you believe, is the future of choral music in higher education?

Burk: I hope collegiate choral groups continue to be organizations where students can connect with each other, driven by the purpose of creating beautiful, meaningful music together and being transformed by that process. In order for that hope to be made manifest, we need to keep placing our students at the center of the narrative. If we build cultures and craft musical experiences that leave students feeling successful and connected, choirs will thrive. However, no matter how amazing our choirs are, significant forces continue to stand in our way with programs being deflated as we enter the demographic slope. We need to keep thinking about ways to help administrators, boards, and other power players understand the impact of what we do with quantitative data for qualitative work. Keeping track of recruitment and retention numbers is only the beginning. How can we use data creatively to tell the stories of the lives we change?

If we build cultures and craft musical experiences that leave students feeling successful and connected, choirs will thrive.

Myers: In a time of budget cuts and STEM-focused education, it would be easy to worry that choirs may be at risk. However, the choral art form is alive, thriving, and adapting to societal needs faster than I have ever seen. When we share this vibrancy with our campuses, we can show that we are among the classes most readily adopting universal design for learning, project-based instruction, and a commitment to ADEI. Anyone reading the *Choral Journal* knows the power of choral music to stir the soul, to bring people together, and to inspire social change, but those making institutional decisions for our programs do not. It is our duty to advocate for our art, and with time, we will find that choirs are more relevant than ever. I believe that more community-focused, non-auditioned choirs will thrive on college campuses, as they provide the best opportunity for more vibrant and more comprehensive program growth.

Petite: I teach a non-auditioned choir where most of the singers are non-music majors. These students love to sing choral music. I am hoping this indicates the rel-

evance of choral music in higher education. I know of multiple programs, however, that are seeing a drop in music education majors. I can only speculate that the reduced numbers are due to negative perceptions of life as a K-12 music educator, or reluctance to incur student debt for a career that many see as having low salary and job security. My fear is the trend will result in cuts to collegiate music departments or pressure to boost numbers by accepting students who are not likely to be successful in the program.

Wooten: Our future relies on the formation and furtherance of spaces that provide safety for all choristers to imagine and embody a future for the art and the world that houses it. A futurism (embodied, actionable hope) that breaks the stronghold of white supremacy, white privilege, Western-art centrism, and hatred on human imagination. An art that values the inherent, often frowned-upon technologies of the artists. Curriculum that urges faculty and students to get real about the array of avenues available to twenty-first-century musicians so to avoid career regret, burnout, and disillusionment.

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How are your mentors continuing to inspire your work today, and how do you see their guidance reflected in your approach?

Burk: It is amazing to think about the ways my mentors show up in my classroom every day, like a cloud of witnesses sharing wisdom. Janeal Krehbiel's one-liners ("Change your vowel, change your life!"), Hilary Morton's fully embodied warmups, the voice of Eugene Rogers on my shoulder saying, "Taller, Maggie, trust it." My dad, reminding me to be a minister to those in my care. There is basically nothing that I do that was not inspired or influenced by my mentors, and they are present in a spiritual sense in just about every rehearsal or class I lead.

Myers: I think of my mentors nearly every day that I work with choral ensembles. I am inspired by how Dr. Craig Arnold built community and led students to feel ownership both of the music-learning process and also in the group mindset of the ensemble. I think of how Dr. Edith Copley was able to provide specific, succinct feedback to change the sound of a choir drastically within just a few seconds. I think of how Dr. John Dickson built a healthy, supported tone through a relaxed, low gesture with a slightly rounded ictus. Each time I see an excellent teacher work with their students, I am inspired to keep learning and bring back my best work for my students. At this point in my career, I seek out peer mentors who help me learn, grow, and never get too comfortable!

Petite: I had the privilege of studying with Judy Bowers, Kevin Fenton, and André Thomas at Florida State University. Their work ethic, passion, and pedagogical knowledge continues to inspire me. They are the reason I chose to pursue a doctorate and teach in higher education. Though he was not a mentor on a personal level, my time singing with Robert Spano in the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus was pivotal. Spano's knowledge of the score, interpretive ideas, and expressive conducting inspired me to pursue a DMA in choral conducting with John Dickson at Louisiana State University.

I see so many reflections of my mentors in my approach. Due to space constraints of this article, I am afraid this description will be reductive. I discovered the importance of research-based practices from Dr. Bowers (rather than relying solely on anecdotal evidence). When I give feedback to my students, I still hear her voice saying: "specific and relevant!" Dr. Fenton's "positive impatience" shapes my pacing. I employ his rehearsal style to keep my students motivated throughout the preparation process. Dr. Thomas provided stylistic context for our repertoire. I am much more vulnerable on the podium now after experiencing Mr. Spano's emotive conducting. His style helped me, as a singer, connect with the repertoire, and I believe my choirs are more expressive now that I am more comfortable conveying emotion. Dr. Dickson's meticulous score study and textual analysis introduced new ways of appreciating compositional genius and making interpretive decisions. I see his gestural influence daily in the shape of my hand, the sweep of my arm, and the articulation my wrist indicates.

Wooten: I am grateful for mentors that take my calls, challenge me when I am stuck, and offer correction when I am wrong. To me, the best learning is indirect. Simply watching their impact, field engagement, and the fruits of their ongoing scholarship prompt me to be honest in my work. Their stamp on my approach is community—knowing that there is safety and grace for growth in the abundance of trusted counselors.

What advice would you offer directors who may be interested in pursuing a career in higher education?

Burk: The field of higher education is about to undergo (and, in some places, is already undergoing) a somewhat painful metamorphosis as enrollments decline. My advice would be to think as strategically as possible. Even while you are still in a doctoral program, find measurable ways choral music can serve not only current students but institutions as a whole.

Myers: My first advice is to learn everything that you can on your own before you pursue graduate degrees. This normally equates to devoting several years to teaching and conducting experiences after receiving a bachelor's degree. Then, you will head into graduate school with much more awareness of your strengths as a conductor and rehearsal technician as well as the areas in which you want to improve. If you approach your graduate studies knowing exactly what you would like to improve upon, you will be able to shape your learning experience and make the degrees more meaningful. Once you land a job in higher education, know that there is much more to the job than teaching. The expectations for scholarly research, creative activity, and institutional service will take up a significant portion of your time. Be careful to manage your time, and avoid allowing work to overtake every aspect of your life!

Petite: Do thorough research before choosing a graduate program. Your relationship with your major professor is going to be the key to your success or failure in school. You also want to choose a program based on the opportunities it will offer you: are you interested in working in opera? Is it more important that you have your own ensemble to conduct? Do you want experience teaching conducting?

Many colleges and universities are looking for instructors who have teaching experience. Conducting school choral ensembles prior to pursuing a terminal degree will increase the odds of getting an interview for a collegiate role. This is because prior teaching experience is invaluable for developing your pedagogy and teaching philosophy.

Finally, do research about what a career in higher education looks like. People do not always have an accurate picture of the job profile. Make sure you are choosing this career based on reality rather than an idealized perception.

Wooten: Higher education is filled with disaster stories. It is important to stay connected to your purpose for entering this arena. No one hands you your worth. Enter the academy knowing exactly who you are and what you are capable of. Trust that the very best of your training will intersect with your uniqueness as a human and educator. Make necessary pivots and exits that are grounded in wisdom and respect for your needs and well-being.

Related Topic from the Archives:

"Singing Success Representing Primarily Undergraduate Institutions"
by Wendy K. Moy and Bryan E. Nichols
(August 2023)

What practical advice or resources have you found helpful at the start of your career in higher education (repertoire, programming considerations, books/podcasts/articles)?

Burk: In my methods courses, I have really enjoyed teaching Bridget Sweet's books (*Thinking Outside the Voice Box* and *Growing Musicians* in particular) as well as Sharon Paul's incredible book, *The Art and Science of the Choral Rehearsal*. Those two authors have invited me to think creatively and critically about my own teaching and rehearsing.

In terms of repertoire resources, I first engage with Spotify recordings of choirs I admire: the Philippine Madrigal Singers, Tenebrae, the ORA Singers, etc. I always discover (or re-discover) repertoire in the process. I also spend a lot of time on publisher websites; for example, I have been trying to strengthen my knowledge of Southeast Asian repertoire, which led me to Muziksea Publishing. I purchased Ken Steven's amazing *Dendang Alam Khatulistiwa* last year, which quickly became one of my choir's favorite pieces for the year.

Finally, I am grateful for the conductors and scholars creating databases of music by composers underrepresented by the Western classical canon: Marques Garrett's exhaustive database of Non-Idiomatic Music by Black Composers and Erik Peregine's Trans+ Composers Database (erikperegine.com), to name a few. Learning this music is truly a joy and an important act of liberation. In the face of so much hate and oppression, these resources will remain an integral part of my teaching.

Myers: I am often inspired by thematic programming, so I will search for keywords that fit my themes on Graphite, MusicSpoke, CPDL, Musica International, the Institute for Composer Diversity, JW Pepper, self-published composer websites, and my university choral library. I also search my graduate school choral literature notes for these keywords and reach out to colleagues who enjoy discussing programming. I can often build a great list of options just by consulting these resources. As a podcaster myself with the *Choir Fam Podcast*, I have loved listening to shows like *Choir Baton, Choir Chat, Compose Like a Girl*, and *conduct(her)*, as they offer so many great conversations that inform my philosophy as a teacher and conductor. I have found Dennis Shrock's *Performance Practices in the Baroque* and *Classical Eras* books as well as *Face to Face with Orchestra and Chorus* by Don Moses, Robert Demaree, and Allen Ohmes to be vital resources in my preparation of masterworks.

Petite: I transitioned to higher education in the fall of 2020, and my university moved classes online and "reduced density" rehearsals outside. There was not much institutional knowledge for these pedagogical situations. What I leaned heavily on during COVID and the post-COVID rebuilding years was the importance of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and fostering community. While these were not new focuses for me, I really prioritized creating a welcoming environment for my singers. A book that was recommended to me at that time was *Teaching with Respect* by Stephen Sieck. Now in its second edition, Sieck challenges us to consider the lived experiences of all our singers.

Another book I have incorporated in my personal journey is *The Soul of Civility* by Alexandra Hudson. Hudson presents a strong argument for civility over "politeness." I am not much of a podcast listener, but one podcast I enjoy is *Choir Fam* by Dean Luethi and Matthew Myers. They discuss a variety of topics for all choral music educators, including "Growing and Thriving in the First Years of Teaching." Shelbie Wahl-Fouts had a blog on ChoralNet called "One From the Folder: Repertoire Thoughts for Women's/Treble Choir" that I still consult for treble repertoire ideas (choralnet.org/archives/category/one-from-the-folder). Honestly, though, my biggest source of professional development—throughout my career—has been ACDA. CJ

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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

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

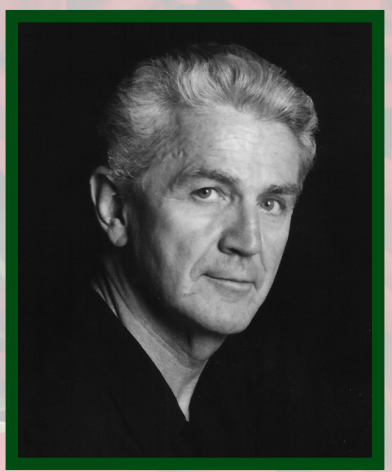
The IJRCS Editorial Board will serve as the Program Committee and will rate each proposal according to relevance, originality, clarity, and validity. The Program Committee reserves the right to designate accepted proposals for either paper or poster presentation.

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.

In Memoriam

Alan Harler (1940-2025)



Alan Harler became Mendelssohn Club's twelfth music director in 1988 and was named artistic director in 2009. He is a former Laura H. Carnell Professor and Chairman of Choral Music at Temple University's Esther Boyer College of Music. After retiring from Temple, he continued to inspire rising conductors by creating the Mendelssohn Club Conducting Apprenticeship Program. Harler was a strong advocate for new American music. He was founder and director of the Contemporary Vocal Ensemble of Indiana. During his tenure with Mendelssohn Club, he commissioned and premiered fifty-eight new compositions. Alan was honored with Chorus America's prestigious Michael Korn Founders Award for Development of the Professional Art, and the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia's Honorary Lifetime Membership for a Distinguished Contribution to the Musical Life of Philadelphia. Alan's extraordinary contributions to the musical community and his passion for new American choral music touched countless lives.

