

CHORTEACH

Volume 12

Issue 2



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

Available online at acda.org/ChorTeach

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.

If you have written an article and believe it would be of interest to *ChorTeach* readers, send it to Terry Barham, barhamte@gmail.com, in .doc format. If you have read an article from an ACDA newsletter or website you think would be beneficial to *ChorTeach* readers, send it to barhamte@gmail.com or abumgarner@acda.org.



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Middle School Choir is Group Therapy

Ailisa Newhall (Used with permission of Washington ACDA's *Unison*)



If you have ever taught middle school choir, you know everything is a huge dramatic deal inside a tiny bubble created by these emerging adults. It makes the emotion of the music exhilarating. It makes every other aspect of life something of a crazy roller coaster ride. One student told me, “The only reason I even get on that bus every morning to come to school is because I know I get to go to choir. It’s my daily group therapy.” Sometimes the big deals really are big deals.

Last fall, one of my beloved seventh-grade choir students passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. About ten minutes before my sixth-period choir class on a Friday afternoon, I was told the horrible news. It was not yet public, but I was given permission to let the fifty-five members of her choir know before they went home for the weekend and heard about it on TV or social media. This was one of the most tragic moments of my career.

As I watched my students deflate into sadness, confusion, and despair, I knew this was a time to let music heal them.

This was a time to teach them how to use music as their emotional outlet and therapy. I told them that we were going to honor our friend by composing a song together.


We started by making a big poster. Everyone wrote to our friend as though we were writing in her school yearbook. We wrote what we loved about her. We wrote stories. We wrote all the things we wanted to say to her and wouldn’t be able to say. Over the next week, we added to our poster as we progressed through our grief.

We began to listen and discuss keys and chord progressions. We played around with different accompaniment instrument possibilities and styles. The kids migrated to the popular music style that currently spoke to them: key of C, simple piano accompaniment with cello.

Once our poster was full, we began to circle phrases and ideas that stood out to us. We circled things that were poetic or things that seemed to be a theme. I played through our chord progression for our chorus over and over, and the kids began to sing some of the phrases to different melodies. A

few students sang their melody; others tried some variations. Finally, the students had created the chorus. I recorded and notated it.

We used the same process with the verses and the bridge. Once we had created the song, the kids started making up harmony, and we added a cello part. Students learned the piano, cello, melody, and harmony parts, and we performed the song at a tribute concert to our friend. We then went to the recording studio and professionally recorded the song so that all of the students, family members, and people affected by the tragedy could listen to the song and be comforted.

Dealing with such a loss and then creating this piece of music to honor our friend made a strong and lasting bond for all the students. It created a tight and caring choir family that took care of each other inside and outside of rehearsal. I had countless emails from parents and communication from counselors and administration officials praising the project. There were so many individual stories from students, how he or she was coping with the loss and how they were surviving because of this very special song. It became the answer to the question we all had that day, “How are we going to survive without her?” The answer? Music. 

The Missing Musical Element in Rehearsals and Performances: Humanity

Lynda Marshall

(Used with permission of Illinois' Podium)



For those of you preparing to enter the teaching profession, you are spending time learning how to prepare lesson plans, develop classroom management strategies, integrate technology into your classroom, work with special needs populations, and incorporate assessment into performance-based courses. That is the short list. For those of you beginning the school year for the tenth, twentieth, or thirtieth time, you are working on those same important items plus contemplating the implementation of new strategies!

Looking back, my first day in the classroom was particularly memorable. Flooded with many emotions one might have when beginning something on your own without a co-operating teacher or supervisor, I felt fear, excitement, anxiety, joy, confusion, anticipation, awkwardness, and triumph. Did I mention my first day on the job was two days before a holiday break, and I was the fourth teacher the choir had experienced that year?

One moment will forever be frozen in my memory. After my long lecture about rules and expectations, I asked the class if there were any questions. One brave student in the back row raised his hand, and in the most “I’m-too-cool-for-

this-lady” voice, looked me in the eye and asked, “Are you going to stay here, or not?”

I cannot remember how I responded. I only remember thinking I might not make it out alive. I wish I had a time-travel machine to take me back to that first day where my veteran-teacher self could have an intervention with my first-year teacher self. I believe many veteran teachers would share the same sentiment.

