

Remixing the Algorithm: TikTok for Choirs

Colleen McNickle



Colleen McNickle is assistant professor of music education at Arkansas State University. Dr. McNickle is the founder and author of “Inspired Choir,” a blog for choir leaders, singers, and enthusiasts. For more lesson and video ideas, a beginner’s guide to TikTok and Reels, and the full TikTok accounts to follow spreadsheet, visit inspiredchoir.com/social-media-for-choir/

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When you think of the social media application TikTok, it is likely your mind goes to the dance trends we see our students trying in our choir rooms during lunch time—or silly dog videos, cooking videos, makeup tutorials, or any number of similar short videos. This is certainly how I had classified TikTok in my mind, and this is why I stayed off the app for the longest time. However, in the summer of 2021, friends and family started sending me almost daily TikTok videos to watch, forcing me to download the app in order to keep up with their references and feedback requests. At this point, I came to find that while there *were* quite a few silly cat videos and dancing trends, my friends and family were sending me far more videos of choir rehearsals, voice les-

sons, student performances, and choir performances. This was how I discovered #choirtiktok.

What is Choir TikTok?

TikTok, the short-form video-sharing app that draws the attention of hundreds of millions of users (including many of our choir members and audiences), allows users to create and share short videos on any topic. *Choir TikTok* is the collection of videos for and by the community of choir TikTok-ers. It includes videos from a variety of elementary and secondary music teachers, and professional and amateur musicians and choirs. Additionally, it showcases student and teacher rehearsals and performances, teaching tips, recruitment videos, and trends.

Search “choir” in the app, and your screen will be populated with dozens of elementary, middle, high school, college & university, community, and professional choirs. You might also come across small vocal ensembles, composers, choir singers, voice therapists, voice teachers, and producers and performers of all kinds. Broaden your search to “music teachers,” and you will find band and orchestra teachers, K-12 teachers, piano teachers, music therapists, theater companies, music historians, music theorists, sound engineers, and more.

TikTok and Music Education

TikTok and similar video-based social media have the potential to not only serve as a tool of professional development for teachers, but also as a window into musical worlds beyond our classrooms for our students. Students today live in a tech-saturated world. Most of our students interact with social media on a daily basis, if not an hourly basis. One report shared that nearly half of adolescents visit social networking sites on a daily basis and spend an average of one hour dedicated to social media use and networking.¹ This seems like an underestimation in my experience working with adolescents. Recently, I suggested that a student Google something, and they said, “I’ll just look on TikTok.” If our students are already utilizing apps like TikTok as search engines, why shouldn’t we harness their search power for our good in the music room?

Music education researchers have suggested that social media can serve as an extension to classroom instruction.² Through the use of social media, students create connections to people and resources online and off that have the potential to enrich learning.³ Because many students view social media as an integral part of their lives, the use of apps like TikTok and Instagram within classroom instruction may lead to increased engagement, relevancy of the classroom, and differentiated learning.⁴

Videos Ideas Checklist

Want to post some videos on TikTok but don’t know where to start? Here are a few easy video ideas to try individually or with your students:

- Share a favorite warm-up and explain why you like it
- Demonstrate a vocal technique and describe how it works
- Share a sneak peek video of an upcoming performance
- Try a “guess the singer” video (all singers mouth the words while one singer sings)
- Share the history or cultural context of a piece you love
- Show off your singers’ sight reading skills
- Ask a question or pose a problem for audience response

Recent research on student response to TikTok in a variety of teaching contexts in the past three years revealed additional benefits. Teachers have reported gaining perspective into students’ lives, cultures, and worldviews through TikTok.⁵ Students who have used TikTok in educational settings report that learning is more fun when using the app.⁶ As they engage with social media, these students displayed higher levels of attention, interest, and understanding. Additionally, higher education students who interacted with TikTok in an educational setting appreciated the opportunity to develop digital skills.⁷ As navigation of a variety of technological applications is now a necessary skill set for many jobs, these students saw activities utilizing TikTok as an opportunity to develop technological skills.

Although social media can certainly have its downfalls (many of us have seen the reports on social isolation, cyberbullying, misinformation, and safety concerns), apps like TikTok are central to how many of our students are building their worldview. In the classroom, we have the opportunity to model healthy use of social media for learning and sharing. Through the use of social media apps like TikTok, our students have access to some of the best teachers and musicians in the world. Singers may explore a variety of musics, techniques, and styles. Students can share information with one another and dig into musical knowledge that interests them. Additionally, teachers have an extension of their instruction through social media, opening themselves up to improved interactions with students, teachers, families, and community members. Although social media cannot and should not replace traditional instruction, it can extend and supplement student interaction with music in a variety of ways.