Rehearsal Break

Jennifer Rodgers, editor

Running a Vocally Efficient Rehearsal

by Elena Bird Zolnick

When I was growing up participating in various ensembles and singing solos, I frequently heard the comment: "You'll be a great music teacher when you grow up!" My mother, now a retired choral music educator of forty years, would smile and nod, and then lean toward me to whisper, "*Be careful. If you become a music teacher, you'll ruin your voice!*"

Unfortunately, many choral educators know too well the truth in that statement. Our own vocal fatigue is difficult to address when we are teaching five days a week and possibly also leading a church or community choir on the weekend. It can become an all-consuming worry, accumulating stress and fear with every utterance throughout the day. That stress can seep into other areas of our lives and even affect relationships, as friends and family wonder why we are suddenly less talkative or avoiding social occasions.

The human voice is about much more than career or musical ambitions—it is largely what makes us who we are as individuals whether speaking or singing. An approach to managing vocal use and efficiency must take this into consideration; the whole picture must be assessed before vocal efficiency can become a part of our daily rehearsal routine. The purpose of this article is to help identify ways to monitor and manage your vocal use while presenting creative ways to make efficient vocal use a part of your rehearsal and teaching techniques.

Assessing Your Vocal Use/Dose

First, it is important to gauge how much voice is used throughout the entire day. The following two voice usage categories determine where it may be possible to limit and rest the voice, starting with what is likely everyone's most important: relationships.

a) **Necessary voice use**: basic human communication at work or home and throughout the day. Explain to your family what your vocal needs are, that you love to listen but may not contribute as much to a conversation or need to go to bed earlier than usual. If you have children, communicate with them and your partner that under no circumstance can you raise your voice (barring an emergency), and ask your partner to hold you accountable and step in when needed. At work, let your coworkers know that you will be resting your voice at designated times.

b) **Social use**: friendly conversations at work, lunch, going out with friends or coworkers. Avoid talking when there is a lot of background noise. Limit talking on Bluetooth in the car, which can cause the voice to become elevated. Create a positive mindset toward being an active listener, rather than a top contributor, in group conversations.

Next, we may approach professional settings for music teachers:

c) **Teaching**: if you are teaching private voice lessons and giving examples of correct singing and speaking, hopefully this will help your voice to grow stronger! *Demonstrating bad examples can seriously damage your voice!* Do not be afraid to use media and take listening breaks when appropriate; have students read aloud so that you do not do all the vocal work yourself.

d) **Singing**: singing should be the easiest on your voice if you are using correct breathing technique and maintaining good posture. Vocal fatigue while singing tends to come at the end of a long day when the singer is tired and unable to maintain proper technique. If singing alone causes you vocal fatigue, seek out an experienced voice teacher, Alexander Technique teacher, or voice/speech therapist.

e) **Rehearsal**: many teachers/directors lead three, four, or five hours of rehearsal a day, especially in middle and high school. This makes it even more important to monitor your vocal use. Likewise, serious musicians and students in chorus may be using their voices extensively throughout the day to practice, attend theater/opera rehearsals, choir rehearsals, social/necessary vocal use, etc. Rehearsal is a place where, as a director, you are responsible not only for your own vocal health, but in part, the vocal health of others. It is, therefore, necessary to train yourself to be vocally efficient in leading a rehearsal, which will in turn create healthy, vocally efficient habits for your singers.

Taken together, these uses of your voice define your usual vocal dose. If your voice is regularly fatigued, consider making adjustments to make your normal vocal dose easily sustainable. Once you know your normal voice use, you must also recognize when an unusual vocal event occurs (e.g., extra amounts of group/presentational speaking, yelling at a ball game, using your voice through an illness) and take both proactive and responsive steps to recover. Remember, too, that an annual visit to an ENT to get a scoping is a good idea, particularly if you suffer fatigue.

Modification Strategies for Vocal Health and Efficiency

While my work is now primarily in choral conducting, my three degrees in voice performance and performing experience in classical solo voice have greatly benefitted my conducting and pedagogy. As a chorister who would often experience fatigue from hours of singing, I had to learn to modify how I participated in rehearsal. Now, as a director, I have had to learn to monitor and modify how I lead rehearsal so that I do not suffer vocal injury. A vocally efficient rehearsal is also efficient in use of time, and the effects of constructing a vocally efficient rehearsal will be beneficial to the whole ensemble, as well as to the individual singers involved. With this in mind, let us explore ways to be vocally efficient as a director during rehearsal.

1) **Use a microphone**. If you are lecturing or using your speaking voice to teach, use a microphone whenever possible, even in a small classroom. Whenever I suggest this to a director, their first response is usually, "It's so awkward!" Give it a week and try a microphone with a monitor that is mobile and can be placed farther from you. Depending on where you decide to place the monitor, you will hear less of your own voice, which may alleviate the feeling of self-consciousness, and the ensemble will hear more of you. Not only will you have to project your voice less, but you will also avoid repeating instructions, which means speaking less during rehearsal.

I was shocked to find how my teaching and rehearsal strategy changed when I was not desperate to be heard! My own demeanor was much calmer, and I was able to give better instructions, make clearer distinctions, and the energy in the entire room felt much more at ease. While I do not recommend speaking/instructing over an ensemble while running pieces, it is, at times, unavoidable. The microphone will help you to be heard and understood, eliminating the need to start and stop, which uses more voice for both director and singers.

2) **Avoid speaking over the singers**, especially if they are talking. Find a healthy balance between allowing social time and rehearsing. Allow the singers to enjoy their time together without cutting into your vocal rehearsal quota by *planning* for short social breaks. This is good classroom management or "crowd control."

3) **Use the piano**. This is important not only for your own vocal conservation but for your singers as well. Unless your goal is to teach ear training, use a keyboard to teach the music. The keyboard can be utilized to teach in two ways: a) play along with a section, or b) play a section of music for the singers to learn by call-and-response.

4) **Break into sectionals and delegate**. Sectional work can be both time and vocally efficient. You may get the same amount of music learned in half the amount of time or less!

Delegate a leader in a section to run the sectional. It is a good idea for the director to lead at least one of the sections (rotating depending on who needs the most assistance). If you find yourself in need of vocal rest, simply visit each sectional rehearsal to check in on progress, give tips, etc. This not only helps the time and vocal efficiency of rehearsal, but it also creates ownership and camaraderie within sections and presents an opportunity for new leaders to emerge. If you do not have a singer who can lead a sectional from the piano, you may try:

- Switching places with the section leader and playing while the singer conducts
- Sending the staff accompanist with that section
- Combining sections so there is one person in each rehearsal who can plunk notes
- Making rehearsal recordings and having student use them together in sectionals

This last option is ideal for middle and high schoolers—it is easy to make voice memos and make them accessible to students. It will also allow you as the director to manage rehearsal well. You know how long the rehearsal recordings are (e.g., the recording is ten minutes long; instruct them to go through it twice and "see you in twenty minutes!"), and you may also isolate difficult parts of the music for the students to drill with the recording ("we are going to sing through this key change three times…")

One roadblock in rehearsing in sectionals could be a lack of facility space, as the different sections need separate spaces. However, administration may help you find an empty classroom or vacant office, stairwell, or even a locker room. If you are leading singers outside of the classroom, create time in your rehearsal at the beginning or end for one section or another. Alternatively, call them early or keep them late if the students' schedules allows for flexibility.

5) **Effective time management in rehearsal** is particularly important for vocal efficiency, as well as helpful in planning to get through all the music that needs to be rehearsed. Make a specific rehearsal plan before each rehearsal. A general outline may look like:

Rehearsal 3:30-5:00pm
Warm-up: 10 min
Bach sectionals: 20 min
Bach tutti: 10 min
Liszt: 40 min

However, it can be helpful to be more specific with the rehearsal outline, particularly as a concert approaches:

Welcome/chat: 3:30-3:32
Warm-up: 3:32-3:40
Bach sectionals: 3:40-3:58
Two minutes for transfer time
Bach tutti: 4:00-4:08 (a three-min chorale run twice)
Transition to Liszt: 4:08-4:10
Movement 1: 4:10-4:16
Movement 2: 4:16-4:24
Movement 8: 4:25-4:40 (needs work)
Final movement: 4:40-4:44
Run movements 1, 2, 8, and final: 4:45-4:59
Rehearsal ends at 5:00 pm

Either option helps in efficiency, but the latter option also helps prepare the director for tricky sections that may require more attention. In the first option, I include an unscheduled ten minutes as a contingency for getting off schedule. In the second option, every minute is accounted for in rehearsal, including the transfer/music shuffling time. I have found that this detailed planning makes it more likely that rehearsal will end on time, saving both the singers' and director's voices and keeping everyone happy!

6) **Isolate difficult parts of the score**. This should happen naturally in rehearsal. However, rather than isolating challenging sections of music, consider small measure groupings or even intervals. The less singing that is done while learning music, the more vocally efficient. You may also find a way to integrate these challenge points into a warm-up, particularly if they are through a section's *passaggio* or if phrasing or intervals are difficult.

7) **Learn music without singing it**. Create a culture where singers are expected to have their notes learned before singing a piece in rehearsal. For example, if you are in a teaching situation, hand out music at least three days before you plan to rehearse it. Assign a rehearsal track as homework and find a way to test/grade the singers on their preparation, perhaps with the help of section leaders or in the use of octets and small groups.

I once had a director who said he memorized everything before he ever sang it in order to save his voice for the rehearsals. It can be difficult for amateur musicians to accomplish this, but it can be possible to memorize the text and rhythmic gestures before singing a single note. If your singers are not able to do this independently, make memorization of text and rhythm, without singing, a part of your music-learning process within rehearsal. Separating pitch, rhythm, and language will assist in this.

8) **Separate pitch, rhythm, and language**. Pitch, rhythm, and language all use distinct parts of the brain. It is almost impossible to sight-read or learn music while also attending to solid vocal technique, particularly if a song is in a foreign language or contains difficult rhythms. It is simply too much for the brain to focus on at one time, and attempting to do all these different skills at once, without preparation, is likely to lead to vocal fatigue for singers. Instead, consider learning the music in this order:

a) *Text*. Even if the text is in the singers' first language, read it out loud first. This helps the singer anticipate the phrase and manage the breath. If the text is in an unfamiliar language, have the singers write in the literal translation. You may also choose to hand out a poetic translation, but the literal translation is necessary for singers to be the best artists possible and helps immensely with memorization.

b) *Rhythm*. Speak the text in rhythm, particularly if the rhythm is challenging. Clap or tap the big beats and subdivisions while speaking the text in rhythm, and practice entrances for polyphonic rhythms.

c) *Pitch*. Teach the pitches using the keyboard (unless the purpose is to improve ear-training). Accompanying the singers on their parts can still provide some ear training while guiding singers. However, when you reach the extremity of a section's range, make sure to play the phrase for them before asking them to sing it. This is particularly important for the higher extremity of the range—the brain must know the pitch to sing it, and there is a risk of laryngeal tension if the singer does not know the pitch and is searching for it. This also eliminates creating inaccurate muscle and pitch memory for singers.

9) **Incorporate voice therapy exercises into warm-ups.** Voice therapy has grown tremendously in the last few decades and is helpful for healthy speaking as well as singing. Find a voice therapist (preferably someone who works exclusively or extensively with singers) to work with and create a routine of voice care for yourself and your choir. This may include learning to speak on the breath and with healthy resonance, which also positively influences the singing voice. Following are some useful vocal warm-ups that incorporate voice therapy exercises:

a) Singing with straws. Encourage your choir to bring a straw to every rehearsal or keep a box of disposable straws in your rehearsal space. Singers can sing through straws with or without water. Introduce the bubble-blowing exercise, where one places the straw in 1-2 inches of water and blows bubbles using mindful breathing and a consistent flow of air on the exhale. Then add vocalizing, while blowing bubbles, on a simple and short melodic exercise. This is a terrific way to wake up sleepy vocal folds and train a healthy vocal onset![1]

b) Start vocal warm-ups in the middle of the range, using a closed vowel on a limited-range descending scale. For example:

- 5-4-3-2-1 on [lu]. Work from the middle of the range down, and then back to the middle and up. Eventually work in larger intervals and range, but not until the "easiest" part of the voice has been sufficiently warmed-up. Do not warm up the extremity of a range until the voice is comfortable in the middle range. A sprinter would be likely to pull a muscle if taking off from the starting blocks at 100 percent with no incremental warm-up, and it is the same for our vocal folds!

c) Rather than starting vocalises on a vowel, start them with a consonant, voiced or unvoiced, that precedes the singing with ample breath:

- [fju]
- [zo-i-o-i-o]
- [hUng] moving from the [U] to the [ng] quickly like a hum, but with the tongue raised to the palate

10) **Assure that your choir members are enjoying themselves and that rehearsal is fulfilling!** A rehearsal that drags mentally will drag vocally—both for the director and the singers. Some rehearsals will be more enjoyable than others, but the choir should always be able to recognize a sense of purpose in what the ensemble is trying to achieve. Each stage in rehearsal must be recognized as a step toward the final goal, whether it be in the warm-ups, note-learning, or fine-tuning of a piece.

