

CHOR TEACH



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Practical Teaching Ideas
for Today's Music Educator

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From the Editor



This fall issue of *ChorTeach* is the last issue for 2022, and it concludes the first year of quarterly issues under our new editorial board. Thank you to Derrick Fox, Libby Gopal, Mark Rohwer, and Julie Yu for their work. You can read the editorial board spotlight in the Winter 2022 issue (pages 4-7). Visit acda.org/chorteach to view the archives and read articles from past issues.

This issue of *ChorTeach* features our fourth “Ask a Conductor” segment, answering the question: *What successful processes have been used to create positive, collaborative relationships between public and/or private school choirs and community children’s choirs?* If you are interested in contributing to a future “Ask a Conductor” section, visit <https://forms.gle/oVcamzqp4KwXfo5M9> or email chorteach@acda.org. We are looking for people to submit questions, along with people interested in answering questions.

Authors David Haas and Seth Pendergast contribute a useful article on technology in the choral classroom. The authors share an introduction to utilizing Digital Audio Workstations in the choral classroom through three examples that include detailed student and teacher instructions, which you will be able to immediately apply with your middle and high school students. Next, Mark Rohwer contributes an interview with composers Laura Farnell and Reginal Wright on composing for middle and high school choirs. The composers discuss the paths that led them to composition, challenges they face as a composer, advice for conductors selecting works, and more.

Jess Edelbrock writes about her experience performing with the Tucson Girls’ Chorus Bumblebee Singers at the 2022 ACDA National Children’s & Community Youth Choir Conductors’ Retreat. The “Bees” are a K/1 choir who



Amanda Bumgarner

performed a piece commissioned specifically for their group. The author shares about collaborative commissioning, working with such a young group of singers, and creating singer-friendly rehearsals. This is a valuable article both for those who teach our youngest singers and those who conduct on the most well-known stages. We hope to highlight more work from our elementary choirs in future issues, so please contact me if you would like to discuss an article idea.

Finally, Mindy Cook has compiled a list of twelve podcasts related to choral music and music education. Podcasts can be an excellent way to hear from colleagues in your field in an easy-to-digest audio format. Make sure to check out this section and find something to listen to for your next commute!

As always, we hope you can take the advice, encouragement, and inspiration shared in these articles and apply them to your daily work with students. The editorial board is interested in submissions on any topic related to K-12 and community choirs, so please consider contributing an article for 2023. Have a wonderful rest of the year!



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Ask a Conductor

Question 4

What successful processes have been used to create positive, collaborative relationships between public and/or private school choirs and community children's choirs?

Welcome to the “Ask a Conductor” section of ChorTeach. In this reader-generated Q&A format, readers submit questions related to teaching, conducting, rehearsing with, or singing with K-12 students. Three to five educators who either currently work in K-12 or who have past experience in K-12 will answer the question, with a new question appearing in each issue. Our goal is for this to be a very practical section that applies directly to current concerns in the choral classroom. Readers can submit questions via the link in this Google form (<https://forms.gle/oVcamzqp4KwXfo5M9>) or by visiting the QR code below.



Ask a Conductor Submission Form

Question: What successful processes have been used to create positive, collaborative relationships between public and/or private school choirs and community children's choirs?



Matt Hill
Founder, Sing Omaha Inc.
Director of Choral Activities, Peru State College
National ACDA Community Choirs R&R Chair
www.MattHillConductor.com

Sing Omaha is an eight-choir, two-studio nonprofit music education and performance organization operating in Eastern Nebraska since 2007. Our annual programming reaches 350-400 students (K-12) each year. With our limited advertising budget, we rely heavily on strong relationships with area schools to support and promote (where possible) our programming.

Prioritization of Commitment

As community choir musicians, we would like to think that music educators and building administrators would see the inherent value of their students seeking additional outside instruction, as those external experiences will find their way back into the scholastic music program in various ways. However, we may more frequently find territorialism to be the dominant hurdle we have to overcome. This makes our overt statements about student expectations paramount in the early conversations with decision makers in schools. We should recognize that most of our students will be active participants in their public/private school music programs,



and we actually benefit from expecting them to be (in our case, without requiring it as a prerequisite for Sing Omaha membership). At Sing Omaha, we clearly articulate to students, parents, and educators that the school program comes first. In exchange, we ask for up-front communication about any potential scheduling conflicts, and we share that in all cases dress rehearsals trump regular rehearsals, and concerts trump any rehearsal—which must go both ways.

Once we establish that we seek to be partners and not poachers, we can turn our focus to service, recognizing that when educators and administrators see our willingness to invest in their program, they are more apt to allow us to share information about our program offerings to their students and families.

Service Mindset

As in any business relationship, reciprocity is critical for long-term mutual success, so our first priority is to assess ways that Sing Omaha can bring tangible value to our partner schools. While this varies among schools and districts, we commonly find that in-class clinics/workshops are a valuable service for general music classrooms and ensembles at all grade levels. Other service opportunities have included providing donations for elementary school field days and faculty/staff appreciation days. The expense associated with providing a few cases of bottled water and a few bags of chips is negligible when compared to the myriad ways in which their promotion of our programming to students serves our nonprofit.

Professional Development

In addition to serving scholastic music programs through clinics and workshops, we have also found value in offering professional development opportunities to their music educators. This can take many forms, but we have found two models that seem to work especially well.

First, it has worked best if the school district offers professional development sessions for their music teachers. In those instances, we offer to supply a workshop at no charge, which is attractive to them, and our organization gets both facetime and “marketing” opportunities in return.

As a second opportunity, we offer free skill-building and/or repertoire-based professional development sessions at one of our studio locations. In repertoire/reading ses-

sions, we choose repertoire that serves the needs of music educators who work with our target demographic in the hopes that we will attract teachers who will derive value from our session and might thus be more open to sharing information about our programs with their students. We are cognizant of each individual district’s policies about outside groups, and avail ourselves of any opportunities to become approved organizations within each district.

Governing Philosophy

Fundamentally, our strategies are based on providing value and ensuring that families, educators, and administrators know that we overtly support each school’s music program. When these principles are in place, we generally find willing and supportive partners.



Jeanne Wohlgamuth
Artistic Director
Columbus Children’s Choir

Community children’s choirs benefit significantly from the recommendations of school choir directors when building the strength of their program. Thus, creating positive, collaborative relationships between public and private choral educators is the community children’s choir lifeline and one of the most important relationships that can be built. If your goal is to build solid and lasting relationships, consider the following points.

Show Respect

In every professional relationship, mutual respect is at the core, whether you are the community choir director or a school choir director. Establishing trust and rapport with your school choir director is essential. Always use the golden rule. Treat the choir director the same way you would like to be treated.

Please take advantage of and respect the expertise and skill of your colleagues; they are valuable resources! Consider creating a teacher advisory board and inviting local school directors to serve on it. Don’t be afraid to ask your colleagues for help and actively listen to their advice. View your colleagues as a part of your team, not your competitor.

Exercise Humility

Be humble. A positive professional relationship does not begin with a sense of superiority. Take an interest in the school program, the director, and the singers. Respect and recognize the positive contributions that a singer from the school choral program brings to the community children's choir program. It would help if you informed your school choir director of the positive effects their singers and their education have on your program.