How Do Choir Teachers Use TikTok?

One does not need to be a TikTok star to effectively use TikTok in their classrooms. Spend some time on the app, and you will find that choir teachers are using TikTok in a variety of ways. First, teachers are using TikTok videos as a teaching aide in and out of class, teaching notes, rhythms, melodies, music theory, musical concepts, musicianship skills, etc. Second, many music teachers, especially the casual TikTok browsers like me, watch TikTok videos to learn about or get refreshers on things like classroom management, teaching techniques, or classroom hacks. Third, music leaders are using TikTok as a recruitment tool, reaching out to all of the singers on TikTok. Fourth, choir teachers

are using TikTok to show off their students' work while also giving behind-the-scenes looks at their classroom management, conducting, instruction, and daily life. Additionally, we have choir teachers using TikTok as a coping tool and space for critique—sharing their struggles and receiving support from within the music education community. And finally, some choir teachers are simply using TikTok as a fun and silly space.

Examples: TikTok Lessons for Choir

Here are a few lessons to help ease you into using TikTok with your ensembles of any age. These lessons work best if you are able to project the prompts along with a QR code or post in your virtual classroom (Google Classroom, Moodle, Facebook Group, etc.) for students to complete online. When enacting any of these lessons, it is important to set boundaries with students regarding their use of social media during the lesson and beyond. If a student does not have access to or is not permitted to use social media apps, either pair them up with another student, or encourage them to complete a similar exercise using YouTube. As you read these examples, I encourage you to consider how you might be able to adapt them to your singers' needs and/or incorporate videos you have seen on a variety of social media platforms.

Bell Ringer Listening

Scan the QR code to watch the excerpt of “Waloyo Yamoni” by Christopher Tin with soloist Jimmer Bolden, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Angel City Chorale. Address the following prompts:



- Describe the tone and timbre of the choir.
- What expressive techniques did the soloist and ensembles utilize?
- How would you describe the overall effect of the performance?

Music Theory Challenge

Scan the QR code to watch the video “How to read music in one minute” and address the following prompts:



- What do you call a note in the second space?
- What do you call a note on the third line?
- What do you call a note on the space above the staff?
- What do you call a note on the space below the staff?

Search and Share

In groups of 3-4, find examples of the following on TikTok. Be prepared to share with the class.

- *Vocal Technique*: Find a tip on singing technique from a voice teacher, speech pathologist, or professional vocalist
- *Performance*: Find a performance of a song we are working on together. Use Instagram or YouTube if no pieces are on TikTok yet.
- *Behind the Scenes*: Find a behind-the-scenes look at a profession in music: performer, producer, arranger, composer, conductor, songwriter; sound mixer, etc.

Partner Warm-Up List Creation

Voice teacher Cheryl Porter shares warm-ups for vocalists on TikTok like the one linked in the QR code. With a partner, do one of the following:



- Create a warm-up routine of 5-7 vocal warm-ups from TikTok. Be prepared to share the list with your choir colleagues.
- Make a Warm-Up TikTok for others. (You do not need to post publicly—download and submit for credit.)

Group Parody Project

Parody is an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect. TikTok is full of parodies by amateur and professional musicians alike. In groups of 3-4, complete the following:

- Find a parody of a popular tune on TikTok. What did the singer(s) change about the piece to make it a parody?

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- Choose a piece of music for you and your small group to parody (at least 30 seconds).
- Although you do not have to post on TikTok, you will be asked to submit to the teacher for a class viewing.
- Create a duet providing commentary or responding to an already existing TikTok video.
- Propose a similar assignment that appeals to you more.

Duet Creation Activity

Duet is a function on TikTok that allows you to record alongside an existing video. Follow one of the following prompts to create your own duet:

- Create a duet singing with yourself.
- Create a duet or trio singing with 1 or 2 of your classmates.
- Create a duet singing alongside an already existing TikTok video.

Frequently Asked Questions

As I have presented on Music Teacher TikTok and Choir TikTok at state and national conferences, I have encountered several repeated concerns from music teachers, which I address below.

Is TikTok Safe?