Once the energy starts to go down, posture drops, singers become mentally disengaged, and the director may become desperate, all of which leads to bad vocalization. If you recognize the energy needs a boost, give a short break, tell a story that connects the choir to the work, or do a physical "re-boot" that gets the blood flowing such as stretching or marching in place, rubbing hands together or shaking out extremities, and breathing exercises.

Conclusion

The benefits of running a vocally efficient rehearsal go beyond saving the voice of the director—they also lead to saving the voices of the singers, running a time-efficient rehearsal, and keeping the mental energy of the choir and director engaged. A choir director who cares about their own voice will demonstrate to the singers how to care for their own voices, creating an environment of teamwork, as well as recognition of the individual voices that make an ensemble. With these tools in mind, a director should not be afraid, for the sake of the voice, to conduct, teach, or sing for years on end! CJ

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NOTES

[1] Jeremy N. Manternach, Lynn Maxfield, Matthew Schloneger, "On the Voice: Semi-Occluded Vocal Tract Exercises in the Choral Rehearsal: What's the Deal with the Straw?" *Choral Journal* vol. 60, no. 4 (November 2019): 47-56.

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Vocal Jazz

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Strategies for the Vocal Jazz Ensemble

by John Stafford II

This article provides an overview on how to develop the vocal jazz ensemble and offers strategies for beginning- to intermediate-level vocal jazz directors. After sharing my personal philosophy, we will discuss the following aspects: audition process, rehearsal preparation, warm-ups, vocal technique, improvisation, sound systems, and literature ideas. I hope this article will serve as encouragement for directors who are wanting to develop or enhance their vocal jazz ensembles.

Nationally, "while all fifty states host one or more traditional statewide honor choirs, only twenty-four states either currently host or once hosted one or more statewide honors vocal jazz ensembles."[1] While this article's topic is not specific to honors ensembles, this statistic highlights the discrepancy between choral ensembles as a whole and those directors who work with a vocal jazz ensemble. It is very easy for directors who teach this genre to feel isolated—even moreso than their broader choral colleagues, who already may be one of the only music teachers in their school or district.

For the purposes of this article, a vocal jazz ensemble is defined as a small vocal ensemble with four to sixteen singers that perform both arrangements of repertoire from the American Songbook and arrangements that are derived from contemporary/commercial music within the last fifty years. The ensemble either performs with a rhythm section (piano, bass, and drums) or a cappella. Regardless of whether or not the ensemble uses a rhythm section, the harmonic setting of the arrangements are based on the traditional 3/7 harmonic voicing used in American jazz music.

Personal Philosophy

The most important thing to do when starting an ensemble, in my opinion, is developing a philosophy about what you want it to be and setting goals to make the philosophy into reality. My general philosophy is based on concepts that I have developed as a vocal jazz ensemble director of high school and collegiate ensembles for the past twenty years.

1) *Teaching style contrast.* It is important for my students to understand the differences in musical styles. When I program music for the next academic year, I'm not

only programming jazz standards; I also focus on programming a lot of popular music that contains jazz harmony. It is important to teach the swing concept, but it's even more important to explain the differences between swing, multiple Latin grooves, funk, and blues. I enjoy presenting music the students are used to hearing regularly such as pop, hip-hop, R&B, gospel, and rock (as stated before, arrangements that contain jazz harmony). By expanding the stylistic variety, a director can broaden their programming tremendously.

2) *Sound of the ensemble.* It's not just about singing the right note and rhythms! The tone quality of the ensemble is essential and can be very intriguing from the audience's perspective.

I also recommend picking music that is accessible to your ensemble. It's so easy to pick music outside the capabilities of the ensemble you currently have, and I have to remind myself of this every year. You might have to do some hunting for charts sometimes, but this is so important. Also, once you create your vision/mission statement for the ensemble, stick with that. It will be easier to track the growth of your ensemble this way.

Ensemble Size

The size of the ensemble depends on your vision for the group and the sound you want to create. I want a bigger but well-blended sound out of my ensemble, so I prefer to have twelve singers in the group (three on a part). For SSATB material, I always look for two lead sopranos, one second soprano, one first alto, and two low altos (splitting the second soprano and first alto to the middle part on three-way splits).

Another detail I look for is finding a combination of larger and smaller voices that blend well together to achieve the sound I would like for the group. This process is highly influenced by the St. Olaf Choir voice matching method, applied to a vocal jazz ensemble. I voice match all the students and have them sing in the same formation throughout the entire year (sometimes, I change the formation at the beginning of the semesters if needed). Standing formation, plus mixing larger and smaller voices together, will aid in the overall tone quality of the ensemble. Within each section, I also look for bigger and smaller voices that match well together to create perfect pairs (two voices that complement each other to the point that they sound like one voice), and this just depends on the singers you have at the time.

Rhythm Section Considerations

Another consideration is the rhythm section. I prefer to have a combo (with guitar) as much as possible. I've considered in the past having my group be a solely a cappella ensemble, but then I run into several issues—mostly having the right bass singer and vocal percussionist (neither of which I have every year). A cappella groups are wonderful; they are, however, also limiting in terms of diversifying a concert program and changing tonal sounds throughout your programming. I like to not only blend styles but have combinations of tone colors happening throughout my set lists. Even on instrumental solos, I try to be very careful about not asking the pianist to take every instrumental solo. I'm fortunate that I always have a solid rhythm section for my ensembles, so I try to have solo features as much as I can (this is why I love having guitar in the combo).

Other details to consider regarding rhythm sections:

1) Pick accessible charts that the rhythm can play as well!

2) For drums: If you're not a drummer, ask questions about how they play their instrument and how their play changes between each style of music that your group would perform. For example, in swing music, I like my drummer to play a flat ride because I don't want them hitting the bell of the ride cymbal. It causes too many overtones to the point that it could wash out the sound of the entire vocal ensemble, and then I have a balance issue to deal with.

3) For bass: It helps to have a bass player who is comfortable on both acoustic and electric. For bass solos, I encourage them to play the solo in the upper half of the fret board to show more volume, contour, and versatilely.

4) For guitar: If you perform music in different styles, the guitarist could provide unique tone colors for your charts. If they perform any style outside of Latin or

swing, have them experiment with different pedals to create electronic sounds that could accompany your group. For example, using a *wah-wah* pedal on the right R&B/Neo-Soul chart could be very intriguing from a color standpoint.

5) For piano: This is a little more self-explanatory. For most gigs, I like having the pianist use a keyboard for everything, because they can change sounds quickly instead of switching back and forth between two instruments. I love experimenting with different sounds on the keyboards to add to my philosophy of "tonal changes" within my set.

6) For all instrumentalists: When they solo, allow them to solo in the upper ranges of their instrument. Not only for the reasons I stated before, but this will provide some contrast to the chart and "in the moment" excitement for the audience member.

Audition Process

Testing how students hear harmony is the most important aspect a director needs to learn from the audition, even more important than sight-reading (in my opinion). Good sight-readers don't always translate to singers who can adapt/adjust within complex jazz harmony. Sight-reading capability is a wonderful tool for any student to have; however, sight-reading doesn't mean that the student can hear and adjust to the harmony around them (these are definitely two different things). I'd rather take a student who can't read as well but have great ears for harmony than vice versa.

I start my audition by checking students' vocal range and then have them sing either "My Country Tis Of Thee" or "Amazing Grace" (only the first few lines of each tune; that's all I need to hear). I want to hear the low notes for altos and basses and the high notes from sopranos and tenors, plus find the vocal break for each singer. The goal is for me hearing how the student navigates through their instrument on a melodic line, and I like having them sing the tune in different keys (sometimes up to five different keys). This helps me understand how they sing through their vocal break, which register has the most resonance, and learn whether or not the student has learned how to access their mixed register. Specifically for "Amazing Grace," I like having them sing with and without vibrato and sing in different styles (most likely in a traditional choral setting then in a popular music setting). I obtain quite a bit of information from these two simple vocal exercises.

Afterward, I conduct three jazz ear-training exercises:

• *Melodic ID (pitch memory)*: using common intervals from jazz—Major 7ths, half-steps, thirds, and tritones. I just want to hear them navigate through those intervals in a short, linear setting. I play a three- to four-note motive, and they have to sing it back to me. This exercise is especially helpful for the tenors and basses because they often sing more complex intervals within their individual lines, especially tritones when they sing a succession of dominant harmony. The next two exercises test the student's ear vertically.

• *Chord Cluster*: I play three notes as a blocked chord, and the students sing the middle note on a neutral syllable. I do five examples of these in the middle of the keyboard (so the cluster can easily be heard): C-D-E, $E^{\flat}$-F-$G^{\flat}$, $B^{\flat}$-B-$C^{\sharp}$, D-E-$F^{\sharp}$, and $B^{\flat}$-C-$C^{\sharp}$. All of the examples are either a group of whole-steps or a half-step/whole-step combination. This is especially helpful for altos and tenors, because they will have several occasions where they have to sing whole-steps and half-steps apart, especially at cadence points. It's amazing how many students can only hear the top or bottom note but struggle with the middle one!

• *Six-Note Jazz Chord*: I learned this exercise from Jennifer Barnes at the University of North Texas, who learned it from Connaitre Miller from Howard University (both of them direct fabulous vocal jazz ensembles). It's a wonderful exercise on how students hear harmony while they sing. I play a six-note jazz chord (blocked), and the student has to identify all six notes in the chord (just sing a pitch one at a time on a neutral syllable, not ID the exact pitch). I play the chord multiple times and use the following voicing for my three examples (each example is a different chord quality, and none of the notes within the chord are doubled):

1) Gmaj13 (from the bottom up…G-$F^{\sharp}$-B-$C^{\sharp}$-E-A).

2) B♭7 full-diminished (from the bottom up…B♭-A♭-C-D♭-F♭-G).

3) A♭13 (from the bottom up…A♭-G♭-B♭-C-D-F).

The beauty of this exercise is that it shows both the student's voice part they are used to singing and, more importantly, the other voice parts they are used to listening to while they sing! Three correct notes per chord is an average ear, and four is above average. Students who can consistently find five or six notes per chord are the students I want in my vocal jazz ensembles. These are the students who can hear the entire chord while singing within an ensemble, and the intonation and blend work will move faster during the rehearsal process. Students who can only hear one or two pitches per chord should not be in a vocal jazz ensemble. Their ears aren't ready for it yet. For example, if you have a bass singer who can only hear the bottom note in every chord (of course, the root of the chord), and then you put that student in a vocal jazz setting, that singer will naturally gravitate toward singing the lead soprano melody down the octave (which will conflict with the 3/7 voicing they should be singing).

When and How Often to Audition

The decision of when and how often to have auditions depends on your program. My students usually stay in the same ensemble for the entire year, so I only have auditions once a year. The audition above is for new students entering my program. The returning students who want to do vocal jazz have to re-audition, and that's a different process. Even the best singers in my top group have to re-audition to keep their spot in the ensemble. I give the students a few pages of a chart to learn on their own and have them make a video for me singing their part. I then send the videos to several colleagues (both on-campus and out-of-state) to adjudicate and score. This is helpful for me to justify my thoughts, and if a student doesn't get into the ensemble they want, it's easier for me to explain the reasoning with adjudication notes from someone who isn't biased.

Rehearsal Preparation

Here are a few thoughts to consider when it comes to rehearsal preparation. Within any chart, I want to micromanage every single phrase. Every moment of the music is planned out, and I found myself being a better director because of that philosophy. My rehearsals are about developing consistency from rehearsal to rehearsal, which hopefully translates to the performance. Much of my focus is on matching vowels within the groove of the music, changes in the tonal placement throughout each line, word stress/phrasing, and articulation. I keep focusing on this every single rehearsal until they are absolutely consistent! I tell them regularly that we don't do this job to be mediocre. I expect excellence, and they should expect that from themselves!

By rehearsing this way, I should be able to walk away from the ensemble off stage during a performance, and the music happens on its own because they are so prepared. If I'm on stage giving cues to the vocalists or the rhythm section, that means I'm not comfortable with them being on their own yet. (This is more of the case in the fall semester.)

Warm-Ups

I am critical about warm-ups for a variety of reasons. I mostly don't do warm-ups for my vocal jazz groups because all of the students sing in my concert choir earlier in the day, and I teach warm-ups during that time. Within my warm-ups for choir, I mostly want to establish the ensemble tone, vowel matching, and the concept of listening to the entire chord, not just the part they are going to sing. I have students sing a chord (usually, an open-voicing) and sing OO-EE-EH-AH-OH and back to OO.

