

# CHOR TEACH

Volume 12 Issue 3



**Practical Teaching Ideas  
for Today's Music Educator**

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# welcome

Welcome to ACDA's online magazine for choral director/music educators. The articles in this issue have been gleaned from state and division online and paper ACDA newsletters around the United States and from submissions by seasoned choral directors with topics germane to the profession.

ChorTeach, our name, is derived from the German word for chorus, chor. It is pronounced, as many of you know, like the word *core*. We hope *ChorTeach's* articles will be a breath of fresh air for you, provide you with new ideas or techniques that give you a lift, and help your singers reach the goals you and they have set. *ChorTeach* is designed for those who work with amateur singers at all levels.

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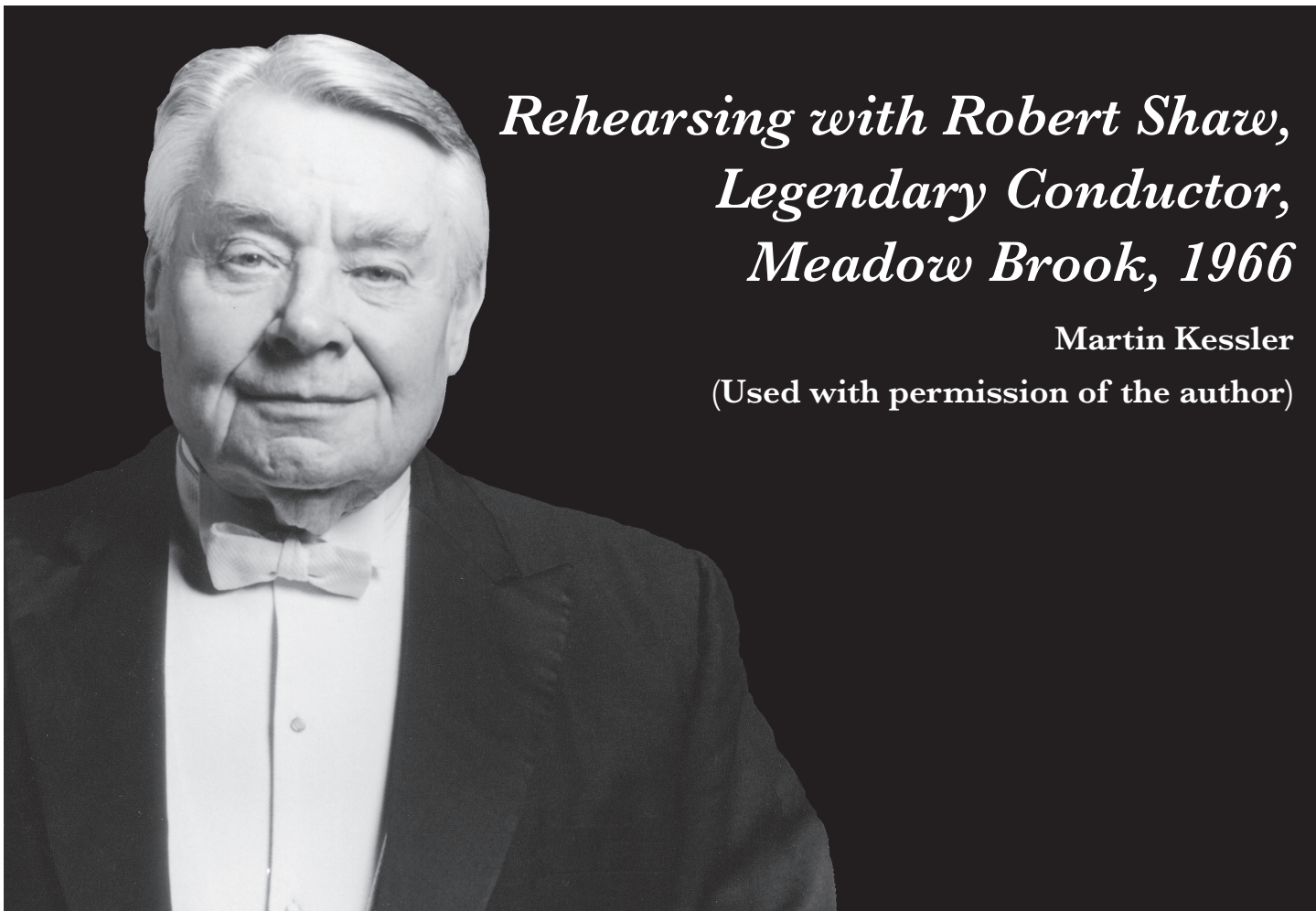


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## *Rehearsing with Robert Shaw, Legendary Conductor, Meadow Brook, 1966*

Martin Kessler

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It is 9:30 and every seat in the rehearsal hall is filled. Mr. Shaw insists on promptness from his hand-picked choir of high school all-star singers. Even adults can receive his thunderbolts for being late. He once addressed a tardy Cleveland Orchestra Chorus tenor with the following comment: “There are plenty of good reasons for a busy adult to miss a rehearsal, but really, how many good reasons are there for being five minutes late?”

