

A Delicate Balance— Caring for the Music and the Singers

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I've often marveled that some choral conductors can consistently and even aggressively strive for choral excellence in rehearsals and performance but without undermining or damaging the relationship with their singers. These conductors have achieved what I call a delicate balance—caring for both the music *and* the singers. This balance would seem particularly challenging to maintain at the college/university level, considering the attendant pressures that likely accompany frequent and musically demanding public performances. In an effort to glean some insights, I decided to undertake a study.

My purpose was to explore the ways in which successful college/university choral conductors work to establish and maintain a balance between striving for musical excellence (*caring for the music*) and valuing their choristers as human beings (*caring for the singers*), particularly in the context of the choral rehearsal.

I conducted in-person interviews with twelve successful college/university choral conductors from my state of Illinois, all of whom, as I will explain, care for both the music and the singers. I use the word *successful* to describe choral directors who have made at least one appearance

at a national or regional ACDA conference, conducting a choir she or he rehearsed on a regular basis. Clearly, these conductors could not be successful without caring for the music. That they also care for the singers is evident both from the reputation each conductor has established for respecting the humanity of his or her singers and from my personal observation(s) of each person in rehearsal.

I am indebted to the conductors who supported this study by graciously consenting to be interviewed: Karyl Carlson, Illinois State University; Scott Ferguson, Illinois Wesleyan University; Joe Grant, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (retired); Brad Holmes, Millikin University; Mary Hopper, Wheaton College; Jon Hurty, Augustana College; Eric Johnson, Northern Illinois University; John Jost, Bradley University (retired); Lee Kesselman, College of DuPage; James Stegall, Western Illinois University (retired); Jeff Wilson, Greenville University (retired); and Ramona Wis, North Central College.

1. Is caring for the music and the singers a necessity for a choral conductor's success?

Ferguson: Absolutely! I believe that you *must* value the person and the music. Especially in an educational institution, our job is to help students grow. We must pay attention to the individual growth of our choristers as well as the growth of the choir as a whole. If you don't value them, they're not going to want to sing! Tone comes from your inner spirit, I believe. And if their spirit is not well, if their well-being is not at peace, the color and the vibrancy is not going to be in the sound! So, I think the sound of the choir directly depends on how well you value all of the individuals in it.

Wilson: For me, excellence in music and caring for my singers are not mutually exclusive ideas. They come together and are essential in a choir.

Wis: It is not an either/or, but rather, a both/and mindset that we need to have as conductors. But this can be difficult to develop when we consider our undergrad, and even graduate, education and training. The discussion or study of the singer as a being is minimal, at best. It's usually about what they can do. But at some point, for most conductors, we start to realize that what we are doing is engaging with people at a very deep level, and in order for this to happen, it has to be built on something that's really powerful. Music is very powerful, but there has to be a relational connection. And there has to be buy-in. There has to be an investment. There has to be a payoff.

Hurty: The old school was "it is my way or the highway" and I think directors who use that method probably would not be successful these days since we are working with a different kind of singer. Unfortunately, it does seem like the old school to not care so much for the person and just care for the music or the product more than anything else.

Holmes: There are probably examples of successful choirs under a conductor who has a poor relationship with the singers. But I'd like to think that the best music is made with the best human situation.

Hopper: I believe a conductor should balance the quality of the music, the quality of texts, and your obligation to the singers. So, even through your programming, you're thinking about how you're caring for the singers, not just doing all the music that you like but what they need.

Wis: At North Central College, we always frame their learning and experience within this larger context of leadership, and we help them understand how to balance musical excellence with the needs of the people they are given to lead.

Carlson: One of the first things is that you have to love what you do. I still try to maintain that idealistic, happy ignorance that I had when I first walked into my elementary school, as a new teacher, and I was so excited. I don't ever want to lose that.

2. How do you envision the ideal balance in the choral rehearsal between caring for the music and caring for the singers?

Stegall: Caring for the music and the singers are one and the same. Choosing high quality repertoire with profoundly communicative texts makes it possible to simultaneously inspire singers and enhance their performance.