I hold each vowel and remind them of the raised palette with the forward tongue (tip of the tongue placed behind the bottom teeth). I also have them sing a crescendo/decrescendo on MI-ME-MAH-MOH-MOO and have them move their arms in circles while doing that exercise. These vowel warm-ups are what I do every single day. I do other short warm-ups to sing through their ranges and change these warm-ups daily. Lastly, I sometimes have the ensembles sing chromatic scales on solfège and sight-read a short excerpt during our warm-up time.

Improvisation

I mostly teach beginning- to intermediate-level improvisation to my students. I make them do a lot of listening… That comes first! To practice improvisation as a group, we do an all-scat: they all go to a different part of the room and practice scatting over whatever music I give them (this also helps with beginners' comfort level). I usually have them scat over music we are already learning as an ensemble. I personally enjoy having them scat over the blues the most because that's an easier adjustment since that "sound" is already in their ears (based on the popular music they listen to regularly outside of class). Lastly, I discuss concepts such as: scatting using the head as the foundation, syllable usage, guide tones, macro and microform/contour, spacing, and using long tones to help create a lyrical melodic line.

Sound Systems

My ideal sound system includes using nine powered speakers (I highly recommend QSC K10s or 12s for both monitors and mains), digital mixer, and digital snake. For microphones, I personally like the Sennheiser e935 mic because of the clarity of tone. For a cappella bass and vocal percussion EQ, I would prefer a different mic like the classic Shure SM58 (the Sennheiser e935 don't seem to have the same clarity with low EQ and distortion). For wireless mics, I use a Shure ULX-D Wireless System and love the depth and clarity it provides! In general, the goal is to have a clear, natural sound for each singer in the group. To tune this complex harmonic content, the clarity of each voice is critical. Using EQ and compression to obtain this sound is essential.

We rehearse on sound for most rehearsals. Rehearsing on sound for new students can be cumbersome at first, but they will get used to it. To create the organic musical performance I want them to have, they need to be exceptionally comfortable with the mic, and this can only be achieved by rehearsing on mics regularly.

Repertoire

Listening is everything, and I regularly incorporate it into my rehearsals, especially when teaching students how to sing in different styles. Listening is the most important aspect to teaching this genre, and if you struggle with teaching a certain concept (like swing feel, for example), find a recording of what you want to teach and play it for your students. Not only play it, but make your students have a discussion about it so they can learn from one another. Jazz is a genre that has to be primarily learned from listening. Exposing students to the wide variety of jazz and contemporary styles is one of the most important things we need to do. Table 1 on the following pages contains suggestions for vocal jazz repertoire suitable for high school and collegiate ensembles.

Who are the essential ensembles and artists that directors/students should listen to? Here are my favorites/the most influential for me, but there are so many not on this list. For ensembles: Take 6, New York Voices, The Real Group, Lambert, Hendricks and Ross, and The Singers Unlimited. For soloists: Mel Torme, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Joe Williams, and Chet Baker. I'm also a huge fan of artists that crossover into popular music like Earth, Wind, and Fire, Steve Wonder, Michael Jackson, Prince, Robert Glasper, Jon Batiste, Moonchild, and the list goes on and on! I don't have essential pieces; it's important for me to teach as many styles as possible. I recommend you do what you're most comfortable with and teach what you want your students to get out of the course.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to provide a foundation on both how to start and develop a vocal jazz ensemble. Some of my methods might seem unique, but these concepts work for me, and they might help other directors as well. If you want to contact me for more insight about the subject, I would be pleased to hear from you.

jstafford@kckcc.edu CJ

NOTES

[1] Tyler Thomas, "The Emergence of All-State Vocal Jazz Ensembles in the United States from 1978-2022" (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2022), 1. https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1987176/

Table 1. Suggested Vocal Jazz Repertoire List for High School and Collegiate Ensembles

Title	Composer/Arranger	Voicing	Level
Swing/Standards/Ballads			
You Make Me Feel So Young	Gordon/Myron, arr. Jeremy Fox	SATB with rhythm section	2/3
There Is No Greater Love	Jones/Symes, arr. Jennifer Barnes	SATB with rhythm section	4
There Is No Greater Love	Jones/Symes, arr. Justin Binek	SATB and SSAA with rhythm section or big band	4
A Child Is Born	Jones/Wilder, arr. Martez Rucker	SATB a cappella	3
Lover Come Back To Me	Romberg/Hammerstein, arr. Jennifer Barnes	SATB with rhythm section	3
Come Back To Me	Lane/Lerner, arr. Kerry Marsh	SSATB with rhythm section	4
I'm Old Fashioned	Kern/Mercer, arr. Matt Falker	SAB with rhythm section	2
Tight	Betty Carter, arr. Matt Falker	SSATB with rhythm section	3/4
Nature Boy	Eden Anbez, arr. Anders Edenroth	SSATB a cappella	4/5
For All We Know	Lewis/Coots, arr. Peter Eldridge and Darmon Meader	SATB with piano only	3
I Remember You	Scherzinger/Mercer, arr. Matt Falker	SAB with rhythm section	2
Come Rain or Come Shine	Mercer/Arlen, arr. Gene Puerling	SATB with rhythm section	4
I'll Be Seeing You	Fain/Kahal, arr. Phil Mattson	SATB a cappella	
Latin (these are mostly Samba or Bossa nova)			
Mad Heaven	Peter Eldridge, arr. Rosana Eckert	SSATB with rhythm section	3
Forever Blue	Peter Eldridge, arr. Rosana Eckert	SSATB with rhythm section	3/4
Bailando	Greg Jasperse	SATBB a cappella	3/4

At the End of the Day	Rosana Eckert, arr. Michele Weir	SATB with rhythm section	2
Open Invitation	Darmon Meader	SSATB with rhythm section	3
New Day	Carol Welsman, arr. Jennifer Barnes	SSATB with rhythm section	3/4
Chicago	Fred Fisher, arr. Michele Weir	SATB with rhythm section	2/3
Fly	Al Jarreau, arr. Matt Falker	SSATB with rhythm section	4/5
Spain	Chick Corea, arr. Kelly Kunz	SSATBB with rhythm section	5
Funk/Contemporary			
Afro Blue	inspired by Robert Glasper, arr. Justin Binek	SATB with rhythm section	3
PYT	Michael Jackson, arr. Ned Rosenblatt	SSATBB with rhythm section	5
Green Garden	Laura Mvula, arr. Kerry Marsh	SSATB with rhythm section	4
As	Stevie Wonder, arr. Tim Brent	SATB with rhythm section	3
Rest	Michael Engelhardt	SATB divisi with rhythm section	3/4
Amazing Grace	arr. Jeremy Fox	SATB with rhythm section	3
How Sweet It Is	Holland, Dozier, and Holland; arr. Jeremy Fox	SATB with rhythm section	3
Fly Away, Birdie	Nelson/Gazarek, arr. Matt Falker	SATB with rhythm section	2/3
Still Fighting It	Ben Folds, arr. Kerry Marsh	SATB with rhythm section	2
Too Good	Drake and Rihanna, arr. Amanda Taylor	SSATB with rhythm section	5
At Last	Warren/Gordon, arr. Kerry Marsh	SSSAAA a cappella with vocal percussion	
Desert Song	Erin Bentlage	SSAAB and SSAA with rhythm section (no drums)	3
Green Lights	Sarah Jarosz, arr. David von Kampen	SSATBB with rhythm section	3
Bridge Over Troubled Water	Paul Simon, arr. John Stafford II	SSAA with rhythm section	2

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Midwestern Region

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

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

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Vocal Jazz from the Archives

ACDA's national chairs for repertoire & resources contribute content to *Choral Journal* on a rotating basis. This month's R&R column on pages 43-49 features an article from John Stafford, National Chair for Vocal Jazz. As a complement, the following section includes article excerpts from the June/July 2015 issue of *Choral Journal*, which was a focus on vocal jazz guest edited by Patrice Madura Ward-Steinman. Dr. Ward-Steinman was a professor of music education at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music who passed away in June 2020. She wrote in her guest editor's column: "The joy of music is that we can always keep learning about it, and the same is true about vocal jazz."

We hope readers interested in vocal jazz who may not be aware of that focus issue will enjoy excerpts from the articles featured in that issue, and those who read the issue when it came out in 2015 may appreciate the reminder of this resource. To view the full issue, including reviews of vocal jazz arrangements and a review of a book on improvisation for choirs, visit acda.org/choraljournal, log into your membership account, and choose the June/July 2015 issue from the archives.

Pedagogy for the Jazz Singer

by Diana Spradling and Justin Binek

Culture, education, values, and taste all play a role in the popular music to which we choose to listen and perform both individually and collectively. To add to the complexity of our choices and our preferences, each new generation tends toward adjustments and changes—be they small or large in scope—in value systems, language, and definitions. These determinates shape our perspective as they relate to how jazz music fits into choral/vocal music education. As we look for sound operational definitions as tools for the teaching of jazz music and with which our greater choral community can work, it is imperative to describe what has happened and is happening historically, musically, and vocally in this genre.

Musical, Vocal, and Style Requirements Specific to Jazz Group Singing

Although the vocal jazz group usually exists under the auspices of the choral music teacher, except in certain universities where it exists under the auspices of the jazz studies degree program, it really is not choral music as we in the American Choral Directors Association define choral music traditionally or historically. Why?

• Authentic vocal jazz singing usually calls for a close-up, one-on-a-microphone configuration and does not depend on natural/ acoustic voice projection.

• Diction requirements in vocal jazz are based on vernacular, not formal, speech patterns.

• The voice ranges and tessituras of jazz music are generally written in keys that emphasize women's middle and low registers.

• Dynamic ranges generally fall between mezzo piano and mezzo forte, and rarely do jazz singers use extremely soft dynamic levels, which do not amplify well; or extremely loud dynamic levels, which cause sound distortion.

• The ensemble is considered a group of solo singers who do not use traditional rules of choral singing but rather blend their "solo" voices to create a variety of colors/ timbres in the music (e.g., the New York Voices) or a group of singers with a match-to-sample tone (e.g., the Singers Unlimited or The Real Group).

• The definition of appropriate intonation becomes a definition of intonations (plural) to allow space for pitch bending, jazz inflections, and jazz articulations.

• Phrasing is more often than not two to four measures rather than the traditional four to eight measures found in more "formal" choral music.

• Breath-to-tone ratios change depending on the style of the music. For example, Bossa Novas and Sambas have more breath in the tone than, say, Bebop tunes and intimate ballads.

• Legato and vibrato are options and not constants in the interpretation of jazz styles.

• Resonance in the tone varies depending on style and is directly affected by the use of the microphone. The resonating chambers (the vocal tract) are not as open as they need to be for acoustic singing.

• The minimum accompaniment for authentic vocal jazz singing is generally accepted as being the jazz trio—acoustic piano, acoustic bass, and drums with occasional use of electric keyboard and bass depending on the style of the tune being performed and/ or instructions given by the composer/arranger of a chart.

Editor's Note: Here, the full article includes sections titled "Organization Structure and Signature Sounds of Jazz Singing Groups," "A Developing Pedagogy," and "Spectrography Defines Behaviors of the Jazz Voice."

Pedagogical Tools

In order to establish a working pedagogy for jazz singers, it is important to identify and implement these features. Keep in mind that the same pedagogy applies to jazz solo singing and to jazz group singing; the only real difference is that a jazz solo singer can use a wider palette of colors, timbres, and unique sounds than members of a group can for obvious reasons. Therein lies an important reason to study recordings.

1) *Jaw position and microphone proximity*

Because the microphone is a part of the character of the "whole sound," the jazz singer should place less emphasis on natural/acoustical projection and more emphasis on the relationship between the microphone, the voice, and the dynamic content. The vocal tract (a combination of resonating chambers) is not as open/expanded as that of the classical singer. Too much resonance and too much volume/intensity will distort the amplified sound. The open/dropped jaw used in traditional choral singing is only used in jazz singing to sing at loud dynamic levels or for holding certain "long" notes for an extended time for some dramatic effect. If the singer or singers think about the distance between the upper back and lower back teeth (as opposed to how open the mouth is) as being somewhere between a third and a half an inch depending on the singer's physical makeup, it will assist microphone compatibility, give the tongue room to function, and the singer will be able to better manage the amount of resonance in the tone and still have a relaxed, loose jaw without it being too open. As for the relationship between the lips and the microphone, a good rule of thumb might be: a) "mouth to the metal" or one finger's distance when placing the index finger vertically between the lips and the microphone; b) two fingers distance (placing the index and middle fingers together vertically between the lips and the ball of the microphone) for a fuller, well-balanced group sound for moderate swinging tunes, and Bebop tunes with lots of lyrics and/or scat syllables; c) a fist's distance between the lips and the microphone for gospel and R&B styles. Most microphone singing should be executed between mezzo piano and mezzo forte. In a thirty-two-plus voice group where close-up microphones are not used, the dynamics can be adjusted to a slightly more intense degree depending on the strength of the voices and the performance venue—more toward mezzo forte to forte—but the use of extreme dynamics should still be avoided for the most part in order to maintain the integrity of the styles and avoid lapsing into a "belt" sound. This often happens if students are in a school musical and singing in the vocal jazz group. They forget to distinguish between styles.