The normal “buzz” of 148 adolescents in an enclosed space is not apparent this morning. The last few rehearsals for the upcoming performance of the Bach *B-minor Mass* have been tense. Shaw had reached a breaking point the previous day. His disappointment with the progress of the singers manifested itself quite unfairly into criticism of the rehearsal accompanist. Boies Whitcomb had worked with Shaw for years and normally could put up with his famous mood changes but recent attacks had taken on a savagery that even he could not withstand.

When an upset man with a magisterial power over language directs that power at one individual, the effect can be shocking. Whitcomb was reduced to tears, and Shaw, shaking with impotent rage at the universe and at himself, stormed out of the hall. The stunned choir sat for minutes

before the assistant conductor resumed the rehearsal. His first words were telling. “That wasn’t Mr. Whitcomb’s fault nor was it Mr. Shaw’s. It’s your fault for not being as devoted to this great work as he needs you to be.”

At this juncture, a week before the first orchestra dress rehearsal, some of my colleagues were disengaged, maybe even bored. For six weeks, they had spent a minimum of five hours a day on the Bach, mornings with Shaw and evenings in sectionals with his assistant, Clayton Krehbiel, or with section leaders like me. Some of us had large segments of the great masterwork memorized. But individual vocal mastery does not necessarily lead to a masterful choral performance. It was this that Shaw was stressing about.

At precisely 9:32, Robert Shaw takes the podium. A middle-aged man (Shaw) with no outstanding physical characteristics except for eyes so light-blue that they seem translucent, is dressed, as always, in khaki slacks, a blue turtleneck and a blue cotton overshirt. There is a white towel over his shoulder and he is carrying a satchel containing the orchestral scores and a baton case made from a cardboard violin string tube. His baton is wooden and unremarkable except that the grip is made of twisted rubber bands with which his nervous fingers are constantly playing as he talks.

We begin with stretching and—a Shaw specialty—group backrubs. From his seemingly infinite assortment of vocal warm-ups, the chorus begins to sing. His goals are always the same in warm-ups: rhythmic precision, pitch accuracy, and ferocity of diction and attack. Shaw rarely talks about tone; yet, all of his choirs sound alike, whether professional, such as the Robert Shaw Chorale, or this festival youth chorus. They sound like humans singing as if their lives depended on it. I have heard him get this sound in less than an hour with an ensemble with whom he has never previously worked.

Today, we are tackling the middle of the Bach Mass and working to the end of the huge Symbolum Nicenum sequence—the entire *Credo* text set in nine movements. Shaw begins with “Et incarnatus est,” a slow and relatively easy piece of Baroque word-painting. The incarnation by the Holy Spirit is depicted with a descending b-minor chord while the Virgin Mary is presented in chromatic rising lines.

Shaw conducts every minute of every rehearsal as if it were a performance. His beat is at once graceful and muscular. His cues and cut-offs are crisply choreographed. His head is cocked to the left as if he is listening with his right ear only. He is sweating profusely, and his eyes are closed in an expression of concentration. After a read-through, he says, “Why do you sing so much better when the music is fast, loud, and technical? Right now, your descending chords are almost a quarter-tone flat, and the rhythm is mush.”

To correct the intonation problem, he has us sing the music *a cappella* and asks that we end a half-tone sharp. Even with a roomful of prospective conservatory voice majors, such a request is a challenge. It is a challenge to our collective musicality and indirectly, an exercise in team-building to our singers. After all, no group of section leaders could force that many voices to go sharp. Shaw’s message becomes clear. No group of section leaders can keep a chorus from going flat either. Intonation is every singer’s responsibility.

For the flaccid rhythm that he perceived, he has us sing the section without text, singing on eighth-note counts throughout the triple meter—one-and-two-and-three-and etc. While in some ways counter to the expressivity of the original, this gives the music a pulse, an almost dance-like inner life. When he asks us to sing the section again like a performance, the difference is astounding. Every singer is now thinking on multiple levels and trying as hard as possible to please a demanding maestro. This is the essence of the Shaw sound—passionate, totally committed precision.

The next movement might be the western canon’s most

perfect 53 measures of sacred musical art, the *Crucifixus*. Perhaps because of the difficulties he encountered in getting a worthy performance out of the previous slow, quiet movement, Shaw begins with a homily.

“When we sing *piano*, the only thing that should be *piano* is the volume.” (He towels off his drenched face and head. He continues). “The rhythm is *forte*, the diction is *forte*, the intonation is *forte*, and the intensity is *forte*.” (His fingers play with the rubber bands on his baton, perhaps to keep his hands from shaking. He continues). “Piano singing is *forte* singing through a clenched mind.”

This is an image worthy of his old drinking buddy, Dylan Thomas. A recent biography places Shaw in the White Horse Tavern the night Mr. Thomas drank himself to death. Anyhow, it works. Our *Crucifixus* is nearly flawless, although not an ideal performance in my view.

Shaw conducts this movement in a trudging six-beat pattern, as if the repeating ground bass were penitential steps to Calvary. But there is an irony in doing the movement this slowly. If one chooses a slightly faster tempo, the beat becomes the three *lento* half-notes instead of the six *moderato* quarter notes, thus, the movement’s heartbeat slows by speeding up its pulse.