Communicate

The cornerstone of every good relationship is open communication. Don't be timid! Get out into the community. Visit your local school choir rehearsal or attend some of their concerts. Find out what their needs are and how you can help. This simple act reinforces the crucial fact that you are not in the business of stealing the school director's singers. Recognize and acknowledge the vital and foundational work taking place in the school choral program.

Practice the Art of Compromise

Be flexible and make sure to compromise. Your program will sometimes conflict with that of the school. If this occurs, reach out to the school director and try to resolve the conflict. Offer suggestions for resolving the conflict in a way that benefits both choirs. Be gracious and willing to accept the fact that a compromise may not be reached and that the first obligation of the singer is to their respective school choir. Be careful; never put the singer in the middle of the conflict.

Celebrate

Celebrating the achievements of your school's choral programs can be done both publicly and privately. In addition to opening the door to a new collaboration, showing interest and sending congratulations can strengthen an existing one and breathe life into a stagnant one. By doing so, your colleagues will know that you appreciate their efforts. This can improve the quality of your relationship and create a supportive atmosphere.

Show Appreciation

A positive and long-lasting collaboration can be bolstered by showing appreciation. Get in the habit of writing letters of appreciation to choir directors. Thank them for sharing their singers with your program. Be consistent by making this a priority each year. Consistency will help you communicate and reinforce the value of the school director's contribution to the community choir.

In closing, take time to invest in your organization's future by building and maintaining relationships with your private and public school choral directors. Embrace the time it takes to help them feel valued and respected, as they are the long-term investments in the future of your community children's choir.



Elizabeth B. Woodhouse
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Throughout my eighteen-year career as a community youth chorus conductor, collaborating with music teachers has been an extremely valuable way to connect with the community, reach new singers, and amplify the power of music. A valued and meaningful partnership can begin with just a quick introductory email! Below are some collaborations that have been successful as well as suggestions for getting the conversation started.

- **Introduce yourself!** This can go both ways—let your local public school music teachers or your local children's chorus conductors know about you! Send a short email telling them about your programs and express your interest in learning more about theirs. Remember, this isn't a "pitch." Instead, this is a chance to understand more about the other in order to create a solid foundation on which to grow. Getting the conversation started is a great first step.


- **Visit.** Invite local teachers or community youth chorus conductors to visit your chorus and work with your groups in preparation for a festival or concert or just as a way to provide a new perspective to the rehearsal process. This is a



great way to connect and takes little preparation other than finding a day, time, and place! Consider offering your services for free; your time and shared expertise are an investment in the music education in your community.

- **Listen.** When I worked in Brooklyn, a middle school teacher and I partnered every year to provide a two-part workshop experience for her chorus. Before their visit, the teacher would share what musical element the students were studying, and we would agree on a piece I could teach her group that would support that element. I incorporated warm-ups and activities in the workshop that directly supported the learning and practicing of that element. A few weeks later, I would visit the chorus and clinic their upcoming concert repertoire including the new piece I introduced to them. Working closely with the teacher and listening to what she wanted and needed for her program ensured that our partnership would fully support her classroom goals by providing another perspective for her students.

- **Create.** As a community youth chorus director, I often provide after-school programs at the schools in the area. One year, we invited all of the participating students from the various after-school programs to spend a day together where we learned a new song all together, played games, and had lunch. The day culminated in a performance for family and friends featuring each of the after-school programs and some of the ensembles from the community chorus. The event required quite a bit of planning and help, but it was worth it to bring our community together through our love of singing.

- **Share.** Don't forget to invite or share your successful partnership experiences with school administrators, parents, and donors! Post photos or videos of your collaboration on social media so your followers can see how you, your organization, or your school are connecting to the community. 

Creative Music Making with Technology in the Choral Classroom

by David Haas and Seth Pendergast

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Of the many technological innovations available to music teachers, Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) represent one of the most powerful and flexible tools to support creativity and performance. Many readers are likely familiar with DAWs such as Garageband, Audacity, Soundtrap, or Logic Pro. These software applications enable users to record, edit, and mix multi-track recordings on computers, tablets, and phones. The increased availability and affordability of DAWs have opened space for many students and educators to exercise musical roles outside the domain of the typical performer or conductor. For example, during the pandemic, some choral directors used DAWs to create virtual choirs when in-person singing was impossible.¹ Students themselves may use DAWs to arrange, record, and produce their own music.² In general, recent research suggests students and music teachers alike are interested in integrating creative music-making with DAWs into classroom instruction.³

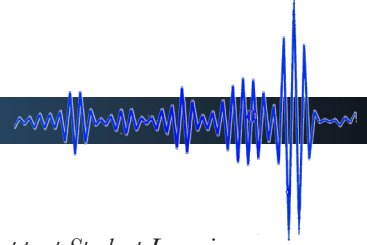
Given the increased interest in these platforms, it may be important to explore how teachers might effectively integrate

DAWs into the choral classroom. Of course, new technologies do not need to be integrated simply because they exist. Still, choral educators might consider if DAW-based creative projects represent an opportunity to extend or deepen student learning in their classroom.⁴ Therefore, the purpose of this article is two-fold: (1) examine how creative music making with DAWs might support learning in the choral classroom, and (2) explore several practical DAW-based project examples for the choral classroom.

First, we will explore general recommendations for finding and utilizing a DAW suited to the needs of your students. Second, we will present a few guiding principles for integrating DAWs into the choral classroom. Finally, we will share three practical project examples—including instructional videos—that may be useful to enhance your instruction.

Choosing and Learning a DAW

If you are considering DAW integration in your classes, first decide which DAW best suits your needs. If you are just beginning to explore DAWs in your classroom, we recommend web-based DAWs like Soundtrap, Soundation, or Bandlab. These DAWs are accessible from virtually any computer with internet access because they run within a web browser (e.g., Chrome, Safari, Firefox) and operate on reasonably priced cloud-based subscriptions. Web-based DAWs might be appropriate for schools with either limited computer access (e.g., one or two shared computer labs or laptop



carts) or one-to-one Chromebooks. If you have access to a Mac lab or iPads, Garageband is free and is tremendously versatile. If you are looking for more robust software options, you might consider Logic Pro X (Mac), Ableton Live (PC/Mac), and Cubase (Mac/PC).

If you are unfamiliar with DAWs and wish to spend some time learning to use them, we recommend attempting a few projects on your own before starting with students. For example, arrange a portion of a folk song and record it using the DAW. Once you have arranged the song, learn to record your voice and instrument using headphones and your laptop or tablet microphone. Be sure to adhere to the metronome click during recording. Once you record the essential parts (e.g., vocals, guitar, ukulele, or piano), use the loop library to add supporting tracks like drums. Use virtual instrument tracks to record a bass line or other additional parts. Exploring the DAW with your own personal project is the best way to develop your understanding of how it works. For more guided instruction, see the video links for each project below.

A Few Guiding Principles for Integrating DAWs in the Choral Classroom

Principle #1: Organize Creative Projects

The creative process can be uneven as students work back and forth between idea generation, editing, and refining. Nevertheless, it is important to structure creative projects within the classroom so students are not overwhelmed by choice or lack of direction.⁵ First, be sure the students have the prerequisite skills to complete the project at hand. If students lack the requisite knowledge to complete the project, initiate a series of small introductory projects that enable them to develop their musical, compositional, or technological abilities. Second, demonstrate and explain the final product at the project's outset. Teachers might provide example projects or rubrics as guides. Third, guide the students through the various stages of the project. Each step of this process will require both imaginative and discriminative thinking.⁶ Allow time for idea generation at the outset (i.e., brainstorming). Next, provide teacher and student feedback as students clarify their ideas. Finally, encourage students to refine and finalize their end-product, and allow students to celebrate and share their work with peers.