2) *Resonance and the microphone*

Measuring resonance in a jazz singer's tone and comparing it to resonance in a classical singer's tone reinforces statement one. VoceVista spectrograms are usually set at 5000 to 8000 Hertz (HZ) when studying vocal behaviors of classical singers but are set at 3000 to 5000 HZ when studying the vocal behaviors of jazz singers. The exact HZ settings depend on whether one is looking at a male voice or a female voice and on the category of each voice (e.g., soprano, alto). The naturally projected acoustical properties of the classical singer registers significant acoustic activity in the first (F1) through the sixth (F6) Formants (and occasionally higher) on a spectrogram, while the microphone singer's behaviors are mostly registered in Formants 1, 2, and 3. (A Formant is a group of overtones that indicates bands of energy on a spectrogram.) We must consider resonance in the tone in degrees when teaching jazz singers, and this can happen rather naturally by simply adjusting the jaw opening and adjusting the palate higher or lower. If the palate is too low, the sound will be nasal; if the palate is too high, the sound will be too full and too resonant to remain microphone compatible.

3) *Tongue activity and tone colors*

There is often weak spectrographic activity in developing jazz singers in Formant 2 (F2), indicating that the tongue is not functioning correctly for this kind of singing. An argument can be made that the singer might be trying to not over-enunciate for fear of sounding "too trained" and therefore inauthentic, but an inactive tongue is not the answer. The most efficient way to "manage" resonance and diction and increase individual colors/timbres in the tone of the microphone singer, thus strengthening the F2, is to keep the tongue active. Even though we are not relying on natural projection, the tip of the tongue must remain active so as to produce clarity of diction. The middle of the tongue cannot re-

main flat or too low in the mouth, because the sound will lack vibrancy and create too much space in the resonating chambers. Because a less open jaw is needed for microphone singing, engaging the tongue plays a major role in creating an interesting, free, and clear jazz tone. Keep in mind that the tongue moves in sections. We can activate the tip, the blade, the back, and the sides separately as we speak and sing. The tongue will not get in the way if we remember to put space between the back teeth (refer to #2); as goes the tongue, so goes the timbre.

4) *The use of vernacular/ conversational diction*

The appropriate use of diction in jazz music falls under the category of vernacular/informal/conversational pronunciation. When one uses a "formal" palette of pronunciation in this genre, the delivery of text sounds stilted, stiff, or, as some would say, affected. The example that comes immediately to mind is the song "When I Fall in Love."[1] In a formal group/ensemble setting, we would sing the word "when" using the vowel "eh" as in the word "bet." In a jazz setting, however, we would sing "win." Vowel substitutions are common in interpreting the text. The stressed schwa vowel "uh" is also commonly used. Again thinking of the title "When I Fall in Love," in a formal setting the word "love" would contain an "ah" as the vowel, but in jazz singing the stressed schwa vowel "uh" would be substituted. How do we know when, where, and how to make adjustments? Simply speak the texts as you would say them in casual conversation and you will have the answers. Recordings are, again, also very helpful. Many final consonants are imploded at the ends of words to make the delivery of the text more microphone compatible. Imploded means the tongue is stopped at the roof of the mouth and never released/exploded with a breath as the tongue moves back into the floor of the mouth. Exploded consonants create an extra puff of air that registers as a "pop" through the amplification system.

5) *Legato as a choice and not a constant*

Legato is a means of "text phrasing" in all styles of music, but according to spectrographic analysis it usually only connects three to six syllables (occasionally a few more) of the text at a time when interpreting many jazz texts.[2] The longest phrases, of course, are in ballads, especially the unaccompanied ones, and the shortest phrases are used for dramatic emphasis in the telling of a story. For example: listen to Frank Sinatra, who is a master of text phrasing. A helpful way to prepare a score for rehearsal is to listen to several solo and group artists phrase a tune. Sing along, match the phrasing, and make choices. In this music, the text is the major determinate of how the tune is to be interpreted. Refer to the concept stated at the beginning of this article that jazz group music is not exactly like traditional choral music. The area of legato phrasing is a major factor that separates a "choral sound" from a "jazz sound." The lengthier the phrasing in any jazz tune, the less it will swing! The editing of arrangements and original vocal jazz charts by publishing companies rarely suggests a "freedom to phrase." Because the charts look like more formal choral music (octavos) on the page, we don't necessarily think about taking liberties with the printed score. You are encouraged to think outside the box and adapt charts to reflect your own ideas of interpretation within the bounds of authenticity and of course without completely rearranging the arrangement!

Editor's Note: The full article continues with tools 6-11 and sections titled "Vocal Percussion and Vocal Bass" and "The Future of Vocal Jazz Ensembles." To read or download the full article, visit acda.org/choraljournal, log into your membership account, and choose the June/July 2015 issue from the archives.

Diana Spradling is the founding director of the Applied Studio Technology Laboratory at Western Michigan University and a past ACDA National R&R Chair for Jazz and Show Choirs.

Justin Binek is the associate professor of music (theory and improvisation) at Kansas City Community College and a finalist in the 2025 American Prize in Composition for his jazz-inspired mass, *Missa Lucis*.

NOTES

1. Nat King Cole, *When I Fall In Love, Love Is the Thing* (1957, Capitol Records).
2. Diana R. Spradling, *Jazz Singing: Developing Artistry and Authenticity* (Sound Music Publications, 2007).

The Collegiate Vocal Jazz Ensemble: A Foundational History

by Gregory Amerind

In the beginning, there was Mount Hood. In the fall of 1967 at a relatively new community college in Gresham, Oregon, a vocal jazz ensemble was formed for the first time as an accredited college course under the direction of a thirty-nine-year-old drummer turned music educator named Hal Malcolm. Although we all love a classic "once upon a time" beginning to a tale, this was not a random singularity that popped into existence without preamble. Vocal groups of this kind had been part of college campus environments for decades as clubs—usually student-run and always extracurricular. At that time in Gresham, however, the stars had aligned to initiate a movement in the collegiate choral community of the Northwest that would eventually spread nationwide. A class of professional artists provided the necessary spark of inspiration. At the head of that class were Jon Hendricks (b.1921) and Gene Puerling (1929–2008), two exceptional innovators who were considered to be the most influential by educators and performers within the Vocal Jazz genre. Most believe that without their innovations, Vocal Jazz as we have come to understand and perform it would likely not exist.

Hendricks and Puerling began their careers at a time when jazz was undergoing a radical change, moving away from the swing era of the 1930s and 1940s to the more urban sounds of bebop, exemplified by instrumentalists such as Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie "Bird" Parker, and Bud Powell. Likewise, Hendricks and Puerling concocted their own recipes that gave birth to a form of arranging popular and jazz standards this author calls "reimagining." Hendricks reimagined songs by adding lyrics to instrumental "heads"[1] and improvised solos, a technique that would come to be known as vocalese. For Hendricks, this began as a way of earning spending money during his impoverished youth in Depression-era Toledo, Ohio. He learned all the solos and band parts from popular records of the day by repeated listening at the local diner's jukebox. He would sing along with them, note-perfect, when customers would put in their nickels,[2] and his act would earn him tips from the appreciative patrons. "When I was first singing, I would forget the words and then make up ones I thought would fit. I got to the point where I put in my own words, and I found out that as long as they rhymed, people didn't know the difference."[3] He has described this time in his life in various interviews as the origination of his interest in vocalese.

Vocalese is a term coined by the renowned jazz critic and historian Leonard Feather[4] in his description of the singing done by Hendricks with his partners, Dave Lambert and Annie Ross. Their recording of a classic song by the Woody Herman Band called "Four Brothers"[5] with Hendricks's words garnered the attention and accolades of many in the New York jazz scene. As Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, they recorded seven LPs and performed around the world from 1957 to 1962, when Ross left the group for a solo career. In 1964, Lambert and Hendricks amiably parted company, each pursuing solo careers. Lambert briefly formed a new group, a quintet called The New Dave Lambert Singers; the group auditioned for but failed to get a contract with RCA. Tragically, Lambert passed away two years later in an automobile accident, but Hendricks kept the flame alive. He continued to write and perform as a soloist and with his wife and daughters, spreading his unique gospel of Vocal Jazz. The Manhattan Transfer and New York Voices, among others, have recorded his arrangements.

Puerling approached reimagining through the use of alternative rhythmic and harmonic structures. In 1997, Puerling described his arranging philosophy simply as "taking the basic melody and basic chord structure of the song from the lead sheet, and making something creative. I like to add color by varying the texture."[6] One of the ways he varied texture was through the use of what he called "wrong chords" or, more accurately, by substituting chords that work with both the melody and the bass line.[7] Puerling took the typical voicings of traditional vocal groups and Barbershop style further by altering the structure of the chords, which resulted in a more sophisticated sound. For instance, where

Barbershop arrangements employ mostly basic triads and use occasional added sixths and sevenths for color and interest, Puerling extended and inverted chords with ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths.[8] This extension of the harmonic structure mirrored what instrumental jazz was doing and set Puerling's arrangements apart from his contemporaries.[9]

A Second Wave

Vocal Jazz maintained its small but passionate niche of practitioners throughout the 1970s and 1980s but could have died out were it not for the efforts of a second wave of enthusiasts. Like their predecessors, the proliferators of this second wave had to rely on sparse resources. Although the information was out there, mainly due to the West Coast Vocal Jazz summer camps for choral directors, it would often be through happenstance that discovery was made. Such was the case of Bruce Rogers, current Director of Choral Studies at Mount San Antonio College in Pomona, California. Although he was vaguely aware of popular music forms, his training and focus was traditional. A few years into his teaching career, he took his high school group to New York City. While there, he was told about a group just starting up called New York Voices. He decided to go hear them perform at a club in the city. "I was completely blown away. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I didn't even know this existed.' That's what turned me on to thinking, 'Maybe I should do this in school.'"[10]

Also like his predecessors, one of Rogers's first questions was, "How do I teach this?" He had zero training and background in jazz, and he did not want to attempt to teach it until he really understood the genre and its language. His approach was total and complete immersion. "I just listened and listened to everything I could get my hands on… just really enveloped myself in the language for months and months and months and months, read books, and did everything that I could."[11]

Vijay Singh, another educator who was a major part of the second wave, is a vocalist and an instrumentalist (in line with Christensen's ideal "complete musician"). His experience differed from that of Rogers in that he was fortunate enough to study in the Northwest around the founders of the Vocal Jazz movement. He already had a foundation in jazz, having studied it throughout his high school and collegiate years. His first encounter with a Vocal Jazz ensemble was as an undergraduate at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon.[12] The recipient of a music scholarship for clarinet and saxophone, he was required to participate in both jazz band and the jazz choir. Due to his jazz background, he and some of his fellow students were given the opportunity to act as leaders and soloists within each group. Later, as a graduate student at Portland State University, he was mentored by a passionate Vocal Jazz enthusiast who encouraged him to write and arrange for his groups. This training included hours of listening to and transcribing the music of all the great arrangers. He continued writing for his own student groups, usually due to lack of funds to purchase music, and gradually came to the attention of other directors looking for material.

One thing these two directors have in common that differs from the first wave of Vocal Jazz educators is that they are both trained singers; the early group comprised primarily piano players, drummers, or other instrumentalists. This second wave of Vocal Jazz teachers not only knows how to make a group swing but how to sing and present the music with more visual appeal, which is helping to dispel some of the initial mainstream resistance to the genre. The misconceptions that singing jazz is harmful to the voice are melting away at last thanks to the efforts of these directors and their contemporaries and many performers, scholars, and pedagogues who have emerged in the last decade.[13]

Editor's Note: The full article includes here sections titled "Vocal Jazz Goes to College," "The Swing Choir Movement," and "Publishing Vocal Jazz Repertoire." The conclusion section is printed below. To read or download the full article, visit acda.org/choraljournal, log into your membership account, and choose the June/July 2015 issue from the archives.