The last movement on this morning’s agenda is the *Et resurrexit*. Bach has planned this to be a piece of musical theatre to reflect the textual drama. The last line of the *Crucifixus* is the only choral passage that is accompanied by the continuo alone--“He died, and was buried.” From this, the softest passage, the full orchestra explodes with the chorus singing the words, “and was resurrected.”

Shaw loves to explore physicality during his rehearsals and for this movement, he instructs each section to stand for its contrapuntal entrances. Whereas one might long for the gravitas of mature voices for the *Crucifixus*, this high-spirited music is perfectly suited to the roomful of young thoroughbreds. We sing and Shaw dances. His feet are never still; his shoulders shimmy; his arms swirl; his eyes sparkle with pure joy.

It is 12:00 noon, and the rehearsal ends with Shaw leaving the hall hastily without speaking to anyone. Even after the unbuttoned, almost bacchanalian pleasure of the last half hour of music making, he appears, in the words of the old spiritual’s paraphrase of Isaiah, to be “a man of great sorrows.”

Because I am on the outer edge of his inner circle, I am acquainted with some of these burdens. His marriage, long a formality maintained for the sake of family and position, was

coming apart. He considered himself an inadequate father to his daughter and suffers guilt pangs over this neglect. He is drinking too much and smoking too many cigarettes.

Also, Shaw has recently taken three professional gambles. He resigned as associate conductor and director of choruses with the Cleveland Orchestra to accept the music directorship of the Atlanta Symphony. He dissolved the celebrated (and lucrative) Robert Shaw Chorale, and, by becoming its director, he has staked his reputation on making the Meadow Brook School of Music the Tanglewood for national choral training. And then, there is the Bach.

Besides considering the Bach B-minor to be the single greatest work of musical art, Shaw always felt it was his signature piece. He took it on a world tour with the Robert Shaw Chorale, a first. He recorded it with the same forces for RCA Victor. An exhausted ensemble had put it on tape in a New York hotel ballroom just days after the tour ended. (According to legend, the Chorale needed to return the rented portable organ; hence, the haste). He programmed it for his last season in Cleveland, and it was the last major work he conducted at Carnegie Hall just months before his death.

Conducting it in his first year at the helm of the Meadow Brook School of Music with young voices, the Detroit Symphony, plus major soloists, and with critics invited was a huge risk. He could just as easily have assigned it to his crack adult chorus, but then, he wouldn't have been able to program the *War Requiem* for the same summer.

If the Bach was Shaw's Sistine Chapel, then Benjamin Britten's 1962 *War Requiem* was his *Guernica*. For the Bach, Shaw was part preacher and part pedagogue in rehearsals. For the Britten, he was all-dramaturge. In this most theatrical, most humanist, most word driven of major choral works, Shaw had found a vehicle for his deepest-held beliefs and possibly, for his most authentic artistic soul.

It is now 2:00 PM. The rehearsal hall has been reset for the adult festival chorus. Because Shaw is the most famous choral director in the world, he has attracted forty American choirmasters to the Meadow Brook Conducting Seminar to study with him. Many individuals are also professional singers. They, plus the thirty-odd adult voice majors at the school, make the core of this ensemble quit superb.

Shaw walks in, prompt as usual, and seemingly quite refreshed. He has changed his sweaty togs for identical dry ones, and his hair is still wet from a recent shower. His approach to this chorus is more collegial, less scolding in tone if not in content. He is constantly challenging our imagination and sometimes, our acting ability. Today's agenda is move-

ments II and III, the *Dies Irae* and the *Offertorium*. Comments/directions follow.

To the basses, one measure before 24, Shaw says to "Just whisper the last syllable, but it must be audible to the whole audience. Stage whisper-*issimo*." For the chromatic rising counterpoint (at measure 30), "This should sound like nausea rising in your throat. The end of the crescendo is a metaphoric vomit." To the women (at 43), "You should sound mechanical as if you were playing this on a xylophone instead of singing it. Don't play a xylophone, play a *people!*" To the men (at 45), he said it should be like "An obscene football cheer."

For the triple *piano Quam olim Abrahae* fugue (after 79), "Hiss all the sibilants. Be as snake-y as possible, especially the "s" at the beginning of "semini ejus. Folks, the soloists have just sung, "but the old man would not do so, but slew his son and half the seed of Europe, one by one. After that, how can you sing the Latin word for seed without it sounding like a curse?"

This extended moment is the black heart of Britten's masterpiece, in my opinion. He has paired Wilfred Owen's bitter retelling of the Abraham and Isaac parable with the original biblical promise of longevity for Abraham's lineage. Before the chorus' final fugue, Britten pulls off a brilliant *coup de theatre*. The boy choir is heard at a distance, singing a haunting stanza from the Latin Requiem text about sacrificial offerings.

They are the ghosts, not so much of the fallen combatants as of their never-to-be-conceived progeny. Against this, the two male soloists (stand-ins for a British soldier and his German counterpart) violently interject the last words of Owen's poem—*One by One*. Shaw reminds the choir that Europe lost one quarter of its male population between the ages of 20 and 40 in the trenches of World War I. He also reminds us that Wilfred Owen, whose poems stripped from battle any justification or glory, was himself, killed just days before the Armistice.