Hurty: For me, it's not as much a balance between those two things as if you were to use 75% to 25% or fifty-fifty. But rather, pushing for the limits of both of those things is what I view as being the ultimate way to achieve excellence while caring for your students—simultaneously. I don't think excellence in approaching the music is in any sense exclusive of caring for the people. You will actually get a more excellent level of musical accomplishment by caring for your choir. You have to completely commit yourself to both of those things.

Carlson: In my rehearsals I generally try to set up the atmosphere and mind-set that rehearsals are for learning the music and related issues. There has to be a modicum of professional distance, even though I like them very much. But when we're rehearsing, it's about the music. It's not about me, and it's not about them.

Johnson: It's not about me! That's the biggest thing we have to learn as conductors.

Just: I don't know if there is an ideal balance. In the rehearsal, I feel like I'm really working on the music and not thinking necessarily about the singers except in the sense that I think there are some givens in terms of respect that need to be part of it. I'm not thinking, "Oh, this tenor prob-

ably had a rough day today” or that sort of thing. I think we need to let go of those things and just go to work.

Hopper: I think the repertoire you choose for your singers is really key in caring for them. One thing I think about a lot is the texts that we’re giving them. We’re giving them texts that are going to encourage them, to feed their souls, to do something, convey a message because that’s something they take with them for the rest of their lives sometimes. There’s a great story I use often about a woman who sang in the women’s choir here before my time as the conductor. She was kidnapped when she was a missionary in Africa in the ’60s. She wrote a book about it. She writes in the book that, for that amount of time she was held hostage, it was the songs she sang in the women’s choir at Wheaton College that were in her mind that came back to her and gave her encouragement during the time of captivity, especially a Kodaly piece called *Cease Your Bitter Weeping* that she quotes. And so that has always struck me how important it is what we’re putting in the minds of our students.

Wis: I would start by saying that caring for the singers and caring for the music are not mutually exclusive. Is it process or product? Of course, we can’t have one without the other. To function at our best and for the singers to reap the most benefits, we need to have process and product in front of us at all times, working toward our immediate goal of a great performance as well as our long-term goal of wonderful creative work and the development of people as musicians and collaborators.

Holmes: In some ways, a choir is the last bastion of youth, not me-ness, in artistic expression. It’s a lot about the ‘you’ and a lot less about the ‘me.’ It’s about a ‘we’ coming together. If it is all about the conductor, then the sense of other-ness is lost. The concept of otherness is crucial to the whole thing that I’m trying to build. In that sense, it is always about building up the individual through the community endeavor. Otherness is so key. In the Millikin University Choir, or ‘U Choir’ as we call it, one of our ongoing mottos is, “Not Me Choir—U. Choir!” And I think that takes us very far. That isn’t to say that individuals aren’t important. In fact, they’re so much more important in that context—where their individual strengths are given to each other. The conductor does the same thing. He gives himself to the ensemble. The individual is absolutely vital, but the submission of individuals to one another makes for an

amazing experience.

Just: It is going to be a much richer experience if I can call upon their experience and not just feel that everything has to be coming from me. Over the years I’ve come to realize that there are ways to use the experience of the group. What you want to do is increase the ownership of the group over the music and the music-making process, and you can’t do that by constantly being the only source of wisdom and knowledge and truth yourself.

Grant: The experiences I had within my groups taught me that these two things can go hand-in-hand. I think if you’re a conductor at the professional level and the primary emphasis is on the performance alone, then you can really dial it toward that, just taking care of the music. If you’re in a school situation, a college situation, it seems to me that that balance has to come more to neutral—that is, at least an equal emphasis on student growth and musical performance. But you have to be intentional. I don’t think it can happen by circumstance.

Hurty: When I started, I think I was probably more rigid in my approach to people because I was more concerned about me rather than about them. And the more experience I’ve gotten, the more I realize that it truly is about the music itself—what the music or the composer or the poet has to say. Learning to get me out of the way and make the music be more important has been the best developing experience that I’ve had.

Johnson: If I start with the perspective that creating music and performing music all circles back to a profoundly human experience, things get a lot easier to keep in balance. How can you ignore the needs and experiences of the people in front of you if what you are about is a fundamental expression of humanity?