The Future of Vocal Jazz

What is the future of Vocal Jazz? Interestingly, there is continuing concern among cited educators that the obstacles aren't so much lack of training or resources but rather the manner in which to make this sophisticated art form entertaining for, and thus supported by,

audiences. The approach of [Bruce] Rogers includes bringing in some elements of show choir, not choreography per se but simple, organic movements and other visual ideas that help the music and musicians connect more with the listeners. Shaw laments a stylistic deficiency in performance practice. He harkens back to the hallowed days of Ellington and Basie, whose bands were known as much for their "smears and shakes" as they were for their straight ahead approach to swing. He feels that the post-bebop world has become too "antiseptic"[14] and too intellectual. He misses the jazz "inflections in it that make it human, like the sentence I just said. You know, with rise and fall."[15] Vocal Jazz can also benefit by better interpretation of the lyrics. At a recent workshop with jazz pianist/singer/arranger Michele Weir, a singer was struggling in her interpretation of a standard ballad. Weir's simple direction to the singer was to focus on the words, not the notes. She was able to demonstrate with this singer how many musical and technical problems will "take care of themselves" by just letting the words dictate.[16] Kirby Shaw also illuminates this aspect of Vocal Jazz in his observations of his favorite vocalist, Carmen McCrae. "My go-to song that I use everywhere I go is her rendition of Cole Porter's 'Get Out of Town' when she says 'just disappear' [voice fades out with the word to paint the meaning]. 'When you are near, close!' The way she sings 'close' suggests danger."[17] We can place the next phase of Vocal Jazz development on the shoulders of the current and future Vocal Jazz arrangers, composers, teachers, and performers. There are many luminaries who are not identified in this article, but their names can be found on other pages of this issue and beyond. Hendricks and Puerling and their many disciples demonstrated that this music could be both sophisticated and fun with a unique ability to reach the heart and the intellect. It was that quality that first inspired the pioneers of the collegiate Vocal Jazz movement and will be needed to keep the flame burning for future musicians and audiences alike.

Gregory Amerind is a composer of traditional and jazz vocal ensembles arrangements and a past Western ACDA Region and National ACDA R&R chair for Vocal Jazz.

NOTES

[1] A "head" is a jazz term meaning simply the melody of the song.

[2] Kathryn Reid, "An Examination of the Lineage of Jazz Vocal Improvisation Through the Analysis of Representative Solos" (DMA diss., University of Miami, 2002), 50.

[3] Jon Hendricks, quoted in Will Friedwald, Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 239.

[4] Sol Foster, "Jon Hendricks, A Rare Artist, An American Original," accessed November 11, 2012, http://www.harmonyware. com/JonHendricks/vocalese.html.

[5] Marc Myer, "Interview with Jon Hendricks, Part 2," accessed June 10, 2012. http:// www.jazzwax.com/2009/07/interviewjon-hendricks-part-2.

[6] Steve Zegree, "Gene Puerling, A Tribute," *Jazz Educators Journal*, 29, no. 4 (1997): 49.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] [Note 46 in full article] Bruce Rogers, interview by the author (July 15, 2013).

[11] [Note 47] Ibid.

[12] [Note 48] Vijay Singh, email interview by the author (July 8, 2013).

[13] [Note 49] See: Gregory Amerind, "Benefits of Including Vocal Jazz Studies Within the Standard Curriculum" (Tactus, Winter 2013).

[14] [Note 50] Kirby Shaw, interview by author, July 3, 2013

[15] [Note 51] Ibid.

[16] [Note 52] Michele Weir, vocal jazz workshop, Mesa Community College, Mesa, AZ, November 6, 2013.

[17] [Note 53] Shaw interview.

The Choral Music Teacher as Artist: Vocal Jazz and Improvisation as Expressions of Artistry

by Patrice Madura Ward-Steinman

Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt. To read or download the full article, visit acda.org/choraljournal, log into your membership account, and choose the June/July 2015 issue from the archives.

Sometimes it seems as though the idea of an improvising choral music teacher is an oxymoron. Although improvisation study is essential to a degree in jazz, future choral music teachers are required to focus on classical music, not jazz, and rarely have the opportunity to improvise. Yet, many choral musicians catch the vocal jazz bug through a secondary school or college ensemble and find that there is much to learn about performing jazz authentically and artistically. Vocal jazz is an engaging and powerful musical art form because of its propulsive and cathartic swing rhythm,[1] its American popular song repertoire, its challenging extended harmonies requiring near-flawless intonation, and its potential for self-expressive and innovative improvisations.

In my research with jazz singers, I have found three distinct factors underlying improvisation skill. Not surprisingly, the first two are good musicianship and knowledge of jazz style. Learning a new style of music, such as jazz, can feel like trying to learn a new instrument! In fact, my research showed an inverse relationship between classical voice lessons and the ability to improvise.

The third factor underlying improvisation skill is the creative or inventive use of dynamics, range, tone color, articulations, lyrics, melodies, and rhythms. It is this creative aspect of improvisation that can provide the necessary enjoyment and motivation for more choral musicians to develop their artistry as improvisers. Artistic self-expression and innovation emerge through conscious awareness of the musical criteria that can be played with. The artist might choose to simply vary or elaborate on a musical idea. Or she might explore different possibilities of vocal timbre, including vocal and body percussion or unusual vocables. The artist needs to risk breaking the rules in order to discover those original ideas that have worth.

In my own teaching experience with children to adults, I have witnessed the transformation from rule-bound, sterile, and tentative improvisations to relaxed, joyful, and humorous ones within one class period. With novices in improvisation, the musical materials must be simple (perhaps a pentatonic or blues scale with accompaniment), the words can be improvised from a chosen theme (perhaps an upcoming holiday), and the form can involve two-bar calls followed by two-bar responses that relate yet contrast in some way. Psychologist Emanuel Hammer asserted that teachers should assist their students in "breaking their creativity loose from their intelligence, i.e., to gain freedom to momentarily suspend their orientation of convergent thinking to allow divergent flights."[2] He adds that we can teach them how and when to suspend the over-evaluative, criticizing, judging function of the mind in order to remain open to uncritically "receiving" the creative idea.

It is not the sole responsibility of the performance majors and professional musicians to teach us about innovations in music. We as artist-musician-teachers have a wellspring of music within ourselves. My research subjects provided insights into the development of their own improvisation skills, and these included listening to a range of musical styles and playfully improvising to all of it, paying attention to interactions among the instruments to gain melodic and rhythmic ideas, using lyrics to help provide context, and seeking out musicians who are better improvisers than themselves.

Patrice Madura Ward-Steinman was a professor of music education Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music. She published numerous research articles and books on music education and vocal jazz improvisation.

NOTES

[1] Jeff Pressing, "Black Atlantic rhythm: Its computational and transcultural foundations," *Music Perception* 19, no. 3 (2002): 285-310.

[2] E. F. Hammer, *Creativity, Talent and Personality* (Robert E. Krieger, 1984), 119.

Starting a Vocal Jazz Ensemble

by Roger Emerson

The First Step

The most important first step to starting a vocal jazz ensemble is: listen. There is no better teacher than our ears. So much of our choral tradition is aural; we have developed our concept of choral tone and style by listening and imitating and probably by a good deal of instruction in college. Unfortunately, with few exceptions we did not get much training in vocal jazz as part of our traditional choral curriculum, so we must play catch-up, and the best way to start is to use our intuitive musical nature and imitate the archetype. Familiarizing yourself with the groups mentioned above is the place to start.

My favorite "one-stop" CD is the New York Voices album *Sing, Sing, Sing,* which represents an excellent model for the high school vocal jazz ensemble. Darmon Meader's SATB arrangements are beautiful and well crafted. The material is drawn from the best of *The Great American Songbook,* and the vocal instruments of Darmon, Kim Nazarian, Lauren Kinhan, and Peter Eldridge are stunning, natural, and healthy. Take 6, The Real Group, Manhattan Transfer, Singers Unlimited, Hi-Lo's, and the Four Freshmen also provide wonderful style models. After you listen… listen more to Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Tierney Sutton, Mark Murphy, Kurt Elling, Chet Baker, and Jamie Cullum, to name a few vocal soloists. Don't forget instrumentalists such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Joe Pass, and the big bands of Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, and Gordon Goodwin (his "Phat Band").

Getting Started

Consider adding one or two vocal jazz selections to your fall or spring concerts. Your madrigal, chamber, or concert choir will love the challenge and the sonic freshness of this new medium, and the experience will allow you to experiment with the genre. After this experience, simply ask how many would like to try the recently learned selection as part of a small group. This will create the nucleus of your new ensemble and is a relatively painless way to begin. Keep in mind that although SATB is the standard voicing for vocal jazz, SAB, SSA(A), and TTB(B) arrangements are also available. There are some challenges with diving right into the twelve-voice, individually miked ensemble; instead, keep it simple. A little larger group, say sixteen to twenty-four members, is a good place to start. Have them sing in a half-circle around the piano. Pick charts (arrangements) with little or no divisi, fairly traditional jazz harmonies, and written-out solos. There are a few listed at the conclusion of this article. Sing small venues that don't require amplification. We will talk more about the challenges of amplification later.

Vocal Tone

Your students are probably already into the close harmonies of contemporary unaccompanied groups such as Pentatonix, and if you have performed Eric Whitacre or Morten Lauridsen, you are well on your way to having a concept of the vocal quality needed for vocal jazz. It is light and generally straight (minimal vibrato). There are exceptions, but it is a reasonable starting point. It is conversational and legato unless notated otherwise. Consonants are generally de-emphasized, and vowels are more horizontal as opposed to vertical. The sound should be energetic but not oversung.

One reason the traditional choral director may be hesitant is that although the vocal jazz voice is healthy and still relies on proper breath support and freedom, it does not generally employ tall vowels, emphasized consonants, or vibrato, which are paramount in our concert ensembles. Just as we modify for much of our twentieth-century literature, we must do the same for our vocal jazz ensemble. As we have learned, the voice has a variety of colors, and we should endeavor to explore them all.

Picking Charts

The right choral chart can make or break your vocal jazz experience. More often than not, groups perform

music that is too difficult for the time and talent available. A high-quality piece does not have to be difficult, but it does need to contain some complex jazz harmonies, which by nature may not be easily accomplished by the more traditionally trained choir. The vocal jazz world is getting better about grading the difficulty level of their charts similar to the instrumental jazz world. Let me suggest grades 1, 2, or 3 for a beginning ensemble. Several are listed at the conclusion of this article that fit the bill. Anything beyond that requires strong readers who are comfortable with identifying and singing the intervals; "good ears" are not enough to accomplish the close and extended harmonies required in the more advanced arrangements.

Improvisation

Begin with arrangements that have a well-crafted, written-out scat solo or augment the written melody by delaying entrances, stretching the rhythms, and employing neighbor, chord, or related scale tones. Some students will be more adept than others at improvising a new melody over a given chord progression. Have the students imitate an instrument such as trumpet, sax, trombone, or flute. Train their ears by outlining the roots of the chords and then the chord tones, 1-3-5-b7 of a twelve-bar blues progression. The blues scale [Figure 6 in full article] will expand their options since it works over all three chords of the progression. Create short, repeated melodic phrases (riffs) from those tones and experiment with a one-measure call (you or a student) that is repeated by the ensemble in a response. I also like to employ a C major scale over standard "rhythm changes" (IM7, vi7, ii7, V7, IM7) Cmaj7, Am7, Dm7, G7, Cmaj7. Again, listening and imitating is essential, so make sure that you and your students are listening to the great improvisers, both vocal and instrumental, listed at the beginning of this article.

Be Fearless

In the immortal words of Eleanor Roosevelt, "Do something that scares you every day." So many times we fail to take on something new because we are afraid of doing it wrong. We fear what our fellow directors or mentor instructors will think. Trust me, the rewards of starting and maintaining a vocal jazz ensemble are worth the occasional blip. This article merely scratches the surface of this wonderful and exciting genre, but listed in the following pages are camps, social media groups, and individuals who will be delighted to expand upon the topics presented. The vocal jazz community is ready and waiting to help you. Just ask!

Editor's Note: Find a list of recommended resources, including starter arrangements, in the full article, online at acda.org/choraljournal in the June/July 2015 issue.

Roger Emerson is a professional composer and arranger with over 900 choral titles in print. He has experience teaching singers in grades K-12 and previously taught guitar and vocal jazz programs at College of the Siskiyous.