This is a taste of Shaw the storyteller, the moralist, the dramatist, the shaman, using the preparation of great music to heal the world through that most fundamental of human attributes, the voice. He doesn't expect the audience to hear all of the messages he has embedded in his rehearsals, but those messages will be written on his singers' hearts forever. **CT**

# *Developing Appropriate Teacher-Student Relationships*

*Micah Bland*

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The relationship between a student and a teacher is undoubtedly one of the most important aspects of any classroom environment. A positive teacher-student interaction allows a student to feel safe, understood, and significant. As music directors and educators, we have a distinct advantage when it comes to developing relationships with students. Students select music as their elective and are enrolled with the same teacher for multiple years. As a result, these positive relationships often have a lifelong effect on a student.

Educational research agrees that the relationship between a student and a teacher is of critical importance to a student's success in the classroom. Numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate the teacher-student relationship. Hamre and Pianta found a variety of predictions could be made based on the quality of a teacher-student relationship at the primary school level.<sup>1</sup> While positive relationships yielded beneficial student outcomes, negative relationships often predicted behavioral problems. Additional research by Roorda et al found that, "affective teacher-student relationships were associated with both a student's school engagement and achievement."<sup>2</sup>

While the vast majority of teacher-student relationships are positive, some can be emotionally or physically damaging. Sadly, current culture has desensitized many to this blemish on society. Films and television romanticize the idea of inappropriate relationships between teachers and students. In addition, inappropriate conduct by celebrities and politicians elicit a weekly news extravaganza.

While working in the public-school setting, it was a concern of mine to both protect myself from any appearance of impropriety, while still developing a positive and appropriate relationship with all my students. Considering the ever-increasing occurrences of inappropriate teacher-student relationships, it seemed prudent to discuss suggestions for appropriate connections between teachers and students. Although some suggestions in this article focus on methods for developing relationships between male teachers and female students, many of these suggestions are applicable for all genders.

## **Boundaries for Appropriate Interactions with Students**

In order to develop appropriate teacher-student relationships, clear boundaries must be established. No hugs! Acceptable physical contact includes high fives or handshakes.

Hugs are not inappropriate; however, female students may perceive this physical contact differently than a teacher. Some students might feel uncomfortable receiving a hug because they feel that the teacher is invading their personal space. Alternatively, some students may develop romantic feelings for a teacher and relish receiving hugs on an almost regular basis. Establishing a contact boundary makes it clear that you do not view students in a romantic way.

### Avoid Being Alone with Students

It is important to make the classroom a safe place for students. This often leads to students congregating in the music room before or after school. To remove yourself from a situation where you are alone with a student, make an excuse that requires both of you to leave the room. Another option is to be honest with the student and say, “I’m sorry, but I don’t find it appropriate to be alone with a student.”

Teachers may be required to work with students individually in private lessons. Ensure that there is a window that allows others to observe the private lesson. Avoid providing lessons when others are not around, such as before or after school and on weekends.

When waiting for students to be picked up by family members after an event, be aware of where the school’s security cameras are located and stand in view of these cameras. This provides added protection for you when left waiting alone with one student.

### Avoid Interacting with Students through Electronic Media

Social media outlets have greatly improved a director’s ability to plan and communicate with his or her classes or organizations. While a fine tool, you must be cautious and

#### Boundaries for Appropriate Interactions with Students

- No hugs!
- Avoid being alone with students of any gender.
- Avoid interacting with students through electronic media.
- Minimize encouraging comments about appearance.
- Keep all conversations on appropriate topics.
- Be aware of and supportive of students who have been emotionally or physically abused.

never send private messages to students through any electronic media. Instead, incorporate group messaging services like *Remind* or *Group Me*, and avoid applications that provide students with your personal information or allow for private messaging services, such as *WhatsApp* and *Facebook*.

### Minimize Encouraging Comments about Dress or Appearance

Comments such as, “I like the new haircut,” or “you look very nice in your concert dress.” This may be construed as flirtatious in nature, or worse, become persistent and inappropriate over time. Save these comments for large groups in order to avoid the perception that these comments are directed at individual students.

### Keep all Conversation Focused on Appropriate Topics

It is important to discuss difficult topics with students in order to develop their emotional intelligence. An ability to intelligently and peacefully debate topics such as hate crimes or politics is an important skill one needs to develop. However, as students begin to trust you, it is possible for them to share intimate details of their personal life. It is wonderful when students feel comfortable opening up, but you should remain cautious about the topics discussed. There are many topics a teacher and student should never discuss. In your interaction with students, avoid topics such as gossip, sexual innuendos, degrading jokes, and your personal struggles with co-workers, parents, or other students.

Finally, be aware of female students who have been emotionally or physically abused by male role models in the past. These students may often express a great deal of distrust for male teachers. Be prepared for this possibility and diligently work at the student’s pace to develop a sense of trust and safety.

### Developing Relationships

It is common in today’s culture to encounter students who do not have a positive male role model in their lives. Some students may come from broken homes without a father; others may have fathers who fail to provide them with the attention they deserve. It is for these reasons that all male educators should act as a positive role model both



for young men and women. The following are strategies to consider when developing relationships with students.

