

The Missing Musical Element in Rehearsals and Performances: Humanity

Lynda Marshall

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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.