



### Stronger When We Work Together

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(Used with permission of Minnesota's *Star of the North*)

“Today we’re going to start a group project...”

Those are words that are dreaded by every type-A student. As a high school and college student, there were few words that I hated more when they came out of teachers’ and professors’ mouths. Now, as an adult, my experience with collaboration is very different. It has led to some of my favorite musical performances in the last several years.

I have been consistently surprised at how much collaboration I have found in southeast Minnesota. Youth choirs, including *Bella Voce*, the Honors Choirs of SEMN, and Northfield Youth Choirs, are working creatively with other ensembles and musicians for their concerts. Choral Arts Ensemble, an adult, auditioned choir in Rochester, is hosting its third annual Singing For Life High School Festival for which three regional high school choirs attend and perform with the Choral Arts Society in a side-by-side concert. Events like these abound, and they result in performances that are creative, engaging, and memorable for audiences and students alike.

It’s not just community and semiprofessional groups who are in on the action. One particular event I have been impressed with since I began teaching is the Zumbro Education District Choral Festival. As background, the Zumbro Education District (ZED) is a consortium of smaller rural schools that may not normally be able to provide all the services needed to support students independently. However, as a group, it is able to meet the needs of member districts.

Every fall, ZED hosts a choral festival with member high schools, and it has become one of my favorite performances each year. The traditional setup of the festival is to have every school perform two works alone, then to have all the choirs combine and sing three or four works together. This design allows students to see and hear other choirs from the area while also providing an opportunity for them to sing music together that they may not have the vocal resources to sing at their individual schools.

This year was particularly fulfilling because we changed the traditional design and tried something new. We upped our collaboration game! Instead of choosing a few mass choir works and having choirs perform their own selections, we decided to try performing an entire masterwork, Vivaldi’s *Gloria*. It is unlikely that any of the member schools of ZED would have been able to provide this opportunity for students on their own, but together we realized that we could design the program in a way that allowed our students to have this experience.

To make the Vivaldi work, we chose to do the first and last movements as a mass choir, and we divided the interior movements of the work between individual schools. Because the piece was in the public domain, we were able to use the funding that typically went toward buying music to hire adult musicians to perform the solo and duet movements.

There were many positives that resulted from this format and made the experience special for our students. First,

we ended up with different layers of collaboration. Some of our schools have smaller, younger choirs that do not necessarily have the experience or performing resources to sing a movement on their own, especially in the fall. For some movements, pairs of schools teamed up to create a kind of collaboration *within* collaboration, and they were able to perform with great success. Their students felt comfortable and supported because they had additional peers helping, and the audience saw and heard consistency in the size of the choirs, helping to prevent the judgement about size that sometimes comes with these types of festivals. In essence, collaboration allowed us to take competition out of the equation.

Second, Pine Island has an orchestra that has also traditionally participated in this festival by playing for one of the mass choir movements. This has sometimes seemed to relegate the orchestra to second-class status, as students do not necessarily understand why the orchestra is a participant as well. However, for this performance the orchestra suddenly became vital to the entire production, which dramatically changed the relationship between the choirs and the orchestra.

Choral students understood inherently that the orchestra was an important part of this music. Orchestra students were full participants in the entire concert, and both sets of students had the opportunity to experience playing and singing together. Collaboration allowed us to work better as a community of musicians.

Third, in addition to the adult soloists, we were able to hire a quartet of professional string players to play with our orchestra students. Between the soloists and instrumental quartet, our students were able to see how music can be a lifelong activity, and the side-by-side design encouraged students to take their performance to a higher level. Collaboration allowed us to push the boundaries of what we thought we could do.

When I started teaching at Pine Island, I never would have guessed that my students would have the opportunity to sing the entire Vivaldi *Gloria*. Now, a few months after the festival, I still marvel at what a great experience it was. Because ZED member schools worked together, the end result was highly satisfying for students, directors, and audience members alike. The entire production was much stronger because of our teamwork, and our students felt like they had accomplished something they couldn't have achieved on their own.

Collaboration provides us with opportunities to rejuvenate our singers and choral programs. It gives us a structure in which to be creative, to try things that are different, and to engage our singers and our audiences in new ideas. It allows us to accomplish what we may not be able to do on our own. It builds our communities by placing the focus on working together instead of competition. Every time I have been involved in a collaborative venture, it has been an incredibly energizing experience. I can't recommend it enough.

### **I Heart (Love) Sight Singing!**

Jane Vanderhoff  
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(Used with permission of Kansas' *Choral Range*)

Sight singing is the unbreakable principle, the sacred cow, the "must do," most days, anyway! It is the key to a singer's progression/growth; it breaks the artificial ceiling of rote singing; it gives students independence and musician-ship to get started. It is the key to their success!

In my classroom it takes many forms. I use different books from year to year or throughout the year; write exercises on the board, use portions of songs, have students sing in groups or alone, sing the exercise backwards, switch from line to line, sing portions of a song, have one group clap the beat while another counts/claps the rhythm, anything to keep the brain moving in a musical direction.

For beginning sight readers, I have assigned a pitch to a section (SSA or TTB usually), and they must sing their pitch as it occurs in the exercise, in rhythm. If there are more notes than sections, I sing the leftovers. If they sing on their own, they can choose any exercise in the book for me to sing on the spot. All of these ideas have been stolen from someone else!

As we move toward Common Core standards, documentation of student writing becomes more important. As a bellwork activity, I had my singers complete the following in three or more ways, including the good, the bad, and the