#### *Regularly Pray for Your Students*

For those directors with religious affiliations or beliefs, fervently pray for all of your students. Pray for opportunities to make a difference in their lives. Pray for the right words to encourage and discipline appropriately. Especially pray for those students you find difficult so that your attitude might change towards them. Once you prepare your heart and mind, you will be able to develop effective relationships with them.

#### *Stand and Greet Students at the Door Every Day*

While this suggestion might sound cliché, it is, in my opinion, the starting point for all interactions with students. This action sends a message to students that you are glad to see them and have been eagerly awaiting their arrival.

An action very often neglected is standing at the door when students are dismissed. This action provides the teacher with one final opportunity to encourage a student, allowing him or her to leave the classroom feeling successful, excited, and eager to return the next day.

#### *Give Students Your Full Attention*

It is deeply meaningful to a student to receive your full and undivided attention. It tells him/her that they are important to you. No matter how important a project may be that you are working on, stop what you are doing, smile, and look that student in the eyes. Music directors are often busy people, but our priority should be the students. Without them, we wouldn't have ensembles to direct.

It is easy in the fast-paced environment in which a director finds herself/himself to rudely dismiss a student who is trying to talk with you. For example, a student wants to talk with you about the upcoming trip at the beginning of class. Try your best to be polite, smile, and say, "I'm sorry, I'm trying to start class; may we talk later?" This reaction is vastly different from your saying "Not now, go to your seat!"

Having given students your full attention, listen carefully to what they have to say. Regardless of how insignificant the conversation might be to you, students deserve to be

heard. After the conversation, remember what he or she said, recalling this information in future interactions. Remembering what a student said validates the desire to be accepted and understood.

#### *Excessively Encourage Students*

Take every opportunity to encourage students, building up their self-esteem. According to the *New York Times*, a 1991 study found that "many girls emerge from adolescence with a poor self-image, relatively low expectations about life, and much less confidence in themselves and their abilities than boys."<sup>3</sup> As male role models, encouraging these young women greatly enhances their idea of self-worth and strengthens a teacher-student relationship.

As educators, we must provide criticism for musical improvement and behavioral correction. Try to provide criticism with specific pedagogical techniques, avoiding general comments that may impact students' idea of self-worth.

#### *Be Purposeful with Your Speech*

Avoid generic conversations that lack any student individuality. In other words, talk with students about specific things in their lives. Ask them about recent extracurricular activities. Take an interest in them as individuals.

### **Developing Relationships**

- Regularly pray for your students.
- Stand and greet students at the door every day.
- Give them your full attention; they deserve it!
- Listen to what they have to say.
- Excessively encourage.
- Be purposeful in your speech.
- Focus your attention on group leaders.
- Have compassion.

## Developing Appropriate Teacher-Student Relationships

### *Focus Your Attention on Group Leaders*


It is difficult to develop meaningful relationships with all students in a short amount of time. Begin connecting with students by focusing on the leaders within the group. Focusing on group leaders is also an important tactic for recruiting ensemble members. Patrick Freer states that “positive peer pressure is a prominent factor as to why students join choir.”<sup>4</sup>

The majority of students join an ensemble based on the comments or actions of their friends. In the same way, developing a relationship with group leaders will likely expedite the relationship process with the rest of the group. At the very least, the group followers will have a positive opinion of you based on the comments of group leaders.

Upon connecting with the group leaders, make sure to divide your time wisely between groups and individuals. Do your best to spend time with all students. This helps avoid the appearance of favoritism or preferential treatment.

While all these suggestions are important, the most critical relationship for building quality is compassion. Having a genuine interest and concern for all students creates an unmistakable aura that radiates from the heart of a teacher.

One of the most iconic individuals whom I believe exemplifies this aura of compassion is the late Fred Rogers. Every episode of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* displayed a sense of peace and compassion for viewers. Mr. Rogers once said, “The greatest thing that we can do is to help somebody know that they’re loved and capable of loving.”<sup>5</sup>

In all that you do, through your actions, speech, and attitude, take every opportunity to let students know that they are loved. Always remember, you have the power to change lives through the relationships that you develop. 

com/1991/01/09/education/little-girls-lose-their-self-esteem-way-to-adolescence-study-finds.html.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Freer, “Technique Tuesday 010: Hacking choir retention and recruitment, with Patrick Freer,” Choir Ninja with Ryan Guth, Podcast audio, Nov. 10, 2015, <http://ryanguth.com/tt010/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* DVD, directed by Morgan Neville (Tremolo Productions, 2018).

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bridget K. Hamre and Robert C. Pianta, “Early Teacher-Child Relationships and the Trajectory of Children’s School Outcomes through Eighth Grade,” *Child Development* 72, no. 2 (2001): 634.