My veteran-teacher self would share two important pieces of advice with my I-know-everything-first-year teacher self.

- Teach the human being in your class, not just the music.
- Make your classroom feel like the safest place in the entire school.

Perhaps you read the short list above and are thinking, “Duh.” Or, perhaps you are teaching music to robots. Let me explain. I have always considered myself one of the luckiest people in the universe because I have an opportunity to impact young peoples’ lives every day. All of us wake up. All

of us have good and bad days. All of us have emotions. All of us experience life. We have these things in common. Yet, so many people struggle to find meaning and common ground in many areas of life.

The choral rehearsal is a place where we have the luxury of expressing music through words. I believe it is not just about shaping the best vowels and having a wonderfully balanced and blended ensemble. It is equally important, if not more important, to understand the meaning of texts and convey that meaning to listeners.


Honestly, I would like to go back and slap my first-year teacher self as I methodically planned every lesson, concept, rhythmic figure, note, and solfege syllable and on and on. Do I think all of those concepts are important? Absolutely!

There must be high standards and expectations in the choral classroom; however, I left out the most important part in my planning: the human beings in my choirs. It took several years for me to realize that regardless of the age of the singer, no matter how well constructed the music might be, if emotion and the understanding of texts is missing, so is the music.

If I can create an environment in my choral classroom that is focused on allowing for mistakes, vulnerability, encouraging confidence, building relationships, and the singers supporting each other as a team, then my chances for creating beautiful music will increase exponentially.

So much has changed in our society, schools, and homes since I began teaching over twenty years ago. I feel it is our duty to serve our young people to the best of our abilities, whether it be in a school, church, or community choir setting. Simply put, we can impact people in a way no one else can, and we can back that up with scientific evidence from research on brain development and learning.

The arts were part of our ancient cultures long before there was science or math. The brain's ability to respond emotionally to music is connected to biology and culture. The biological aspect is supported by the fact that the brain contains specialized areas that respond primarily to music, and these areas are able to stimulate the limbic system, provoking an emotional response.¹

I want to challenge all of you to start thinking about the impact you have on your ensemble members and your audience. Be creative, be brave, be vulnerable, and be human. Who shall set a limit to the influence of a human being?² 

Recommended Resources

- ¹ David A. Sousa, *How the Brain Learns*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Inc., 2017).
- ² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Power." Emerson Central, <https://emersoncentral.com/texts/the-conduct-of-life/power/> Accessed August 15, 2019.

Recruiting and Retention Ideas for Beginning High School Choral Directors

Lorraine Lynch

(Used with permission of New Jersey ACDA)

I hope the following outline gives you ideas for recruiting and retention in your choral program. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at lorrainealynch@gmail.com.

Basic goals/concepts at all levels:

Good quality builds numbers

- High tone quality and solid vocal technique
- Solid intonation
- Excellent phrasing and musicianship
- Quality literature appropriate for the level of singers
- Consistent rehearsal discipline and concert etiquette
- Solid and consistent warm-up regimen

Connections from school to school:

Communication builds numbers

- Teacher connection with elementary and middle grades
- Teacher connection with middle to high school grades

- Teacher connection between high school levels
- Communication between vocal teachers

Teaching concepts through performance literature

- Make sure the music you choose is appropriate for age and level, varied in style, and is of high quality.

Importance of balance in choirs

- The recruitment of and maintenance of both TB singers and SA singers in your SATB choir is important.
- Work at getting to know all the eighth graders in the school.
- Look for new eighth graders who might enjoy a music elective.
- Work for balance at select levels.
- The emphasis on curricular choirs is first.

Identify goals to school principal

- Explain why you need quantity and quality to develop excellence.
- Identify how he or she can help you. Ask for help!
- Identify if there is a fine arts requirement.
- Identify if the choral program meets state core curriculum requirements.


Role of student leadership

- Leaders insure continued choral enrollment from level to level. Place ownership on leaders to keep students signed up.
- Recruitment push from eighth to ninth grade and from sixth to seventh, fifth to sixth including visits, letters, concerts, promoting attendance at concerts at different levels plus sibling and friend connections.
- Create a legacy and traditions with alumni e-mails, opportunities to serve, MC concerts.