Kesselman: I am troubled by the idea that there is some sort of dichotomy. I don’t think I have to choose between caring for the music, striving for musical excellence, and caring for the singers. I think if you care for the music and the singers, and if you make choices based on something that involves both, you’ll be more successful. In fact, the joy of choral music is that people, often with very modest skills and training, achieve great things, greater things than they could achieve on their own.

Hopper: Because I direct two single-sex choirs, there's more of a sense of community expected in these groups. For the men, it's a lot easier. They have a little more of a fraternal feel. With the women, we have to work at it, at helping individuals to feel part of the group without becoming like a sorority. The men are just up almost all the time. They're enthusiastic and hitting each other and a lot of physical stuff. But the girls need to be encouraged and looked out for a little more. And because we are a place of faith, we have that opportunity to pray for each other and share needs. I believe that contributes to the development of the human being. In both groups I have to emphasize that music is still our primary thing and at the same time emphasize that there is a way of belonging to this organization—that we're all in it together.

Jost: We talk about the things we've learned as conductors from the great conductors who've inspired us, but maybe we've learned just as much from the people we don't want to imitate. When I was in high school, one year we had—we went through four conductors in three years, and they were mostly inexperienced first-job people. But this one conductor (it must have happened eight or nine times) his office was just off the choir room. He left rehearsal with the choir still standing there and slammed the door. I did not see that as appropriate or something to imitate.

Johnson: Remember, we are all dealing with people, not sound machines. We are human organisms interacting with the body-brain experience where the brain exists to discover. The brain does not exist to recite. If you engage the singers in a process of discovery, then the rehearsal experience is much more organic and, as the conductor, you become the leader/facilitator rather than, say, dictator.

Wis: If I stop and say, "Fix that vowel," singers don't really have to invest; they just have to respond. But if I say, "Fix that vowel because it's going to make you tune better," now I've respected the singers as people, as artists, and I've given them the ability to fix their own musical problem. They're truly learning and they're more invested in the process. So what's really great about that is that while this collaboration approach helps them to be more invested, it requires them to be more responsible.

Holmes: Earlier, we were talking about the church choir that I direct and I learned how to love what they achieve.

I've been moved deeply by seeing what my church choir has done, even though it's never at the level of the Millikin University Choir. You have to figure out what those levels of ability are and what is exciting for them at their level of expertise. Music is layered, and there's great achievement at every level.

Kesselman: I think if your singers feel cared for and feel respected and feel as though they're part of a reflective practicum in their rehearsals, they will produce better music to the best of their abilities. They'll give you everything they have. I don't think they will do it if they're angry or hurt or feel as though they're pawns in somebody else's world.

Johnson: You don't have to put the students down to be uncompromisingly better. If you're yelling at them or intimidating, that's power! That's a power trip. That has nothing to do with music. It has everything to do with you! You don't have to compromise. It's not an either/or. It's a this/and.

Carlson: Caring for young singers is much different. I think the light bulb came on when I was a student. When I was doing my undergrad degree, I had food poisoning, so I wasn't able to go to class for a couple of days. My music ed professor called me, which was a little bit unusual in those days. She called me and wanted to know if I needed anything, if she could bring me anything. And I said, "Yeah, some ginger ale or something." So she came over. She came to my apartment, which was crazy! And then she said, "But I want you to know that your assignment is still due." And so it registered with me like, here's a person who is still holding me accountable, but I know that she cares. So I'm still accountable for what I need to do. I always remember that. Here, I'm helping you and I care for you, but you still have to do the work.

Wis: The difference between a really effective conductor who's going to build musicians for the long term and one who just gets the right pedagogy for the moment is enormous. The one who gets the right pedagogy can, every time they stop, say, "No, it's this vowel. No, round your lips. No, listen and match," and so forth. But there has to be a reason for the singer to want to do these things. That's the people part.

Holmes: If you love them [your own children or your

choir], then how can you not show them some possibilities and then help them achieve them, or even demand that they achieve them? It shows a lack of care and a lack of love for the choir if you don't help them to their highest potential. I hope that I've left the choir with a sense of what it means to envision, pursue and achieve—to be a growing person.

3. How do you establish and maintain the ideal balance in rehearsal, especially in the face of mounting rehearsal pressures?