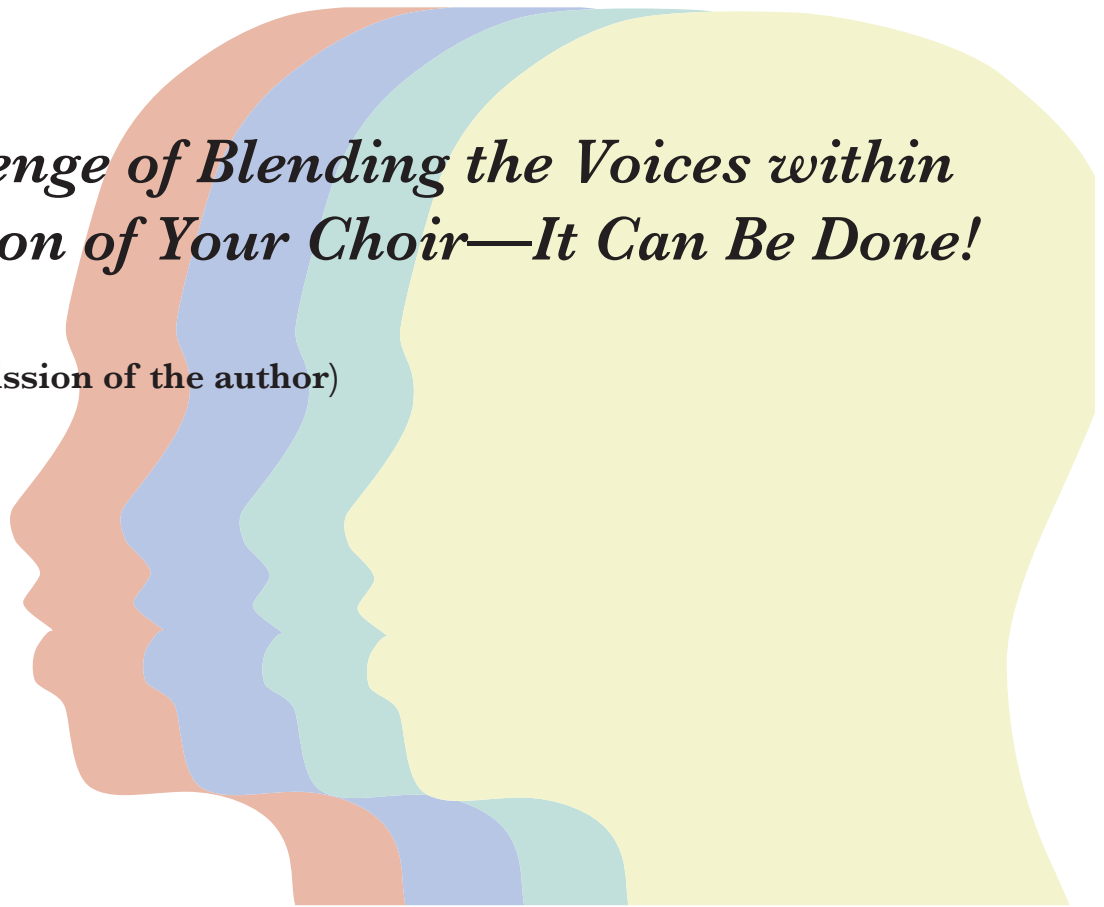
<sup>2</sup> Debora L. Roorda et al., “The Influence of Affective Teacher-Student Relationships on Students’ School Engagement and Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Approach,” *Review of Educational Research* 81, no. 4 (2011): 515.

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Daley, “Little Girls Lose Their Self-Esteem Way to Adolescence, Study Finds,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 1991, May 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/09/education/little-girls-lose-their-self-esteem-way-to-adolescence-study-finds.html>.

# *The Challenge of Blending the Voices within Each Section of Your Choir—It Can Be Done!*

**Terry J. Barham**

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Have you struggled occasionally with getting the soprano or alto voices (or tenors or basses) to blend while rehearsing? For many years, I did! Then I attended a workshop given many years ago by Weston Noble (Luther College) in which he offered a specific approach to achieving blend within a section. Along with a few other choral directors, I volunteered, with Mr. Noble's gentle directions, to try his approach, and it changed, for the remainder of my teaching career, how I was able to meet the challenge faced by many college/university choral directors. It will work for high school directors, too!

At the beginning of every school year, plan on using half of a rehearsal (two full rehearsals for the four sections—soprano, alto, tenor, and bass) for each section to go through the process described below. Tell your singers exactly what you will be doing before you actually begin. Have a piece of paper available to write down the exact order of voices in each section—who stands next to whom within each section. Your students will sometimes be surprised by their singing partners, but they will be happy with how their voices complement each other.

After some months, some of your music majors, since they take voice lessons, may come to you and ask for going through the process again because they no longer blend with their initial singing partner. That is natural. All of us know that voices change/grow over time.

Before you begin the process of hearing all of the singers in pairs, teach everyone the melody in Example 1. It's a relatively easy melody, a hymn tune.

Within every section of the choir, decide which singer will be the "model." That "model" should be a singer who sings with ease, whose timbre (color) you like, whose vibrator, if it exists, is natural and unforced, and who handles the registers with relative ease.

Once you have chosen your model singer (this is not a personality contest!), ask one singer at a time from each section to sing with the model-voice person that you have chosen from each section. The results may surprise you. Some voices clash and clearly do not work well together. Other voices blend together with seeming ease. Feel free to ask the two singers if they like the way their voices blend together.