Emphasis on excellence in curricular choirs first

- All students must be in a curricular choir in order to participate in the extras: jazz, show, men's and women's choir plus madrigals.
- If a student is singing well in curricular choirs, all extra-curricular extensions will benefit as a by-product.
- If vocal technique is taught thoroughly in curricular choirs, a change in style for extra-curricular jazz and show choir music will be an easier task. Solid vocal technique should transfer through all styles.

Publicize each success as the choral program grows

- Keep track of and publicize how many students you attract and enroll each year.
- Work at getting news articles in local newspapers.
- Have students sing at public events, community meetings, and board meetings.
- Have a parent assigned to publicize the choral program and its concerts. 



Selecting, Adapting, Writing, and Publishing Music for the Middle School Choir

Emily Crocker

(Used with permission of the author)



“My choir has one tenor and two basses. Neither of them is confident enough to carry their own section against the sopranos and altos. What should I do?”

“Looking for an upbeat, mostly unison piece for my sixth-grade choir—nothing cheesy, can contain a few splits but very minimal and easy. Multicultural would be cool, but I’m having a hard time finding something without extra instrumentation.”

“I’m in my first year at a school, and I have no music budget. Also, my digital piano is missing keys. What do I do?”

Unbalanced choirs, the perfect work for a beginning choir, no budget—these are the themes we often see on social media. One thing has changed from decades ago when I started teaching is that the middle school choral director has many options for choosing repertoire. Composers and publishers offer specialized series for middle school ensembles. ACDA and other organizations now offer honor choir opportunities and repertoire recommendations. If anything, it can seem like there are too many choices.

This article is adapted from a session I presented at the

2019 ACDA National Conference in Kansas City. The four areas of concentration—selecting, adapting, writing, and publishing—are related, but they are all rooted in the basic elements of music selection.

Selecting Music

Know your singers and their voices. Range and tessitura should be appropriate for the singers’ ages and development.

- Emphasize basic vocal technique. Music should encourage healthy vocal production.
- Teach music literacy. Students should sight read daily, using a sequential method.
- Plan well-balanced programs. Students should sing music of all styles, periods, and genres.
- Determine the most appropriate ensemble groupings for your singers. Group students appropriately in ensembles best suited to encourage success based on school and district policies. These may include treble voices,

the emerging low voice choir, and mixed voices.

- Get the singers in the door and get them singing. My very first published piece of music was “The Drunken Sailor,” published by Jenson Publications (HL #42304012) in 1980. Some current opinions have said that this song is not appropriate for children to sing. In 1979, my sixth graders loved it when I went to the piano and played a loud D minor boom-chuck while they sang rowdily “Hooray and up she rises!”

These kids signed up and sang and stayed in the choir. From that point, they trusted me and sang whatever I put in front of them. Not every first work you choose needs to be “The Drunken Sailor,” but over time and with the help of trusted composers and colleagues, I began to notice certain qualities in the entry-level works (and beyond) that were most successful with students. They often led to continued participation in singing.

Music for your singers should be:

- Well-crafted
- Use appropriate ranges
- Employ smooth voice-leading
- Contain interesting vocal lines
- Have a melodic vocal part for emerging low-voice singers. Treble parts can contain a bit more complexity and occasional divisi or descants.

Text

Texts may vary widely from serious to whimsical, but it is important that they be authentic and not perceived as too babyish. Try these guidelines:

- A certain level of sophistication or intellectual challenge
- Poetic texts
- Languages other than English

- Diverse cultures
- Folksongs
- Romantic love if in third person or general in content
- Broadway-type music such as “Seasons of Love” or “The Greatest Showman” are often more successful than the latest pop hit.

Texture

Textures should be varied and may be either accompanied or a cappella. Since students’ voices are light and developing, a cappella music works better with call-and-response phrases, closed position harmonies, and unison lines. The addition of percussion or other student-played instruments provides interest and motivation. Accompanied songs should not double voices or get in the way of voice parts. The accompaniment should be interesting and be able to stand alone. It should support and complement vocal lines.