Principle #2: Use Technology to Support Student Learning

Each teacher must decide how musical content, pedagogy, and technology should work together to support student learning.⁷ No single creative project or technological solution works best for every classroom. Choral educators must decide which technologies and creative projects will deepen and extend the students' learning within their classroom. Therefore, consider DAW-based projects critically and plan those you feel will enhance your instruction and provide meaningful creative opportunities for your students.

Principle #3: Varied Practice Deepens Learning

When learners practice their skills in different ways (varied practice) and apply key concepts to new situations (transfer), their learning tends to be deeper, longer lasting, and more readily applied to unique situations.⁸ At first glance, it may seem that DAW-based musical projects and choral singing are unrelated. However, consider how working in DAWs might extend and enrich essential concepts for students. For example, choral directors often instruct their choirs to blend within their section and across the choir and use many techniques to achieve a unified sound (e.g., listening, vowel alternation, tone placement). Similarly, to achieve blend in the DAW environment, students might mix the volume of voices or change the timbre of voices using digital effects. Fundamentally the students are exploring the underlying principles of blend (i.e., timbre adjustment, volume) and how to achieve blend in both environments. Applying skills and ideas in several unique settings may deepen understanding for choral singers and enhance performance. The examples below highlight how each project might support conceptual learning within the choral classroom.

DAW-Based Choral Music Projects: Three Examples

Remixing Choral Literature
<https://youtu.be/zrN2G77TmAY>



In this first project, students will create a new selection of music by remixing a pre-existing piece of choral literature.

Remixing in this way can deepen students' understanding of a particular selection and support a sense of pride by generating a creative project that is uniquely their own. In this example, students will deepen their familiarity with an existing piece of choral literature while simultaneously celebrating their own creative agency. The student will explore variations between genres and fuse the type of music they find compelling with a piece of choral music chosen by their instructor.

When you have chosen a piece, upload an .mp3 file to your Google Drive or Canvas Files. For best results, this selection should have a constant BPM and should not include accelerandos or ritardandos. Additionally, it is best to choose an cappella piece in a simple time signature such as 3/4 or 4/4. Unless incorporating a song from the public domain, it is essential to utilize these works strictly in an educational setting since reproduction or mass distribution can be subject to copyright infringement.

STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS:

- 1) Download the file of the original song onto your hard drive.
- 2) In your BandLab account, click "Create" at the top right-hand corner of the screen.
- 3) Label the project "Choir Remix Assignment_ Student's Name."
- 4) Set the metronome to the corresponding tempo of the selection.
- 5) Either click "Drop a loop or an audio/MIDI file" to import your original track. Alternatively, drag and drop the selection into the workspace.
- 6) Move the track as necessary to calibrate the metronome with the downbeat. Turn on the metronome to verify the subdivision of the measure lines up with the song.
- 7) Click on "Bandlab Sounds" at the bottom, right-hand corner of the screen, opening up a submenu on the right side. Click on "Loops" at the top of this menu.
- 8) Click on "Instruments" and choose from variety of different category filters. We recommend choosing "beats" or "percussion" to start.
- 9) Click on the play icon on the left side of each audio clip to sample the various beats.
- 10) Drag and drop different combinations of these musical excerpts, carefully lining them up with the downbeats in the workstation. To repeat the example, hover the mouse on the upper-right hand corner of the loop, click the icon, and then drag to repeat as many times as desired.
- 11) Use at least three independent samples when coming up with your remix, including at least one instance where the different beats overlap and possibly an a cappella section.
- 12) When pleased with your remix, export your selection by clicking "File," then "Download," then "Mix-down." Save this file to your hard drive.
- 13) Upload your completed project to Canvas or Google Classroom with a brief description of something you learned or enjoyed during the process.

Student Quotes from Remixing Choral Literature:

"I enjoyed being able to layer different tracks on top of each other. It was cool how different sounds were able to complement each other and make for a cool final sound to lay with the vocals."

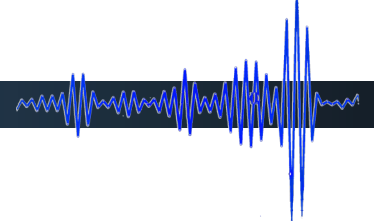
—Select Mixed Choir Junior

"It was actually super fun to experiment with different kinds of sounds. Especially when it was beats going alongside a more classical song."

—Select Choir Senior

"I loved playing around with the beats; instead of spending 5 minutes on the assignment (which is the amount of time it would've taken), I looked at the clock to see almost 30 minutes had passed."

—Treble Choir Freshman



“I enjoyed being able to put my own creativity into this project. Normally in choir, we just sing, but in this project, we were able to explore music more on our own. It was interesting to be able to combine beats to enhance a song. I learned which type of beats go well together and which don’t.”

—Treble Choir Freshman

“I enjoyed the experimentation it allowed, and the freedom it gave us to shape the music.”

—Bass Choir Freshman

- 2) Go into your Bandlab account and click “Create” at the top right-hand corner of the screen.
- 3) Label the project “Director for a Day_Student’s Name”
- 4) Import each individual voice part track into the workstation by either dragging and dropping them or by clicking “Drop a loop or an audio/MIDI file” to open the import selector.
- 5) While listening to each track, use the sliders on the left side to balance the voices so that you can hear all of the voice parts.
 - a) Extra Credit: Students may utilize automation to bring up and down the volume of each individual line at different moments in the selection. For this option, students would click on the diagonal line with a dot on either side. This icon is to the right of “Add track.”
 - b) To utilize this function, double-click the line over the track to create a nodule. Every nodule created allows for dynamic modification.
- 6) When pleased with your remix, export your selection by clicking “File,” then “Download,” then “Mixdown.” Save this file to your hard drive.
- 7) Upload your completed project to Canvas or Google Classroom with a brief description of something you learned or enjoyed through the process.

Director for a Day! A Lesson on Balance:
<https://youtu.be/pG2Dj3bm2ik>



Our second example allows students to customize the balance between voice parts of a given set of individual practice tracks, allowing the choristers to demonstrate one facet of artistic control that is typically limited to the director. Blend and balance are essential keys to a fine-tuned choral performance. However, students in the choral ensemble rarely experience the art of balance other than being asked to reduce or increase the volume of their individual parts within the context of an ensemble. Allowing students to adjust the balance between sections in a DAW deepens their understanding of the intricacies involved in negotiating the prominence of individual voice parts within a choir and enables them to utilize technology to see this aspect of choral singing in a new way.

In this lesson, the teacher will need to either seek out or create examples of multi-track recordings of choral pieces (when each track is individually produced) and upload them to their Canvas or Google Classroom site for the students to mix. For this example, we will use *Os Justi* by Anton Bruckner.

Revitalize Solo Accompaniments with the Flexibility of MIDI Instrumentation:
https://youtu.be/47_3dJoG6iI



STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS:

- 1) Download all voice parts to your computer’s hard drive.