Once you have found a voice that fits well with the model voice in a section, have your model sit down. Then a third person from the section sings the hymn with the second singer. Everyone remaining in that section sings with singer number two until you and they find an agreeable blend with the second person. A third singer will certainly be found. Continue the process until all singers in that section have sung. Of course, you have been writing down the names (in each section) in the order in which their voices fit together.

I think this process is one of finding timbers that fit to-

## *The Challenge of Blending the Voices within each Section of your Choir—It Can Be Done!*

gether, that complement each other. Individual singers will get acquainted in this process, and the choir will grow closer, I believe.

Occasionally, you will find a voice that does not seem to fit with any other voice in the section. I usually put this singer at the end of the section row and try to help him or her understand the need for all voices working together to achieve certain goals, like blend.

Here's the melody everyone should use to help him or her find a partner. After teaching this beautiful melody using the piano, I would not use the keyboard with each singing pair but expect singers to sing it a cappella so that I can listen more carefully. I believe you and your singers will find this process to be very rewarding!

### Example 1

My God how won - der - - ful Thou art, Thy ma - jes - - ty how  
5  
bright, how beau - ti - ful Thy mer - cy seat, in depths of burn - ing light.



## *When We Teachers Walk Through the Door— New Teachers, Take Note*

Nicole Lamartine

(Used with permission of NW-ACDA)

As I was teaching a conducting lesson last week, we deconstructed the rehearsal segment the student had led in front of one of my choirs. Tamara said, “I just didn’t feel good, and I had too much going on in my head from all of my classes, and we had a performance that afternoon... and...and...and...” She stopped, looked down, and then so earnestly looked me in the eyes. Tamara asked, “When you are having a bad day, how do you always have energy, and how are you always positive for rehearsals?”

I stammered and didn’t know what to say. I had never thought about how I mentally or physically prepare for teaching every day, especially if I don’t feel good, have frustrations, or feel overwhelmed. It is very much in my nature to “suck it up, buttercup.” I had never thought through the preparations and choices I make to put me in a productive and positive mental state.

The preparation is most likely different for introverts and extroverts, and I write specifically from an introvert perspective. I am writing this article for Tamara, and I’ve tried to put on paper some of the things that have helped me on those days like I believe she had experienced. I hope these ideas might help you, too, in your teaching.

### **Practice**

Preparation to walk through the door takes practice. It is a choice. I’m not quite sure when I learned that what I bring into the rehearsal is what I get out of it. It takes a lot of dedication to commit to only bringing in what we want. All decisions begin with a choice to accomplish our goal for the day. In making a choice, we begin to practice what we want to be every day, as a person, as a teacher, and as a musician. Choose to practice those qualities.

Preparation can begin in your office, in your car on the way to work, or wherever you can find focus and excitement about what you will accomplish in the class. It can also be as you walk to the classroom, unlock the door, and greet the students. Most importantly, it can also be part of the collective warm-up process for the ensemble.

### **It’s Not about You, but Be You**

Remember that this rehearsal is not about you. As soon as we release self-consciousness, self-judgment, and perceived student judgment, we can be true and honest humans. I believe people respond to that. Our students can see through

our trying to be a certain way. Love yourself for what you bring to the rehearsal. You will learn from the students what you can be. There is no need to take yourself so seriously. Yes, hold yourself and your students to high standards, but be you!

### **Acknowledge Each Person**

Enter the room with love, not with an agenda or rehearsal plan or emotional baggage from a prior meeting. Love. People feel it when you look into their eyes. It is a gift. Give it freely. A high-five, a handshake, fist bump, or elbow tap acknowledges a true greeting to each individual.

### **Breathe before You Open the Door**

Take deep breaths, three in a row before opening the door, even when students are asking questions as you take those breaths.

### **Live an Example for Students Even if You Feel Goofy**

Know that you influence someone's day. Why not choose to make it a great one by living the example? Who cares if you feel goofy? You might make someone smile. A student will remember this rehearsal for one reason some day.

### **Allow Your Cup to be Filled**

Give. Give. Give. It is by giving that we receive. When we feel like we are completely drained, physically or emotionally, that's when it is hardest to give of ourselves in rehearsals. I've found that when all I need is to be filled, the door to that fulfillment opens when I give something to my students first—a smile, a moment of laughter, a beautiful moment of music, a realization of text meaning. Be open and allow your own cup to be filled.

### **Do Something Amazing Every Day with the People who ARE There**

Make the best music you can with the people in front of you at any given moment. This adage I got from Jonathan Talberg, and it has served me well. There will always be students missing from rehearsal because of illness or an activity or sports conflicts, or ditching. We are there to do something

amazing every day—for the people who ARE there.

### **Energy**

Create an expectation of energy. Each conductor/teacher/leader will operate best with the energy that is most fulfilling to that person. For me, I feel uncomfortable when there is silence as my students enter the room. I would rather see, experience, and be a part of their interactive energy. If I feel that the energy is too low, I bring it up with physical activity (for my Statesmen Choir, for instance) or interactive activities like “tell three people why you appreciate them in this choir.”