Adapting Music

No matter how carefully we choose music for our middle school singers, the reality is that their voices will evolve and develop over time. Because of voice change, we may not have the same choir at the end of the term (or the end of next week!) as we currently have. Directors should closely monitor singers’ voices and be willing to:

- Transpose
- Double parts
- Pencil in alternate pitches
- Pivot between parts
- Make cuts in voice parts
- Write alternate harmonies
- Lower the key of the song

Writing Music

As you understand your choir's unique character and situation, perhaps you can't find the right music for them. Maybe you have a theme or a motive or a chord progression that speaks to you. You may want to try your hand at writing music. If so, try to keep your choir's vocal abilities and strengths in mind as you compose.

Copyrighted music

Check publishing rights and get permission first. Most publishers have information on their website regarding obtaining permission. Keep in mind that whatever arrangement you choose does not belong to you. Any arrangement is a derivative work that belongs to the copyright holder.

Public domain

Folksongs are not always folksongs! Check your sources and do the necessary research. If you are setting a poetic text, be sure the poem is in the public domain. If not, contact the poet (if living) or the poet's estate. Be prepared to pay a fee for the poem.

Original words and music

If you have the interest and the skill, this can be an immensely fulfilling process; however, if you are writing specifically for your middle school choir, avoid a text that is too personal. You may love your spouse to the moon and back, but having your middle school choir sing about that love might create a certain "ick" factor you want to avoid.

Crafting your music

All the criteria for selecting music apply here. Make your music interesting and unique but not too weird or quirky. Write an interesting accompaniment. Sing all parts yourself to see if they are interesting and have good voice-leading.

Get feedback

Invite your choir director friends over for pizza and coax them into reading through your music. Listen to their comments. Try your music with your choir and assess their reaction. Perform it on a concert and evaluate the audience response. Share that music with your peers and get their response either by visiting their rehearsal or concert or through video sharing.

Publishing Music

Traditional Publishing

Eventually you may want to distribute your music more widely. Despite what you may have heard, many publishers are looking for new music, especially accessible pieces of quality for younger and developing choirs.

As you decide where to submit your music, study publishers' catalogs and identify those that are aligned with your composing focus. Try to make a connection with a series editor or a publisher's representative at a conference or a reading session. Use this opportunity to make a connection, engage in conversation, and exchange business cards.

This is not the time to give that person a package of your scores. Based on his or her willingness to receive new scores, send your music to him/her, preferably electronically. Be prepared to wait for a response. Check back periodically. Publishers are busy and sometimes only review new music at designated times during the year. If you are successful and your work is accepted, be flexible, collegial, and open to an editor's suggestions. Be willing to promote your works and others in the publishers' catalog.

Publishing may give you wide distribution, nationally and internationally, and if your work sells well, you may attain recognition as a choral personality. In addition, most publishers handle all aspects of commerce and rights administration which is a plus for you. (Note: be sure to register with a performing rights organization such as ASCAP or BMI. You will split your income with your publisher for broadcast, recording and performances.)

Publishers pay royalties once or twice a year. You may not get rich, but over time, royalties can provide welcome supplemental income.

Self-Publishing

These days, composers and arrangers have opportunities to self-publish both original works and arrangements. Here are several sites to consider. All of these sites have different requirements and royalty rates. You'll be responsible for marketing your own music.

- **Noteflight Marketplace** - Noteflight is a free online software program that allows premium members to create, adapt, and sell music. Over a million copyrighted songs are available for licensing through the affiliated Arrange Me site, which has a vibrant online community at <https://www.noteflight.com/>

marketplace

SMP Press - This site allows members to post their PDF scores for sale and handles commerce for all sales. Again, the affiliated Arrange Me offers easy options for licensing copyrights online. Go to <https://smppress.sheetmusicplus.com/>

J.W. Pepper My Score - This is a service that allows member composers to post their music for sale digitally or in printed editions through the J.W. Pepper site. Go to <https://www.jwpepper.com/myscore>

MusicSpoke - MusicSpoke describes itself as “artist-owned sheet music.” It is a distribution platform for self-published composers. MusicSpoke vets composers, not specific compositions, and seeks composers who are accomplished, established and looking for a platform that will represent them professionally. MusicSpoke does not take the copyright for any particular work, so composers are free to adapt their own works for different voicings and instrumentation. Go to <https://musicspoke.com>

Final Thoughts

My career has spanned four decades of teaching, conducting, composing, editing, and managing a choral publishing division. I continue to be amazed at the energy, the passion, and the dedication of choral directors at the middle school level. Don't get tired; the choral profession needs you! 