THE SCAT SINGING DIALECT: An Introduction to Vocal Improvisation

by Michele Weir

There is a difference between scat singing and scat singing that has musical integrity and sounds good. This article will explore the latter. First, it is important to offer context about jazz pedagogy and scat singing in order to understand and appreciate the historical perspective of this unique genre of music.

Historical Perspective

Among all jazz singer recordings ever made, only a small percentage contain scat singing. Out of those, only a relative few demonstrate the level of artistry of a singer such as the great Ella Fitzgerald. Formal jazz education was introduced in the late 1940s, but it was almost exclusively tailored to instrumentalists and did not fully begin to take wing until the 1970s. Even then, formal vocal jazz education was still in its infancy. Today, the number of universities offering an instrumental jazz major far outweighs the number of universities offering a vocal jazz major, and even the ones that do rarely have a dedicated vocal improvisation course. Singers are commonly placed in existing instrumental improvisation courses that are not designed to meet the needs of the vocal improviser.

We must, then, consider the historical perspective of the potential student scat singer: there has been no overabundance of great role models and little or no opportunity in formal education to study and practice vocal improvisation. Additionally, it would be unlikely that the student had much lifetime exposure to any jazz music unless his or her parents happened to be jazz buffs. These combined factors may have contributed to a degree of historical underdevelopment in the art as a whole, especially at the educational level. Fortunately, the current outlook for meaningful vocal jazz pedagogy and quality role modeling has steadily improved as a second generation of jazz-trained vocal pedagogues has risen to university positions, where they are able to mentor aspiring jazz singers. Over the past ten years or so, the quality of vocal improvisation and ensemble performance at festivals has greatly improved.

What is Vocal Improvisation?

Vocal improvisation is another term for scat singing, or scatting. Vocal jazz improvisation is similar to instrumental jazz improvisation in that the improviser spontaneously invents melodic lines over the chord progression of a song. For both singers and players, the overarching musical goals include:

1. Improvising melodic lines that are inventive and work well within the chord progression (known as the changes).

2. Making the music feel good rhythmically.

3. Sounding conversationally expressive as though the improviser is telling a story that is being conceived in the moment, in real time.

Jazz vocalists and instrumentalists, especially in educational circles, commonly speak of learning the language—that is, the language of jazz and, more specifically, the language that has been by far the most influential and prevalent among jazz musicians dating back from the last seventy years: bebop. Bebop was a style period of the 1940s whose leading proponents were Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. The idiomatic melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic languages of bebop are still prevalent among jazz singers and players today. A primary focus in jazz pedagogy is to become fluent in the language of jazz (bebop) then "say what you want to say" within that language. Scat singing differs from instrumental improvisation in a number of key ways, especially as it pertains to their respective pedagogical needs.

First, scat singers use scat syllables instead of lyrics in their improvisation. Unlike instrumentalists, developing a healthy repertoire of syllables is a required task. The importance of singers having fluency with syllables should not be understated. Until a singer is completely comfortable with a repertoire of scat syllables, they are handicapped; nothing they sing during

improvisation will sound jazz-authentic. If used skillfully, a singer's scat syllable choices will model the style and articulation that is characteristic of their instrumental counterparts.

Second, jazz singers have a much greater need for advanced ear training than instrumentalists; they have no button to push that will manufacture an altered dominant scale. In other words, players can play things that stem from their cognitive understanding and technique, whereas the nature of a singer's instrument requires them to hear everything that they sing.

Third, there is some amount of debate about whether jazz scat singers should universally try to model the content and style of their instrumental counterparts, or whether they should sing in a way that is most true to the nature of their instrument—the voice. It is true that the traditional historical role for jazz singers has been to sing the melody, not to improvise long lines of intricate, highly articulated melodic material woven through fast tempo chord progressions. It is probable that for some singers, an instrumental approach to improvisation is not their forte.

There undoubtedly, however, exists a school of singers (e.g., Darmon Meader from the New York Voices and Jon Hendricks from Lambert, Hendricks & Ross) who are truly impressive in their ability to use an instrumental approach to improvisation. They use their voices with great control to execute the same highly chromatic melodic language as players, maintain control at fast tempos, and navigate the harmony with fantastic fluency, while spontaneously improvising melodic ideas. This illustrates that vocalists can be successful using an instrumental approach to vocal improvisation if they choose and that the question of which approach a singer should adopt is only a personal preference.

Scatting Overview

The first step in learning to improvise is to listen to improvising role models via recordings. More specifically, saturate the ears with good role models to become intimately familiar with what the genre in its best form is supposed to sound like. The second step is to practice exercises of various kinds repeatedly, essentially drilling musical data that will be later recalled and reinvented in a creative way. The third step is to spend ample time experimenting with and exploring unstructured creative improvising with a recorded jazz accompaniment. All improvisers need time spent on this activity to build a comfort level with the process and to learn through trial and error in a safe climate (i.e., alone or in a supportive classroom environment). The fear of making a mistake that is common to virtually all beginning-level scatters melts away as familiarity and experience with the art form increases.

Group Activities

1. *Call-and-Response*

The easiest way to introduce scat singing to a group is through call-and-response. No experience or special preparation is required—the practice is simply to listen to phases sung by a recorded demo singer (on a designated call-and-response practice track) and repeat the singer after each phrase. Calland-response is generally fun and pain free since no one is put on the spot to perform as a soloist, and there is usually a high success rate. Recordings are available that make the process as simple as pressing play and turning up the volume. A variation in call-and-response is to assign a qualified student (or several, one at a time) to lead the calls. The leader of the calls should keep ideas limited to one-, two-, or four-bar phrases.

2. *Exercises*

Most of the exercises presented in this article can be easily applied to use with groups by having the class or ensemble sing in unison. Rhythm and syllable exercises, melodic exercises, and singing the changes are all activities that work well in the classroom.

3. *Transcribing*

Although the actual transcribing of a recorded solo may not be practical for your class, listening to and singing along with a recorded solo is. To facilitate this, have the group listen to approximately eight measures of a solo a day, repeating the passage as many times as necessary until they can sing along with it confi dently. On the next class day, review the previously learned eight bars then move on to the next eight. Eventually the group will be able to sing with an entire solo.

Unstructured Improvising

There are a number of ways to provide the opportunity for individual singers to improvise their own unique ideas while in the context of a group. These activities are generally fun, energizing, and very beneficial for improving musicianship. To facilitate unstructured improvising, play an accompaniment track loudly enough for everyone to hear and ask the singers to sit in their chairs and quietly scat to themselves. To an outside observer, it may sound like a cacophony, but from within the group, each individual is able to hear him or herself adequately and explore improvisation without the pressure of having to perform in front of others. There are myriad variations to this activity, several of which are outlined below:

1. Ask singers to slowly (meditatively) walk around the room in meandering fashion as they sing. You may need to remind them to avoid interacting with anyone as they meander close to other singers who are doing the same activity. You may also ask them to step in tempo as they walk.

2. Assign each singer to a partner and place each partner group around the room facing each other. Instruct partners to take turns improvising ideas of two-, four-, or eight-bar phrases (depending on tempo and personal preference) while a backing track plays. This is a reasonably safe way for singers to begin improvising in front of another person.

3. Divide the class into small groups (quartets or more) and place them around the room standing in a tight circle. The groups should be as far away from other groups as possible so each can hear itself. Play a recorded backing track as each singer takes a turn at improvising in two-, four-, or eight-bar phrases. It is a good idea to determine the direction of improvisers (clockwise or counterclockwise) ahead of time.

Jam Session Groups

Jam session groups are small groups of four or more singers who meet either in or outside of class to practice improvisation together. They can function just as sectional rehearsals function in a choral or jazz ensemble, meeting regularly as a required activity outside of class, or they can be used as part of in-class warm-ups or breakout activities. The musical benefits of jam session groups can be significant, and the activity boosts enthusiasm for improvisation and jazz. Divide the class into groups of four or more, and if meeting outside of class, determine the time and place. If meeting during class time, send the singers out to practice rooms, nearby classrooms, the hallway, or wherever there is appropriate space, give them a specific assignment, and tell them a specific time to return. Luckily, supplying backing tracks for each group is not a problem, as jazz accompaniment phone apps are now available, and very likely at least one singer in each group will have a smart phone. The key to success with jam session groups is to be very specific with goals and assignments and to require the groups be accountable for their progress. Example assignments include: "Listen to etude 19 all the way through, three times, then learn the first eight bars of the solo," or, "Sing exercise 12 five times, then trade fours with the backing track for ten minutes, working mostly on scalar ideas." To keep the jam session groups lively and fresh, periodically rotate out just one member of each group for a new member so that new energy is often being infused into the group. To inspire everyone's best practice efforts, have jazz session groups periodically perform for each other in class.

Editor's Note: The full article includes sections titled "Quick Start with Melody Variation," "Rhythm, Syllables, and Articulation," "Melody," "Scatting in the Choir or Classroom," and "Musical Games." There is also a selected resources section. To read or download the full article, visit acda.org/choraljournal, log into your membership account, and choose the June/July 2015 issue from the archives.

Michele Weir is on faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles as a teacher and clinician. She is an active arranger, vocalist, and pianist.

PROJECT : ENCORE™ NEWS

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QUARTERLY ENDORSEMENTS

D. GEOFFREY BELL

Kites

- SSA; piano; English (D. Geoffrey Bell)
- 2’ 49”. The poem (by the composer) expresses childhood imaginings of the view and experience of a kite soaring through the air. The whimsical nature of the text is captured in the darting yet singable lines. Unison, then harmonies in the implied thirds, and a bit of imitation make it an ideal teaching piece for children as well as a concert pleaser. (ProjectEncore.org/d-geoffrey-bell)

PATTI DRENNAN

Ave Maria

- SSAATTBB; a cappella; Latin (Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary)
- 4’ 37”. For a luxurious experience in choral sound, look no further. Consistent with the spirit of the well-known text, the tone is gentle and uplifting, leveraging the full potential of the choral instrument. Mix of moving lines and homophony. Expansive range, D2 to A5. Ideal for Advent programming. For robust choral forces, HS and above. (ProjectEncore.org/patti-drennan)

COLIN EATOCK

O Magnum Mysterium (2023)

- SATB; soprano saxophone; Latin (Responsory for Matins on Christmas Day)
- 5’ 00”. Effective and unusual scoring for this tradition text. The saxophone weaves a delicate gossamer between, within, and among the phrases, creating the sense of mystery that is the nature of the text. Mix of homophonic and imitative writing; harmonies often surprise but are never harsh. Lovely new setting; adventurous HS and above. (ProjectEncore.org/colin-eatock)

In fond memorium of long-time PROJECT : ENCORE reviewer, Alan Harler, who died peacefully in his sleep on June 26th.

In addition to Maestro Harler's renowned and well-lauded work as a conductor and artistic visionary, he served in a significant role that only a very few have known, and about which he many times expressed enormous enthusiasm: Alan served for many years as one of the anonymous adjudicators of scores submitted to PROJECT : ENCORE.

Alan enriched many of our lives in many ways over many decades! In this one additional way, we can only now begin to sing his praises! It is a beautiful example of his selfless work on behalf of the choral art to which his life's work was dedicated.

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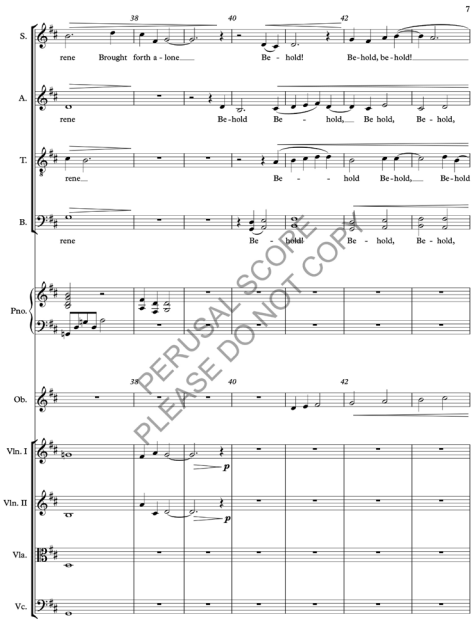


The rose serves as poetic metaphor for beauty, for a beloved, even for mystery and miracles. A rose is the focus of these very different texts and musical settings, both of which inspire hope in what may appear elusive.

-with strings, piano and oboe obbligato . . .

"A Lovely Rose Is Sprung" by Andrew Jacobson

This setting of the traditional "*Es ist ein Rose entsprungen*" text is richly romantic yet freshly captivating in its use of an original melody. The obbligato oboe line is elegant in its simplicity. The setting captures the meditative nature of the text and a glimmer of light in the midst of a very dark season. Manageable for choirs with a solid F2 bass section.