### **Let it go**

Have a mantra. When you don't feel like you can make it through the hour, the afternoon, or the day, tell yourself that you can because we teachers must be the best possible self for our students. I often find myself with the soundtrack of “Let it go” from Frozen running through my head.

### **Smile**

Smile, even when you think you can't. Let it begin on the outside to become true on the inside.

### **Is it a “You” Problem**

Choose a positive response. “So, when IS the concert?” “I don't have that piece.” “I can't see you.” After providing significant information, establishing a procedure for music distribution or borrowing for the day, and wearing my high heels, it is easy for me to get irked at these questions and statements. There seems to be a sense of entitlement with students recently in which they feel as if because they were not told personally, hand-held through a process, or if someone is blocking their view, that it is somehow my problem, not theirs. A dear friend of mine (in tech, not teaching) said he would respond to a student by saying “that sounds like a you problem.” At first, I was surprised at his candor, but I've been able to take his statement and transform it for my conversations with the students. “You have the ability and a choice to change that, and I invite you to do so.”

### **But How Did They Feel?**

People will forget what you did, but they'll never forget how you made them feel (Maya Angelou). Feelings and emotions are transparent and transferrable. I try to walk into every rehearsal with my best emotional goals for the atmosphere in the room: joy, acceptance, excellence, and openness. And it always comes to pass that great music is made when I hold these atmospheric goals in mind. Over and over, students will recount stories. "Remember that time when..." with descriptions of what they felt at the time. Very rarely do they include the title of the work we were singing or the beautifully-tuned chord or a perfect vowel. We remember and learn deeply from emotions.

### **Connect**

Look your students in the eye, every individual. During the front matter of the rehearsal, scan the ensemble. By setting a standard of appropriate connection, students are better able to connect with others and engage fully in a rehearsal. Reach the tender souls in your ensemble.

### **Engagement/Purpose**

For whom or for what are you singing today? This is my mantra. It came to me after one of those really trying rehearsals where I just wanted to throw in the towel. I asked myself this question, and then the next day in rehearsal, I asked the students. Thinking they would hold their answers only in their minds, I was surprised when a shy voice offered, "my mom." Then others chimed in until almost everyone in the room had said something. The music we then created had utmost engagement and purpose.

### **Take in What You Need.**

#### **Let Go of What You Don't Need**

Breathe together. I'll often lead breathing exercises that are meant to focus the mind and body, but sometimes this exercise is really for me. More and more, students are plagued by depression, anxiety, and insomnia. We must teach them how to clear the mind and to switch gears for a place of creativity in which they get to make choices and are not told what to do by a screen. We should breathe with this phrase: "Take in what you need from the universe and let go of what you don't."

### **If We Choose, We Are in Control**

Have to versus choose to. When we exchange "have to" for "choose to", wondrous things can happen! The simple act of acknowledging that we have a choice to walk into the classroom or not produces a great sense of ownership and power. When we "have to" do something, we sound victimized and small. If we choose, then we are in control, and that is a feeling that is essential for running rehearsals, I believe.

### **Notice the Sparkles**

Wear clothes that make you happy. I have a pair of children's pink-sequined flats. I wouldn't normally wear these crazy shoes, but sometimes I do because they simply make me smile. As I walk through the building to rehearsal, I watch my feet sparkling back and forth across the floor and that reminds me that we have moments everyday where we can choose to notice the little things or not. When I notice my sparkles, it makes me happy, and I feel ready for rehearsal. I have various bright colored or printed clothes, and I wear them when I wake up with that heavy feeling in the morning—that feeling of how will I make it through this day? Feeling happy on the outside helps you to feel happy on the inside.

### **Keep Love Notes**

Keep a file of love notes. If you don't already have one, begin a file or keep a box in which you keep those special notes, cards, and mementos from students that remind you why this profession is so amazing. Remind yourself, before teaching a class, of the impact you have on people's lives and why that is important. My Collegiate Chorale writes notes on paper plates at the end of each semester (this idea came from Leslie Guelker-Cone). Each singer wears a paper plate tied with a string on his or her back. The choir members take turns writing something special about that person on that person's plate. I treasure these comments, and I know the students do, too.

### **Yes, You Love that Piece of Music, but...**

Rehearse and perform the music that you love. Look forward to it! When I am excited about the music, it's like a volcano of excitement. My students laugh at me because I love our various works so much. But sometimes you must have a divorce with a work, and that's OK. The piece that

once spoke to you deeply does not connect with the students, or it is too challenging, etc. You still love the music, but it is not the right time in life for you and that music to be together. Avoid the struggle. Put it aside. It is not an indication of failure.

### **Three Rules to Consider**

Show up. Tell the truth. Don't be burdened by the outcome. These three rules come from Craig Hella Johnson. I scribbled them on the inside cover of a piece of music I was singing with Conspirare many years ago, and they have stuck with me. Being present, physically, is half the battle of preparing for rehearsal. Be there because your students need you. Honesty in music making and expression come from a place of vulnerability. This is crucial to the demonstration of our humanness. The product is so much less important than the process, in my opinion.

The journey begins every day when we choose to walk through the door! 