Revitalizing a solo with nontraditional instruments can support student learning and encourage positive practice habits. In this lesson, students will have the opportunity to customize an accompaniment track based on their preferred instrumentation. Utilizing the DAW to modify filters

of pre-existing MIDI pitches allows students to change the timbre of the sound while still maintaining the pitches of their accompaniment.

By making the selection more personalized, students may be encouraged to listen and practice their solo repertoire more frequently and effectively. For this example, we will use *America the Dream* by Steve Schuch, a modern take on the traditional *America the Beautiful*. Before the student interacts with the DAW, the teacher should take the following steps to pre-record the accompaniment:


TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS:

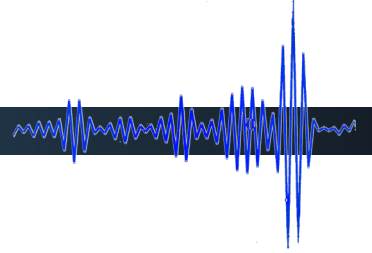
- 1) Log into your Bandlab account and click “Create.”
- 2) When entering the workstation, click “Instruments.”
- 3) Set the metronome to the given BPM of the selection you are recording.
- 4) Click the record button, indicated by the red circle on the top center of your DAW.
- 5) Play the accompaniment using the MIDI keyboard. If your piano skills are remedial, you may also choose to play one hand at a time and layer the others in later.
- 6) Create a new track. Play the right hand of the accompaniment using the MIDI keyboard in a similar fashion as step 5. For those who want to add more, here are two suggestions:
 - a) Create 1-4 countermelodies, arpeggiations, or chords, each on a new MIDI track.
 - b) Record yourself singing the given selection to serve as a vocal model for your student.
- 7) Export each channel individually by clicking on the three dots on each track. Choose “export MIDI” on your accompaniment tracks and “export as WAV” on your vocal tracks if you record them.
- 8) Place all of these files in a folder on your Canvas Account or Google Drive for your students to access.

STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS:

- 1) Download all midi tracks and sound files provided by your instructor.
- 2) Log into your Bandlab Account and click “create.”
- 3) Import all downloaded files into your workstation.
- 4) On each accompaniment track, customize the instrumentation by clicking on the channel and choose a different instrument from the screen’s drop-down menu on the bottom left-hand corner. Often, the default instrument will be Grand Piano.
- 5) Practice your solo with your newly customized accompaniment.
- 6) Extra Credit
 - a) Record yourself singing your solo with your customized accompaniment and export your work by clicking “File,” then “Download,” then “Mixdown.”
 - b) What different combinations of instruments did you find the most appealing in the process? What were some instrumental combinations that did not work particularly well together?

Conclusion

We believe DAWs represent a unique opportunity for learning, creativity, and technological integration for choral educators. Consider attempting some of the example projects from this article in the future. With careful planning, DAW integration may become a new and compelling feature of your choral music program. 



NOTES

- ¹ Janet Galvan and Matthew Clauhs, “The Virtual Choir as Collaboration,” *Choral Journal* 61, no. 3 (2020): 8–18.
- ² Adam Patrick Bell, *Dawn of the DAW: The Studio as Musical Instrument* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- ³ Steven N. Kelly and Kenna Veronee, “High School Students’ Perceptions of Nontraditional Music Classes,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 219 (Winter 2019): 77–89; Seth Pendergast and Nicole R. Robinson, “Secondary Students’ Preferences for Various Learning Conditions and Music Courses: A Comparison of School Music, Out-of-School Music, and Nonmusic Participants,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 68, no. 3 (2020): 264–285; Julie K. Bannerman and Emmet J. O’Leary, “Digital Natives Unplugged: Challenging Assumptions of Preservice Music Educators’ Technological Skills,” *Journal of Music Teacher Education* 30, no. 2 (2021): 10–23.
- ⁴ William J. Bauer, *Music Learning Today: Digital Pedagogy for Creating, Performing, and Responding to Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ⁵ Seth Pendergast, “Creative music-making with digital audio workstations,” *Music Educators Journal* 108, no. 2 (2021): 44–56.
- ⁶ Peter R. Webster, “Creative Thinking in Music: Advancing a Model,” in *Creativity and Music Education. Research to Practice: Volume 1*, eds. Timothy Sullivan and Lee Willingham (Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Music Educators’ Association, 2002).
- ⁷ Bauer, *Music Learning Today*.
- ⁸ Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel, *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

Composing for Middle and High School Choirs: A Conversation with Laura Farnell and Reginal Wright

by Mark Rohwer



Mark Rohwer is the director of fine arts for Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District (Dallas-Fort Worth, TX). He was previously the director of choral activities at Flower Mound High School for over twenty years. He is a member of the *Chor-*

Teach editorial board.



Laura Farnell is an active choral composer, clinician, accompanist, and adjudicator who resides in Arlington, Texas. She earned a BME from Baylor University and taught elementary and junior high music in Texas. In 2004 she received an Excellence in Education Award as the Arlington Independent School District's outstanding junior high teacher of the year. She is represented by Alliance Music Publications, BriLee Music, Hal Leonard Corporation, Heritage Music, Kjos Music Press, and other publishers.




Reginal Wright is a clinician, composer, conductor, and educator who teaches at Mansfield High School in Mansfield, Texas. He received BME and MME degrees from Stephen F. Austin University. His choirs have been featured at the TMEA and South-

west ACDA. He is a sought-after adjudicator/clinician on the middle and high school levels. Reginal has published compositions with Graphite Publishing, Hal Leonard, Carl Fischer, BriLee, and Santa Barbara Music Publishing Companies.

Describe the path that led you to composing music for middle school and high school choirs.

Farnell: I was fortunate to have a musically rich childhood, supportive parents, as well as caring and talented musicians and educators in my life, which laid the foundation for me to have opportunities in music. The path that led me specifically to composition likely began with my participation in the “improvisation” category of piano guild in elementary school.

While at Baylor University completing my music education degree, I took a choral composition class with Dr. Robert Young. His perspective, as well as collaboration with other class members, were formative for me. During my third year of teaching, I transitioned from teaching elementary music to junior high choir, at which point I found myself spending quite a lot of time adapting pieces to make them work for my seventh- and eight-grade tenor bass choir. At one point, I thought, “It would be so much easier



to write my own pieces,” so I gave it a try! When my students seemed to enjoy my arrangement of “Deck the Halls” and were successful performing it, I thought, “Maybe other directors and choirs would be able to enjoy this piece,” which prompted me to submit it for publication. After it was accepted, I was encouraged to write and arrange more pieces for my students.

Wright: I started composing music for school choirs due to a need for music for my high school tenor/bass choir. We had a strong, but mighty, twelve-voice men’s choir. The required music for the state festival list was well above the accessibility level for this band of humans. The more accessible music for the group was below their level. I composed a middle-of-the-road piece that contained some cool stylings along with a difficulty that was within their grasp.

As a singer or choral conductor yourself, what helped prepare or give perspective to your composing?

Farnell: My experience teaching junior high choir probably shaped my perspective most as a composer and was also my primary motivation to begin to write. I wanted my students to have successful performances, and I felt the literature options available then were limited in many ways. I first wrote for my students, and doing so prompted me to shape my writing styles for their needs, such as what ranges would work best, what types of styles and texts they would like to sing, and how to make the pieces simultaneously interesting and accessible.