4' 30" in length

Hear a complete recording and learn more about it here:
ProjectEncore.org/andrew-jacobson

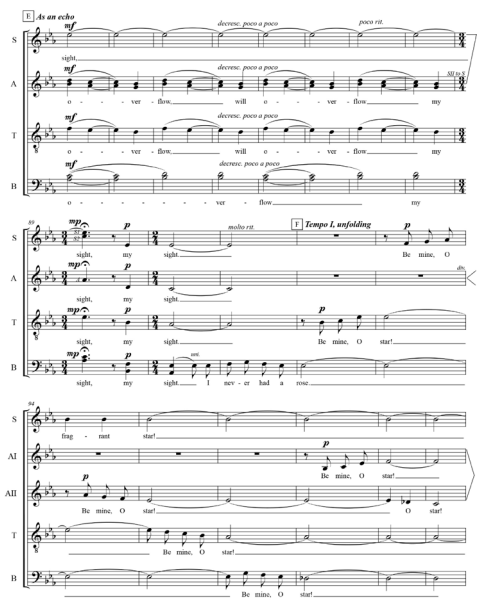
For your a cappella mixed chorus . . .

"I Never Had a Rose" by Matthew Erpelding

As a high school senior, Sarah May won her school's fine arts poetry contest with this original sonnet, speaking of beauty through the timeless symbol of a rose. The gentle shimmer of the choral setting makes it equally appropriate for either springtime rose or December rose-in-winter programming. Rich choral textures, with some imitation and independence of line are viable for HS and above.

5' 30" in length.

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



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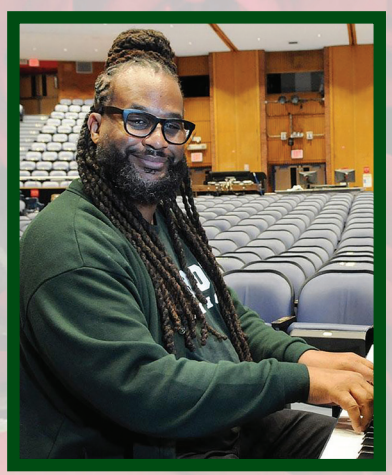
In Memoriam

Thomas Wright Jr. (1975-2025)



Thomas Wright Jr. was part of the New York ACDA leadership as a repertoire & resources co-chair for high school music. He taught at several high schools in his home state of Maryland and in New York before joining the staff of Edward R. Murrow High School as the music teacher.

He was a lifelong musician, playing alto sax and singing at an early age. His mother was the guitarist in his childhood church. In addition to teaching beginning, intermediate, and advanced piano at Edward R. Murrow High School, Thomas directed the gospel choir and was the vocal director for the school's musical.

A new teacher profile written in April 2024 cited some of his extroverted recruitment efforts: "He will stop students in the hallway and ask, 'Can you sing? Come sing for me!' He'll get them to sing for him and determine whether they are alto, soprano, tenor or bass. 'Then, they just have to rearrange their schedule,' he says cheerfully."[1]

With his deep curiosity, broad musical interests, and a "particular joy"[2] in teaching gospel and twentieth-century Black composers, Thomas touched many lives and is remembered with fondness by many students and colleagues.

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1. Leigh Anderson, "With a song in his heart" (United Teachers of Freedom, https://www.uft.org/news/building-your-career/new-teacher-profiles/song-his-heart, April 11, 2024). Accessed June 12, 2025.
2. Ibid.

Book Reviews

Gregory Pysh, editor
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Leo Sowerby
John Sargent
University of Illinois Press, 2024
164 pages
Hardcover, $50.00
eBook, $19.95

Anyone who studied music in Chicago in the 1920s to the 1950s might have had an encounter with Leo Sowerby, whether in the fields of composition, theory, or organ. Many important musicians did, including Ned Rorem and Florence Price. Sowerby was an important influence, particularly in the Midwest, first in concert and chamber music and later in sacred music. This reviewer remembers organ and choral music sung at church in the early 1970s, and there are several anthems in many church music libraries.

John Sargent has succeeded in chronicling Sowerby's life and work in this small volume. The book is divided into the following sections: Introduction: Sowerby in American History; The Emerging Americanist (1895-1918); Home and Away: European Travels, American Concert Successes (1919-27); The Church Ascendant: Chicago and a More "Balanced" Composer (1927-40); Secular Decline, Sacred Rise (1940-62); Washington and the Royal College of Church Musicians (1962-68); and Epilogue: Forgetting and Remembering.

Sowerby spent his childhood in Grand Rapids, Michigan, but due to family situations and a more educationally advantageous environment, he moved to Chicago as an adolescent to live with relatives. Among formative influences was the composer Percy Grainger, with whom he scheduled a series of lessons in summer 1916 that were more like conversations sharing music of favorite composers. One of these was Frederick Delius's *Florida Suite*, in addition to Grainger's piano music (p. 19).

> Musically, Grainger's influence can be seen in Sowerby's piano setting of the country dance tune "The Irish Washerwoman." Composed in 1916 and issued as his first published composition, this piece highlights Sowerby's burgeoning interests in colorful sonorities, textural variety, and harmonic complexity. (p. 21)

Sowerby's first public concert of his original works occurred in Chicago less than six months later in January 1917, assisted by sixty members of the Chicago Symphony at Orchestra Hall, followed by performances of piano and chamber music later that year. He furthered his studies at the American Conservatory of Music, where he became an instructor of piano.

Following a December 1917 enlistment in the Army, Sowerby returned to Chicago, took two church music positions, composed organ and sacred choral works, traveled, and began writing more in-depth works. He revised his Piano Concerto and studied abroad while he developed his craft, including a tone poem, *Comes Autumn Time,* performed by the Philadelphia, Baltimore,

Chicago, Minneapolis, Detroit, and Los Angeles Orchestras. But it was the winning of The Rome Prize and its accompanying three-year residency that propelled his compositional career and international reputation.

Upon his return to the United States in 1924, he connected to the world of jazz and music based on folk idioms. He developed a relationship with Paul Whiteman, who premiered Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Whiteman commissioned Sowerby to write *Synconata*, a combination of jazz rhythms and sonata form performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, and for eighty performances around the country in the next six months. Sowerby soon abandoned composition in this realm and wrote folk-based music, as other Americans did at this time.

Settings of several English and American tunes for voice and piano, plus a setting of "Pop Goes the Weasel" for woodwind quintet, helped set the stage for his development, including pieces with ethnic and social overtones.

> Sowerby, for his part, viewed folk music as a guiding force for musical modernism, a means of severing the shackles of Germanic tradition and developing a more "authentic" voice. (p. 51)

Among Sowerby's influential orchestral works in the late 1920s and early 1930s were the ballet *Skyscrapers* and the Whitman-inspired tome poem *Sea Drift*, for which Sowerby was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

It was at this time that Sowerby's career turned to church music. He was the latest in a series of prominent American organists and composers who still maintained a relationship with the concert hall. He became a member of *The Hymnal 1940* committee and contributed several hymns to this effort in addition to meticulous editing.

His organ work, *Symphony in G Major* (1931), is technically and compositionally challenging, with comparisons to jazz. *Pageant*, another noted work, is a more structured organ composition, a bravura work but still composed with refinement, "breadth and sweep" in Sowerby's own performance instructions. Passages evoke jazz rhythms, pedal trills, and motivic development. Sowerby also wrote *Prairie* at this time, a sweeping tone poem based on poetry of Carl Sandburg, which was promoted by Howard Hanson.

Sowerby was noted for his choral writing during this time, especially *The Canticle of the Sun*, a thirty-minute cantata on a text by Francis of Assisi for which he won a second Pulitzer Prize. It draws on themes of nature and God, and was premiered at Carnegie Hall. Though it received many positive reviews by distinguished choral composers, it is largely forgotten. The same is true with his shorter anthems for the sacred service, such as his setting of Psalm 122.

Leo Sowerby spent his final years in Washington DC, at National Cathedral attempting to develop the College of Church Musicians as well as composing, specifically the anthem in memory of John F. Kennedy, "Thy Word Is a Lamp unto My Feet." He also wrote *La Corona* for tenor, chorus, and orchestra, which was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and based on the Holy Sonnets of John Donne.

Perhaps the only addition this book could have benefited from is a list of works, either chronological or by category, complete or selected. This for an American Romantic eclectic composer who "sought to never write the 'same' work twice" [Sargent quoting Jim Ginsburg, p. 129]. Indeed, Leo Sowerby is an American treasure worth further exploration.

Donald Callen Freed
Omaha, Nebraska

The Conductor's Toolbox: Transforming Yourself as a Musician and Conductor
Richard Sparks
GIA Publications, Inc. (2019)
Softcover, 210 pages
$17.95

The Conductor's Toolbox is a refreshing, accessible, and deeply insightful collection of wisdom for those on the podium. Best known for his pioneering work with choral ensembles such as Seattle Pro Musica and the University of North Texas, Sparks brings a wealth of experience to this book as well as a remarkable openness and humility. Rather than laying out a definitive method, he invites the reader into an ongoing, candid conversation about the evolving, deeply human art of conducting.

Organized into short, digestible chapters, the book touches on a wide range of topics—from rehearsal planning and gesture to programming philosophy, ensemble psychology, and leadership. Sparks speaks with authenticity about the nuances of our role, offering guidance not only on what we do, but why it matters. His approach is less about prescribing techniques and more about encouraging the reader to develop their own artistry through curiosity, experimentation, and self-awareness.

Perhaps most powerful is his emphasis on the conductor as a communicator. Sparks challenges readers to consider how our presence, words, and demeanor shape the rehearsal space, the ensemble's morale, and ultimately the music we create together. He shifts the focus from transmitting information to cultivating trust, clarity, and shared purpose. For those leading choirs—whether large or small, professional or volunteer—this lens is not just helpful, but essential.

While the book's tone is relaxed and conversational, its insights are grounded in Dr. Sparks's deep schol-

arship and hard-earned experience. He generously shares examples from his own conducting life—including moments of struggle and growth—which resonate with honesty and warmth. These reflections remind us learning and growth are lifelong parts of our journey, and missteps are not failures, but invitations to refine our craft.

So whether we lead a high school chorus, a community choir, a worship ensemble, a university program or something in between, *The Conductor's Toolbox* meets us where we are and helps us move forward with intention. It is not a manual filled with diagrams and checklists but a wise companion—one that affirms the complexity of what we do and gently reminds us why we do it.

Beyond its practical value, *The Conductor's Toolbox* serves as a quiet call to mindfulness. Sparks reminds readers that conducting is not just a job or a skill, but a vocation grounded in human connection. In a field that can often reward polish and perfection, this book dares us to center vulnerability, curiosity, and care. It invites us to lead with authenticity, to create spaces where singers feel safe and seen, and to approach each rehearsal not just as a task, but as an opportunity to build something meaningful, together.

Kenny Kabak
Springfield, Missouri

Berlioz's Requiem
Jennifer Walker
Oxford University Press, 2025
Softcover, 144 pages, $18.99

This publication is part of a series by Oxford Uni-

versity Press titled *Keynotes,* which reimagines the canons of Western music for the twenty-first century. These publications, whose subjects range at this writing from Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* to major symphonic and operatic works, find their readership in performers, advanced undergraduate students, as well as scholars and critics.

Author Jennifer Walker writes of the monumental Berlioz *Requiem* in a concise, accessible format in direct contrast to the massiveness of the work itself. Having sung this work as an undergraduate, its uniqueness in the Requiem genre has stayed with me long after the final chords (and undergraduate education) have ended.

The book is divided into five chapters, which give a history of the work, its reception from first performance through the nineteenth century, the *Requiem's* aesthetics, experiencing the work, Berlioz's composition of the work, and rehearsing the *Requiem*. The author walks readers through the entire composition, especially the composer's orchestration of the text (with excerpts from the full score), including his treatment of the sacred text. In the midst of the huge *Tuba mirum* and *Rex tremendae,* his reworking of the Latin texts are calibrated carefully to highlight the most sublime language of the Mass for the dead, thus enabling Berlioz's most sublime moments to be understood as such (p. 75).

The reflections of his musical contemporaries was quite mixed. Camille Saint-Saens wrote, after hearing the *Requiem* in 1852, "In the *Tuba mirum*, I had the impression that every little column on the church's pillars became a pipe and the church itself became an immense organ" (p. 77). Walker also relates the challenges of selecting spaces, especially sacred spaces, for the work's massive forces. The book concludes with additional sources for reading and listening.

Readers who are well acquainted with the *Requiem*, as well as those learning of the work for the first time, will find excellent information in this publication.

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