Hurty: For me, it's a matter of just being honest, just trying to be what I think is right. Respect people, respect the music, strive for excellence both in your relationships as well as in the work that you do. And if we do that, the outcome is going to be more positive for everybody.

Wis: Honesty is a powerful tool. And we can be honest without being mean. Let the students know that your job as the conductor/leader is to be honest and give feedback. It's not a reflection on the singers as people.

Kesselman: I think when it's a struggle, it's because we think we've done everything we can do and now it's their fault. Honestly, nobody shows up on Monday nights to sing just to torment me. Nobody's trying to do badly. They all want to do well. I'm really convinced of that. Rarely does one encounter a singer who says, "Let's see what happens if we just screw up a little bit more. Let's see how long it takes to get his goat!" Nobody says that. What does that mean? What that means is, they're trying to do well and, if they can't do well yet, it's my job to get that to happen. I think a big part of it is engaging and giving to the choir, or reminding the choir of their ownership in this process. It's their choir. In my experience, choirs really respond to ownership. And they become more than just cannon fodder. They're not just making the sounds. They're really thinking about what they're singing. And then they've got questions.

Stegall: This was a struggle for me as a young conductor. Now, as a seasoned (another word for old) conductor, I have found two things that have a profound impact on supporting this balance: scheduling and programming.

Jost: To me, it has to do with planning. Usually, the idea that pressure's building, and they're not ready, I take that

back to my lack of planning.

Johnson: I try to select repertoire that inspires, informs, and teaches.

Carlson: I think the first step is picking out repertoire that is appropriate for the group. Music that they can do, and my caring for the students on that journey.

Hurty: I don't view myself as being hugely talented. I view myself as having lots of perseverance. And I realize that through my own life, part of being successful is just keeping at it, just keeping on with the process that you've established. It's more about persevering than it is about something you're doing that's so wonderful or your talent that makes things work.

Wis: We get into the "do I care more about the singers or the music today?" There may be pressure close to performances because we sometimes don't make the right decisions in advance, early in the learning process. I really believe in planning and using our foresight, making decisions early and assuming there's going to be something unpredictable that will happen. I really think that if we make the right decision based on people, the music will be there. I've never been burned by making a decision to honor somebody.

Grant: You have to plan your rehearsal around the activities that the students are going to take part in. If all they do is open their music and rehearse and rehearse and rehearse, there's not going to be time for them to reflect on what they're doing, on the music that they're performing, on the texts that they're dealing with, and so forth. You have to be intentional about including things like having them discuss or write in class about the text and what it might mean to them and how it might help them grow personally. But finding that balance is a challenge.

Holmes: You can't drive the wagon train across the prairie and not let the people stop for food every once in a while. It's good to allow them to sit around the campfire at night and reflect on the journey. The students also must have goals along the way. I think you're trying to set up these moments of feasting along the way, and that fuels the rest of the journey. I am very attuned to the emotional stability of the choir while in route. When they're starving, I know

it. When they're thirsty, I know it, and I know I've got to supply something at these times to get them to the next goal. Otherwise, they're going to lose their trust in me. We must truly pursue attainable goals.

Holmes: In the end, the singers have to have a desire to undertake the journey. Maybe the question is, "How do you get them to buy in?" The whole process must be about everybody wanting to attain some level of musical excellence. If that is not there, we have to build that into their psyche.

Ferguson: Maintaining balance is paying attention to the singers and listening to them, watching them, and taking their pulse in rehearsal all the time.

Hopper: I like to have opportunities to talk to my students outside of rehearsal. The men have tea time in my office before rehearsal one day a week. With the girls, especially in years when we don't tour, I will have Sunday night suppers at my house.

Carlson: I have everybody sing in octets. I don't grade them. They just come up and sing. They can tell where they are with the music, and they don't feel like I've called them out in front of everybody.

Carlson: I do ask a lot of questions in choir rehearsals. That also gives a little bit more ownership of the music. They're responsible for the music, not to me. It takes a collaborative effort.

Johnson: You get all wrapped up in something that went wrong in rehearsal, and then you just imagine a million things that don't exist. There are those voices in your head that scream, "Oh, they're all against me! They all hate me! Why do they hate me?" They don't even think about you outside of rehearsal. I just have to get over myself.