Wright: My experiences as a middle and high school teacher/conductor gave me the best insight on what and how to compose. I tended to pay attention to the musical elements that my students liked, as well as voicings and compositional devices that allowed them to be successful. I loved writers like Morten Lauridsen and Z. Randall Stroope, who incorporated interesting harmonies, and Stephen Paulus, who used instruments as a continuation of the vocal sonorities.

Do you have anything specific in mind related to middle school or high school choirs when you are composing a piece?

Farnell: Definitely! When I’m writing a piece for a specific choir, I try to tailor it to that ensemble, which can definitely

be a challenge when I’m working on a piece for a choir and director I’ve never met! When I’m working on a non-commissioned composition for a developing choir, a limited range is something I strive to prioritize, especially in tenor-bass compositions. I also try to incorporate optional notes to allow directors the flexibility to make the best choices for their particular ensemble.

I also learned, first from Dr. Earlene Rentz in my choral methods class and later from personal experience, the importance of a supportive piano accompaniment part. Finally, I try to keep the text choice in mind as I write. I try not only to write music that uses poetry that speaks to my soul, but also to keep in mind, “How can I make these beautiful words accessible to the young artist?”

Wright: I am always doing my best to stay in tune with the needs of the student musicians, as some things have changed over the years in terms of the make-up of some choirs. I’d like to think that I am in tune with the overall specifics of young choirs in terms of appropriate skill level, tessitura, societal interests, and musical preferences for the age groups.

What are the challenges you find yourself facing as a composer?

Farnell: When I first started writing, one of my primary challenges was finding enough time to balance the writing process with the demands of teaching. When I stepped away from teaching full time, I found a similar challenge of balancing my creative process, which often requires large chunks of uninterrupted time, with the demands of being a mom and a part-time musician. I also face the challenge of “staying connected” meaningfully in classroom work so that my writing remains relevant. Additionally, finding public domain texts that simultaneously speak to my soul and are accessible enough for use with young singers is an ongoing challenge.

Wright: The biggest struggle I face at the present time is working to balance my life as a full-time husband and teacher while composing and conducting, where travel is mostly required.

Describe the publishing process for you. Is there anything about it that you think conductors or teacher might not be aware of?

Farnell: Once a piece is completed in Finale, the music notation software I use, I will submit it to the publisher for consideration for publication. Something that was surprising to me, and that I expect few directors realize, is the length of time from the initial conception of a piece to the availability of that printed piece.

Once a composition is written and submitted, months may pass until an editor or editorial board review it. Once a piece is accepted for publication, a contract and “proofs” are generated. When proof corrections are complete, the piece moves to the printing and recording phase, and then is finally available for purchase. This process takes many months, even a year, and involves many people. Finally, directors and singers might be surprised to learn that composers generally receive 10% of the sales of pieces. The other 90% pays the salaries of the editors, engravers, marketers, business personnel, marketing costs, etc. I wanted to highlight that fact to remind everyone to purchase enough copies for each singer in their choir. If a piece of music costs \$2 and a director purchases only five copies and then photocopies the remainder, the composer receives only \$1.

Wright: For the most part, publishing has been really good to me. I am still learning the ins and outs of the business, though. The big part that I think teachers/conductors should be aware of is how the funds are distributed. During the process of publishing a piece, the actual piece goes through several hands before being available to the end user. These include editors, parts singers, engravers, distributors and local retailers. Each of those entities take a piece of the pie. The more pieces sold, the bigger the pie. The standard percentage for the composer is 10%, therefore things like photocopying lessen the number of units sold, which hurts everyone involved in the process. This results in higher costs for printed/downloaded music.

How would you advise conductors or teachers go about finding, perusing, or studying your work, or the work of other composers?

Farnell: With regard to finding music, the internet has made so much music so accessible, even overwhelmingly so at times! But it’s still a wonderful resource for recordings and more. I think that finding the right “fit” of literature for your choir and their ability level might be the most important step in setting up an ensemble for a successful per-

formance experience. Another important factor is to select music you personally enjoy. If you aren’t excited about a piece of music yourself, motivating your singers to enjoy it will be especially challenging.

Wright: The internet is wonderful in allowing not only the ability to learn about composers, but also the ability to communicate with living composers. Most composers would be more than happy to do a workshop or Q/A with choirs via Zoom for free or for a small fee. Also, most composers have personal websites where their entire catalogs are listed and available to sample or purchase. Sites like YouTube and Soundcloud allow the ability to listen to compositions as well. These avenues often also give access to unpublished manuscripts.

What would you say to a conductor who wants to alter ranges, reduce parts, etc., in a piece that you’ve composed?

Farnell: In adjudicated choral contest setting, I’d advise against it. But, I have certainly altered other writers’ compositions and arrangements to make them work for my singers more times than I can count! I suppose some composers might not like the idea of people altering their work, but I personally view this practice as a compliment. I think, “Wow! Someone likes my music enough to spend time adapting it in order to use in their situation.” That said, if you find a situation-specific need for, say, a treble version of an SATB piece already in print, I’d encourage you to reach out to the composer or publisher with the idea. Sometimes these suggestions highlight a need or spark an idea that results in a new voicing or composition.

Wright: Have at it! My primary goal is for the choir to be successful. In many cases, if they contact me I could help with that in terms of lowering/raising keys or suggesting alternative voicings.

What advice would you give to a conductor who has purchased a piece that you have composed?

Farnell: I think my advice would be similar for any piece of choral music, be it my composition or another piece: study the piece so you can help your singers find the patterns as they learn, try to help your singers find an emo-

tional connection or learn a lesson from the message of the text and music, and enjoy the learning process.

Wright: First, work to make the music your own. Next... TEXT, TEXT, TEXT! The words of the song are everything for me. Last, please look for every detail within music. This includes dynamics, syllabic stress, articulations and suggested tone, and so much more.

What would you say to other choral artists who are interested in composing?

Farnell: “Please do!” The creative process is such a beautiful and uniquely human one, and sharing what is in your heart and mind with others is such a gift! I would especially encourage directors of developing choirs, and most especially tenor-bass changing voice choirs, to try to create art that can be used with that age group. I’d also say to find ways to have choirs perform your pieces and to ask directors and colleagues you respect to peruse your work. Finally, be intentional about finding the appropriate publishing “niche” for your submission. Just because a composition is not selected for publication does not mean the piece isn’t a good one! Perhaps the piece needs some adjustments. Or perhaps the piece itself is great, but the publisher has already filled their catalog slot for the “2-part slow winter lyrical” piece for that season.

Wright: Write as much as humanly possible. Share your music with others. Ask friends to perform your works. Publishing isn’t the end-all, but it will allow you to get your music into places you otherwise wouldn’t be able to access. Be willing to take suggestions and change accordingly.

Is there anything else that you would like to say to any conductors who are reading this? Or, is there another question that you wish I had asked?

Farnell: To conductors reading, I would love to add a word of gratitude for all that you do. Without your efforts, my work is reduced to lines and dots on a page. Also, I truly believe in the power of choral music to transform lives, make our world more beautiful, and to speak important messages. So, I’m incredibly grateful for your work to bring that art to life. I’d also like to add a special message to educators during these challenging times. On behalf of all

of the parents and students who never say it (but should), THANK YOU for all that you give of yourselves in your job. The passion you convey and the way you invest in people is so appreciated!