TikTok is just about as safe as any other social media platform. Best practices for social media safety include being selective about the information that you include on your profile and within your videos. Examine your videos for location data. Are you unintentionally sharing your

Creators to Follow

There are so many creators to follow who contribute to Choir TikTok. Here are just a few active creators to follow if you are looking to populate your feed with choral creators:

Name	Handle	Follow For...
Myles Finn	@itsmrfinn	Warm-ups using pop music; performances
Yesenia Navarro Garcia	@yeseniathat1musicteacher	Everyday choir experiences; trends
Coty Raven Morris	@cotyraven	Car thoughts; BTS Choir Professor
Chanticleer	@chanticleersf	BTS the professional choral ensemble
Emily Morris	@emilykristenmorris	Warm-ups; voice teacher reactions; performing on Broadway
Cheryl Porter	@cherylporterdiva	Warm-ups; Exercises; Voice Builders; Voice Lesson BTS
Eric Whitacre	@ericwhitacreofficial	Daily life as a composer; Insight to his work
Biko's Manna	@bikosmanna	Young musicians
Kevin Woosley	@kevinwoosleypiano	Music Theory; Piano
Page to Stage	@pagetostagemusic	Ear Training; Pitch Memory Activities

school name, street name, house number, etc.? In addition, be careful about who you allow to direct message you. TikTok's privacy settings allow you to choose who can follow you, comment on your videos, duet and stitch your videos, etc. I also encourage you to utilize the digital well-being features in the app and on your phone, setting a timer to help limit your use of the app.

Am I Allowed to Post Videos of My Students?

Especially if you teach minors, check with your administration to see if your school's media release includes videos on social media. In a university, community, or professional setting, it is always courteous to ask permission of your ensemble members. Once you have the necessary permissions, film strategically to avoid showing those who elect to not be a part of videos. If you are posting on a personal account, it is best practice to not show students' faces. Showing singers' faces is more widely accepted if you are posting on an ensemble account.

What if I don't have anything new to add to the TikTok or Reels Dialogue?

Even if what you are saying or singing might not be unique, your voice or the voices of your ensemble will be. Add your voices to the dialogue!

Am I allowed to copy what another choir did?

Yes! So much of TikTok and Reels is imitation. Just make sure to give them credit in your caption.

Do I have to do trends?

No, you do not! If your goal is audience growth, they will help you. If your goal is to have fun and share your or your singers' work, trends are not necessary.

Conclusion

If you are considering utilizing TikTok with your ensembles, I encourage you to start simple and share short videos with students in order to start conversations or begin exploring techniques. Allow students to flex their searching skills and find examples of musical techniques or performances for the ensemble. This has the bonus effect of remixing their algorithms within the app, including choir in their scrolling more often. Develop professionally via TikTok by learning, asking for help, or sharing your expertise. There are teachers out there who want to learn from

your experience! When you are ready to go a bit deeper, ask students to create videos for the class, engaging the arts standards of create, perform, respond, connect. And finally, if you are so inclined, please do show off your students' hard work! Even if you don't post publicly, you can share with your community via email or in a private social media group.

Through the use of apps like TikTok, we have the opportunity to engage and challenge our choir students in new and exciting ways. Through the app, we have the opportunity to virtually bring high-caliber musicians, teachers, choirs, and so on into our classrooms to teach our students. We also have the chance to empower our students with the technological skills to learn from and interact with musicians around the world via social media.

NOTES

- ¹ Christina Bucknell Bossen and Rita Kottasz, "Uses and gratifications sought by pre-adolescent and adolescent TikTok consumers" *Young Consumers*, 21(4), (2020): 463-478. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/YC-07-2020-1186>
- ² Daniel J. Albert, "Social Media in Music Education: Extending Learning to Where Students 'Live.'" *Music Educators Journal*, 102(2), (2015): 31-38.
- ³ Robin Giebelhausen, "What the Tech Is Going On? Social Media and Your Music Classroom," *General Music Today*, 28(2), (2015): 39-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1048371314552523>
- ⁴ Sum Yi Lei, Dickson K. W. Chiu, Mavis Man-wai Lung, and Cheuk Ting Chan, "Exploring the aids of social media for musical instrument education," *International Journal of Music Education*, 39(2), (2021): 187-201. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0255761420986217>
- ⁵ Ioana Literat, "'Teachers act like We're robots': TikTok as a window into youth experiences of online learning during COVID-19." *AERA Open*, 7 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584219955>
- ⁶ Audrey Valeria Bernard, et al., "Expanding ESL students' vocabulary through TikTok videos" *Lensa (Semarang Online)*, 11(2), (2021): 171-184. <https://doi.org/10.26714/lensa.11.2.2021.171-184>
- ⁷ Paloma Escamilla-Fajardo, Mario Alguacil, and Samuel López-Carril, "Incorporating TikTok in higher education: Pedagogical perspectives from a corporal expression sport sciences course," *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sports and Tourism Education*, 28 (2021). doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2021.100302>