Ferguson: Not every rehearsal has to have pom-poms out and be fast paced. But urgency is great and the singers need to be constantly urged forward. The energy in rehearsal has to be there, but you've got to be bursting with energy and on fire at every rehearsal.

Holmes: More and more, I realize that my frustration is a sign that I am unable to communicate clearly. It's not as much about a choir being incapable of achieving; it's about

my inability to push the right buttons to make it work. Everybody in the choir knows that. When I get really frustrated, they're usually sitting there with questioning faces. They're looking at me like, "We're waiting!" It's funny, too. I mean, they all sit there. I'll jump up and down and hit my head. "How do I get this right?" And they're all thinking, "Are you getting paid for this? Give us something!" So those are great moments when they're waiting on me to figure it out and make it work. That's a fun moment, but it can be very frustrating.

Wis: We have to process and reflect in between rehearsals, asking what singers need from us now and what they need going forward.

Carlson: Seek their anonymous feedback. Pick great repertoire. Don't make it about you.

Grant: So much of that goes back to literature selection. If you've had enough experience overall, then you select appropriate literature that doesn't drive you to the wall at the last moment, fighting for the last notes as you walk on stage.

Stegall: Our preparation is methodical and starts with clearly defined musical goals that are put on a calendar. Repertoire challenges must be significant, but not severe. I want to avoid at all costs white knuckle learning that takes all the joy out of the process and brings out everyone's worst behavior and attitude. We never focus on the concert; instead, we focus on having daily musical experiences. In this light, the concert takes care of itself.

Holmes: I think my biggest struggle in a rehearsal is to show singers what's possible in their product. What are they capable of creating? How do I communicate what's possible? Once they see what's possible then it's a call to their character and to mine also to consistently pursue the possible.

Johnson: For me, it was very important for my students to see balance in other parts of my life. For example, I have made it a priority throughout my career to model that family is very important to me. Making music is about expressing things to be human and you kind of need to be human to do that. The connection between the music we sing and our life experiences is so important. When I focus on that, I never compromise the balance you are asking about.

4. How do you regain the balance in rehearsal if it has been lost?

Hopper: “If”—you say. No, we all have.

Ferguson: Yes, I have lost balance during rehearsal. I have always found it very difficult to handle my own negative emotion in rehearsal. But I don’t think I’ve ever said anything that I regretted. I can’t stand sarcasm in rehearsal. And there’s no place for gratuitous anger. Fear and intimidation may work for some people, but it doesn’t work for me at all. The older I get, the better I am at being firmer earlier in the rehearsal process. But we have to figure this out; we have to realize that the choir’s the “child” no matter how old they are. They know that we’re the parent, and they expect us to be the parent.

Grant: When I started teaching in the public schools, I hadn’t had a lot of experience with working on classroom management. And I was terrible at it. I mean, kids enjoyed being with me. I wanted them to like me and so, you know, I did all sorts of fun things with them. But when they started getting out of hand, how do you control the classroom climate? And I think too frequently, in those days, I resorted to anger, to yelling, and all of this kind of stuff and just being overly aggressive.

Carlson: Well, I have absolutely said things that I’ve regretted. But if that’s the case, if I catch it right away, I will just apologize right away. Again, if it’s not about me and it’s not about them, then I can just turn it back to the music and say, “Okay, I stubbed my toe. Let’s get back to work.”

Kesselman: I think most people are pretty forgiving in this world, but you have to show a little contrition.

Hurty: A lot of times, when I get frustrated and they’re frustrated, we do spend some time talking. If you bring them into the process and allow them to say, “Yeah, I’m frustrated and I feel like we’re doing this,” then I’ll try to focus them back and say, “OK, let’s try some of those things.” And oftentimes just talking about it causes something. I don’t know if it really solves the problem, what everyone says, but it releases the frustration. It makes people realize that we need to focus more on what we’re doing.

Johnson: I had one experience with one of my very, very good choirs. We had a convention performance that didn’t go well. We had given concerts in advance; they knew all of the music. There was no reason why it shouldn’t go well. But it didn’t. And we all knew it. And I later realized that, without being intentional about it, I had made the convention performance about me. I was nervous. I was anxious about performing in front of my peers. During our sound check and the time in our green room, I focused too much on fixing. Then as a group, we were anxious about who was in the audience to hear us. And that was the time when I realized that, in those situations, my responsibility is to make sure that they’re ready emotionally as human beings.