Wright: Thanks for performing my music. As a Black composer, I strive to write music of different styles as well as mostly nonidiomatic styles. As a twenty-two-year choral educator, I am well aware of the issues that we face in our classrooms and try to focus my compositions toward that end. Reach out to living composers for new works or to workshop one of their compositions. I am sure most would be happy to consider it if it will work in their schedule. **CT**



Lifting Up the Littles

Highlighting Your Youngest Singers Through Commissioned Works, Effective Rehearsal, and Performance Opportunities

by Jess Edelbrock

Jess Edelbrock is the community engagement director and associate conductor of the Tucson Girls Chorus. jedelbrock@tucsongirlschorus.org

Our youngest singers can do amazing things. They are keenly connected to their inner sense of musicality, they want to be challenged and uplifted, and they deserve opportunities to shine just as much as choirs that sing the most complex repertoire. These are some of the sentiments I hoped to communicate when the Tucson Girls Chorus' Bumblebee Singers performed at the ACDA National Children's & Community Youth Choir Conductors' Retreat in January 2022.

The "Bees" are TGC's K/1 choir, and the centerpiece of their set was "Now We Have Rivers," commissioned specifically for the Bumblebee Singers. The whole retreat concert was intended to showcase singers from all ages—from the Bees to the Cadet Choir from Phoenix Boys' Chorus (grades 2-3), to the middle school groups from Chandler Children's Chorus and Tucson Boys Chorus, up through the high school singers from the TGC and Phoenix Children's Chorus. It was an honor to be a part of a concert that was so intentionally crafted to accurately demonstrate the actual work so many of us do every day. All of the conductors involved in this concert were so proud to showcase the

depth of artistry that all ages are capable of, and we hope the multi-age structure can serve as a model for national conferences and other high-profile performances to come.

In this article we will explore ideas and practical applications for highlighting your youngest singers, setting them up for success, and showcasing their immense capabilities throughout your community.

First, a confession. I was incredibly nervous about bringing the Bees to the retreat and how they would be received. I was worried that the audience (other conductors, in this case!) would see the performance as introductory or cutesy, simply due to the age of the choir and the developmentally appropriate repertoire and tone. The concept of "choral excellence" and its apparent definition throughout the profession was looming in my mind every rehearsal. However, I was also so confident in the importance of showcasing the Bees's work, and each week they reminded me how eager and capable they were to dig into hard work and artistry.

After the performance, several conductors shared that the Bees's performance made them feel validated in what they do, which was the absolute best compliment I could have imagined. It is so easy to feel less important when you conduct the littles. I am here to tell you that your work is just as difficult, just as artistic, just as valuable as those who conduct the most prestigious groups in our field.



Part One: Collaborative Commissioning

Commissioned works are usually reserved for the “top” groups, but what if our kindergartners have this opportunity? What if they get to feel the same excitement and sense of ownership that comes with performing something that was created for and with them?

In 2018, I was preparing for my master’s recital. At the time, I conducted the Tucson Girls Chorus Bumblebee Singers (grades K-1) and Mariposa Singers (grades 6-8). For the Mariposas, I had a hard time narrowing down repertoire since there is so much age-appropriate, high-quality, engaging music available for middle school treble choirs. I encountered the opposite problem for the Bumblebees. While there are many accessible pieces out there for our youngest singers, I personally found too many of them to be either formulaic, intentionally silly, or in need of much adaptation to actually work for the group. There is nothing wrong with programming silly songs or pieces with similar forms (and I do program these things!). For this situation, however, I was looking for something that would engage the Bees on a different level.

Depending on your situation, you may need to advocate for a commission. In my case, the TGC Director (Dr. Marcela Molina) was fully open to the idea from the start. If your administration or director needs some convincing, you can emphasize the huge potential and unique skills that younger singers possess—their imagination, energy, openness, big

hearts, and much more. These qualities will certainly shine through a musical project and highlight the organization or school as a whole. Additionally, younger singers are the future older singers, and experiencing the sense of ownership and validation that comes with a collaborative commission project helps retain singers and parents. A commission for elementary singers also provides an opportunity for growth and impact beyond the particular ensemble; you are adding a much-needed piece to the repertoire that can be utilized in any young choir.

One of my colleagues in my master’s program, Matt Carlson, happened to be a great composer who was interested in writing exactly that: accessible music for less-available voicings that was still just as crafted as the most complex SATB divisi piece. Matt’s skills and aesthetic were just as much an impetus for this project as the need for a great Bumblebee piece. If you don’t already have a colleague in mind as a composer for your commissioning project, reach out to other children’s choirs, your state ACDA board, or a local college or university. (You could also reach out to Matt!) Chances are, somebody knows somebody who would be a good fit. Be sure to listen to some of the composer’s previous works to get a feel for their style.

For “Now We Have Rivers,” Matt and I were both open to each other’s input throughout the process. He was the expert in composition; I was the expert in exactly what my choir needed to be successful. We also agreed that this piece must be well crafted and provide a vehicle for the Bees to



*2021-2022 Tucson Girls Chorus Bumblebee Singers. Reprinted with permission.
Jess Edelbrock, Conductor; Nicky Manlove, Accompanist; Rosemarie Spece, Rehearsal Assistant*



35 *p* slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon rains
p slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon rains

37 slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon
 slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon rains
pp

39 rains slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon *ff*
 slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon rains *ff*
 mute head *f*
 (hold fermata as long as it takes for the decay to decrescendo)
 Ped.

Figure 1.

creates a three-part harmony (the Bumblebees omitted the G-sharp; the open fifth was enough of a challenge for this group).

So now you are ready to commission a piece for your elementary-age group! As you work with the composer, you can specify or have conversations about the following:

- Vocal range
- Special musical elements (e.g., adding body percussion, highlighting an instrumentalist from one of your groups)
- Musical concepts to focus on
- Voicing strategies for successful two- or three-part singing
- Accompaniment style
- Flexibility: what options are there to simplify the piece further if needed?

Here are some ideas for involving your singers in the process:

- Writing lyrics through individual submissions or as a group project

- Choosing what the piece is about
- Choosing specific musical elements, like which percussion instruments to include
- Composing the first line of the melody for the composer to draw from
- Choosing the overall form of the piece

Part Two: Singer-friendly Rehearsals

Movement

Many of us utilize movement in the rehearsal to attain and reinforce musical concepts, to increase student engagement, and to help unlock healthy sounds through connection with the body. These movements are often dropped for the performance or turned into “choralography” that has less to do with the desired musical effect. However, creating movement that both aids the singer *and* works for the stage is essential for nearly every piece the Bees rehearse and perform. This approach serves many purposes: harnessing the group’s energy, increasing focus, allowing space for singer input and creativity, and providing consistency between rehearsal and performance spaces.

Specific movements within “Now We Have Rivers” were developed to encourage specific tone, articulation, rhythm, and dynamics. They are not written into the score; rather,

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Now We Have Rivers". It consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef, marked with a tempo of "Flowing ♩ = 80" and a dynamic of "p". The lyrics "Now we have riv - ers" are written below the notes. The middle staff is a vocal line in treble clef, also marked with "p", with the lyrics "Now we have riv - ers" below it. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in bass clef, marked with "p" and "Flowing ♩ = 80". The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Figure 2.



they emerged organically throughout the score study and rehearsal process.

The first step to creating intentional movement as a conductor is to know the score well. Sing through every part multiple times and notice the many layers within each phrase (dynamics, rhythm, cut-offs, text, vocal technique challenges, etc). Choose a phrase and focus on one musical detail (perhaps dynamics first), loosen up and let yourself move in a way that helps *you* physically emphasize that concept. Sing through again, focusing on a different musical detail and a different movement. Now, is there a way to combine those movements to help your singers with both

goals through kinesthetic connection?

For example: in mm 11-15 of “Now We Have Rivers” (see Figure 3), the singers begin by crouching down slightly as they sing “clouds build,” stand and raise their arms along with the crescendo. They also pulse their hands open on the beat to internalize the length of the note and to achieve an accurate cut-off.

You can repeat this process to try and work in as many musical concepts as possible. Prioritize which portions of the movement to keep or remove if it starts feeling too awkward or becomes counterproductive for your singers. In the same excerpt (“clouds build”), we began rehearsing starting with a

The figure shows a musical score for measures 11-15. It includes staves for Part I, Part II, Percussion, and Piano. Part I and II have lyrics 'Clouds build' with dynamic markings p, mf, and f. The Percussion part features triplet patterns. The Piano part includes a 'loco' section and triplet accompaniment.

Figure 3.



complete crouch to the ground and a clap above the head on the cut off. This turned out to be too exaggerated for some of the Bees. Many would use the crouch as an opportunity to fully sit on the floor, and the clap encouraged some of them to yell the final consonant. We attempted to fix the issue by explaining that they should crouch instead of sit, and sing the consonant instead of yell, but a simple adjustment in the movement (to the standing from a slight bend and pulsing hands on the beat) proved to be *much* more effective.

Another way to hone in on effective movement is to involve the singers in the process. Young singers naturally move in ways that make sense to them, but they will need guidance to refine their ideas into something that will achieve the desired effect for the whole ensemble. Begin by playing or singing a large portion of the piece- singers can move either in their own space or around the whole room. Ask them to match the music using their whole body, then only their feet, only their arms, only their fingers, only their face, etc. Each time you repeat the exercise, prompt students to focus their attention on one of the musical concepts you would like to emphasize within a phrase or section (or ask them what they would like to listen for!). When you notice a motion that could help the group, ask the singer to demonstrate and have the whole group give it a try while singing the short phrase. You can then follow the same process as above to refine the movement into something that will help the singers best express and achieve the musical goal.

Your singers can be beautifully expressive, and they can also be very silly! Allowing moments of silliness through movement can help establish a culture of fun, trust, and validation. Young students are often told to calm down or focus (which is sometimes necessary), but providing a space for them to be themselves and explore the possibilities of music-making can both help them feel affirmed as a goofy young person and aid in their focus in the long run. Including movement in the rehearsal in both structured and less-structured ways harnesses our littles' energy to help them achieve great things in a positive and naturally motivating way.

Transferring the wonderful work you do in rehearsal also becomes easier when you keep movements consistent between practice and performance. Singers will feel more comfortable with the familiarity and internalized concepts, and are more likely to produce the same sounds they worked so hard to perfect if the associated movement is kept for the performance.

Part Three: Lifting Them Up

All of our singers deserve exciting and meaningful performance opportunities. When a prestigious or highly visible opportunity comes up, organizations and school programs often send their top or oldest group. There is nothing wrong with giving top ensembles wonderful opportunities, but our youngest and least-experienced singers should also be considered. In doing this it is essential to set our young singers up for success through appropriate repertoire, effective and engaging rehearsal, and high expectations enforced with kindness and encouragement.

As conductors of our young ones, we have the opportunity to educate not only singers but audiences. When you think of a typical outstanding choral performance, what comes to mind? Polished performances, professional stage presence, impeccable transitions? While these things have their place, it may be time to redefine success on the stage in order to be truly representative of the work we do as educators, singers, and human beings.

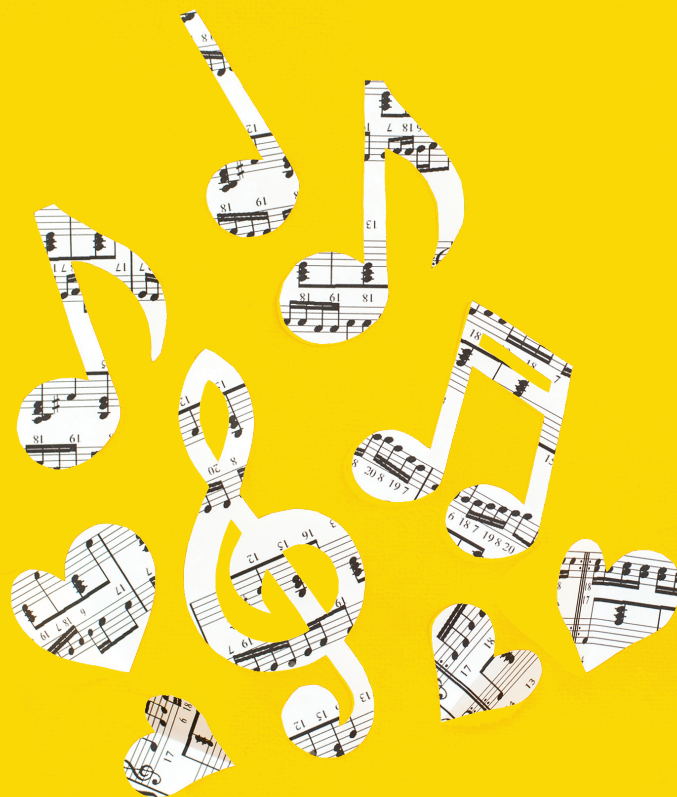
To do this, you must be brave. You must be proud of your non-conducting, because your singers may not need a beautiful legato 3/4 pattern; they may need you to do the movements with them. You must not apologize for the singer who is going to wave to their mom between pieces or literally sit down in the middle of a song (both of these things happened on stage at the National Retreat!). You must embrace mistakes while urging improvement. You must be proud of performing a set of just two or three pieces because they are high quality, challenging, and well done. You must name the fact that what the kids are doing is also art. You must spell that out and then you must let your singers show them what you mean.

Our singers know when we believe in them and when we are truly proud to show them off to the world. They will rise to the occasion, they will give you their whole hearts, and they will surprise you in the most meaningful ways. We simply need to give them the space to do it. Your work as conductors of the littles is so important. You are building the foundation for their musicality, their openness to new experiences, their sense of self-worth and teamwork, and their idea of what choir can be and who it's for. You already know that they can do amazing things; let's show the world! **CT**

To see the full movements for "Now We Have Rivers," visit <http://www.mattcarlson.co/now-we-have-rivers.html#/>

K-12 Resources: 12 Podcasts for Choral Music Educators

by Mindy Cook



Mindy Cook is the general music and chorus teacher at Heritage Middle School in Valdese, NC. She is a member of the NCMEA Technology Committee and the creator of the podcast “Learning To Become: Exploring Careers in Music.” mindykcook@gmail.com

Over the past several years, podcasts have increased in content diversity and availability. Podcasts can be listened to on your computer, phone, or tablet and can be a great way to fit in professional development while you are on the go.