Just: It’s not something that happens to me very often just because I have a pretty high level of patience. I do remember one time early in my time here. The students weren’t paying attention, and I finally just walked out of the rehearsal and up to my office. I finally lost patience, and rather than blow up at them, I left the room. About five minutes later, one of the singers came in and apologized. So that would be a situation where I gave up on the singers, but I think the singers all decided it was their fault.

Wilson: Once, as a student in an honor band, I was working with a famous conductor. It was clear that he was an excellent musician, but the way he treated the group as people was very discouraging. I determined, that if I was ever in his position, I would try to do things differently—in a way that would help build up people as well as lead them to make excellent music. It seemed to me that there must be a better way to do both!

Kesselman: I think our ability to listen deeply is certainly our teaching mechanism, and to hear what people are telling us in the rehearsal and outside of the rehearsal, to try to establish a relationship where people feel confident and comfortable coming to you. The goal is to make sure the people you’re working with know how much you value and respect them.

Stegall: I work to avoid displaying or expressing anger so that there is nothing to regret or take back. As a less experienced conductor, I was prone to anger. I have found over the years that getting angry is only a temporary fix, and students will quickly grow immune to this type of motivation. I have also learned to avoid blaming students for their

poor performance or motivation and want to help them negotiate this part of their learning and maturing process. In the book, *Primal Leadership* by Daniel Goleman, it has been documented that motivating others with continual negative emotional episodes such as anger will sabotage a leader's relationships and hamper the group's work performance. I aspire to lead with true power, not the force of anger but power *with* others, not over others.

Grant: I think long-term—and I tried to teach this in my music ed classes—it's about taking time to reflect, not in the moment but after rehearsal to give myself time to think through it, what happened there, what might I have needed to make that a better situation both musically and in terms of classroom control.

Wis: Never, ever give up on the singers. That's easy to say, tough to do sometimes. But we can never give up on the singers. We might determine that the musical product "is what it is" at some point, but we continue to plan how to bring the singers forward in their development and our work together. If it does happen, you just have to fess up and apologize and move on and then just be sure you don't replay that scene again. Find out what caused it and get to the core of the problem; plan better for the future so you don't get into that situation.

Holmes: On occasion, I have also found myself apologizing to my students for violating their trust by not expecting enough from them. That's the most devastating situation.

5. How do you enhance your ability as a conductor to care for the singers?

The responses to this question fell into one of two categories: professional development and caring for yourself. A non-prioritized summary of the responses is provided here, some being mentioned more than once.

Professional development included attending conferences, talking with colleagues, developing a cohort of professional soul mates, evaluations from students and colleagues, and observing other conductors and choirs in rehearsals, clinics, festivals, and conferences.

Kesselman: A lot of caring for your singers is caring for yourself physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.

Caring for yourself included caring for family, resting, self-reflecting, living and exhibiting a balanced life, setting an example ethically and morally, attending to the climate and the singers in rehearsal, respecting the singers as human beings, plus developing as a person through exercise, church involvement, prayer, concerts/theatre/museums, Yoga, meditation, travel, and reading (self-empowerment, leadership, scripture, inspirational, poetry).

A Few Conclusions

1. Caring for the music and the singers is a necessity for choral success.
2. The conductor needs to develop a "both/and" mindset about caring for the music and the singers. They are not mutually exclusive or a dichotomy, but a singularity.
3. Rehearsals should be devoted to the music but underpinned by respect for the singers.
4. Realistic planning eliminates mounting rehearsal pressures.
5. The choice of repertoire is the key to caring for the singers.
6. The choir needs to be challenged and "fed" in every rehearsal.
7. The conductor should be honest without being mean.
8. If the conductor has lost a sense of balance in rehearsal, he/she should apologize.
9. Reflection on the part of the conductor between rehearsals is critical for maintaining a balance in rehearsals.
10. Conductors can enhance their ability to care for the singers through continual professional development and through caring for themselves (physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally). **■**

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