This article does not provide a comprehensive list of all music education podcasts available. However, it covers a diverse range of topics relevant to choral music educators. You are encouraged to explore these podcasts and research others that could best fit your teaching needs. You can find these podcasts on most major podcast platforms (Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, Stitcher, etc.).

1) Afternoon Ti

“Afternoon Ti” is a music educator and lifestyle podcast. Host Jessica Grant is a middle school music educator certified in Orff-Schelwerk, Kodaly, and has some training in

Dalcroze. Most of the topics focus on ideas for the general music classroom, but Jessica features specialized episodes for choral music educators. Many of the ideas in the general music podcasts can also be applied to the chorus classroom. Jessica published a book called *The Afternoon Ti Guide to Teaching Music* with an accompanying journal that you can purchase at F-Flat Books or Amazon.

Average release schedule: weekly

Average episode length: 30 minutes

2) The Choir Chronicles

In this new podcast, two middle school choral directors, Clinton Hardy and Jodi Coke (The Choir Queen), come together to inspire other middle school choral directors. Conversations and advice stem from their personal experiences in the middle school classroom.

Average release schedule: weekly

Average episode length: 40 minutes



9) Music (ed) Matters

Dr. Emily Burch brings her enthusiastic and bubbly personality to this podcast made for “music lovers, educators, and choir members.” Emily is primarily a choral conductor, but with this podcast, she takes a general approach to music education, appealing to music educators of all types. Her book with Alex Gartner, *The Business of Choir: A Choral Leader’s Guide for Organizational Growth*, is available from GIA Publishing.

Average release schedule: weekly

Average episode length: 45 minutes

10) Music Mindfully Podcast

Aliah Elliot, a Canadian voice teacher, hosts this podcast focusing on mindfulness for musicians. Some topics discussed are performance anxiety, self-doubt, burnout, and rejection. This is a podcast that can benefit both your choir members and you personally.

Average release schedule: weekly

Average episode length: 30 minutes

11) Rhapsody in Black

In these short podcast episodes, choral conductor Tesfa Wondemagegnehu explores classical music that is “aesthetically and uncompromisingly Black.” Each episode dives into history discussing Black musicians’ impact on the classical music genre. Episodes can be found on YourClassical MPR and all major podcast platforms.

Average release schedule: weekly

Average episode length: 5 minutes

12) The Score

“The Score” describes itself as an “urban music education podcast.” Hosts Eric Jimenez and Justin McLean, high school band directors, have conversations about compassionate and culturally responsive music education. While some episodes are specific to band, many others have broad topics with experts from other fields in music education who are brought in to cover specialized topics. Most of the conversations are important and relevant across all sects of music education. Some topics include identity in music education, redefining success, avoiding burnout, white fragility in music education, and anti-racist teaching.

Average release schedule: two episodes per month

Average episode length: 60 minutes



Asking Facebook Colleagues What Enhances Choral Sound – A Pilot Study

by Derrick Thompson

Derrick Thompson taught for eight years in the Virginia school system, teaching elementary general music and conducting middle and high school choirs. He is currently the music program director and director of choral activities at Delaware State University. He is president-elect for Delaware ACDA.

Editor's note: This section will appear in each issue of *ChorTeach* and will preview a past article from the archives. You can view the full archives and the annotated *ChorTeach* index, with articles organized into seventeen categories, at acda.org/chorteach. (You must be logged into the website with your username and password.) Following is a preview of an article from the Winter 2019 issue.

From year to year, many choral conductors have their choir participate in festivals, district assessments, and other adjudications in an effort to receive feedback on what can be improved in their choral ensemble. Often, the conductor receives notes that will benefit the group, and sometimes students receive feedback from adjudicators that their choral conductor alluded to previously. The benefit of attending these events for the students and the choral conductor is having the opportunity to receive feedback from someone who doesn't normally hear the group and having the opportunity to listen to other choral groups from the area or district. After attending these choral events, students have conversations about the choral groups that performed.

They tend to ask the question, "How does that choir create such an amazing choral sound?" Or after reviewing feedback from adjudicators, many singers try to take the notes offered to help improve their next performance.

During the school year, conductors introduce many methods and approaches to help their students recognize the importance of proper singing technique and singing together as a group. These approaches can be presented through warm-ups, the repertoire chosen, or by listening to other high-quality performing ensembles. But the question is, what does choral and vocal pedagogy look and feel like, in action, in the classroom? What are we choral directors doing to enhance the sound of their choir and help our singers grow?

Available literature indicates that choral conductors' ideas (and singers' ideas) about a "great sounding choir" can vary depending on the perspectives of those individuals. Donald Neuen (1988) considers a great sounding choir to be one that uses energy, which includes buoyancy, deliberately formed vowel sounds, proper placement, and vocal control.¹ In Walter Lamble's *Handbook for Beginning Choral Educators*, the author asked eleven participants to describe the tone quality they felt was appropriate for a high school choir. Some of the responses included:

- Having the ability to sing with "cleanliness," intonation, matched vowels, and a moderately mature tone.
- Having a naturally sounding vocal production with good

resonance and breath support.

- Being open and free, natural and easy, supported and energized, flowing, focused and directed, and more vertically than laterally.
- And being well blended, including dynamic color and variety.²

Ultimately, it is up to the choral conductor to make sure that his or her students are capable of identifying a great choral sound when they hear it and understand how they can achieve that sound within their choral group. I do believe that it takes good planning, creativity, the right tools, and hard work to achieve the sound we are looking for with our choirs.³

Pilot Study

In order to receive feedback from choral conductors currently in the field, a Facebook post compiled by choral colleagues was created (a closed group) asking the question, “What do you consider important characteristics of a great sounding choir?” Responses included:

- Diction
- Tall, round vowels
- Clean, balanced sound across the whole choir
- Engaged singing
- Varied and appropriate sound for different and interesting literature
- Pure, clear tone, unified vowels, and crisp consonants when appropriate
- Appropriate tone for age of the individuals
- Intonation, rhythm, phrasing, vowels, dynamics, diction, and energy
- Relaxed vowels, ending consonants together, understanding the text, and supported tones that blend

- Properly shaped mouths
- Vibrant, healthy (not forced), and balanced tone from top to bottom
- Vocally healthy, unified vowels, beauty of sound, and appropriate tone colors
- Good intonation
- Unified vowels and a great understanding of dynamics
- Vitality/energy
- Tuneful, informed, and expressive singing
- Harmony (singing in tune with one another)
- The release of tension and complete freedom and movement causing singers’ bodies to be engaged in the music

Editor’s note: See the original article for the full list.

Based on the responses given, characteristics such as the importance of vowel unification, diction, and the use of energy and expression seemed to be recurring characteristics throughout the post. Even though these three characteristics are not the only areas to help improve a choral sound, literature can be found detailing how choral conductors employ these characteristics to enhance their choral group.

The article continues with sections discussing Vowel Unification, Diction, and Expressivity. The author also provides a detailed checklist for enhancing choral sound. [CT](#)

NOTES

- ¹ Donald L. Neuen, “The Sound of a Great Choir,” *Music Educators Journal* 75, no. 4 (1988), 44.
- ² Walter Lamble, *Handbook for Beginning Choral Educators* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), accessed June 1, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central, 28.
- ³ Paul Nesheim & Weston Noble, *Building Beautiful Voices: Singers Edition* (Dayton, Ohio: Roger Dean Publishing Company, 1995), 2.



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