



A Delicate Balance— Caring for the Music and the Singers

by J. Dennis Morrissey



J. Dennis Morrissey is a past president of Illinois 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 at acda.org/chorteach. (You must be logged into the website with your username and password.) Following is a preview from the Spring 2021 issue.

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.

Jost: 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 probably 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 you-ness, 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.

Jost: 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.

This article continues with 3 questions:

- *How do you establish and maintain the ideal balance in rehearsal, especially in the face of mounting rehearsal pressures?*
- *How do you regain the balance in rehearsal if it has been lost?*
- *How do you enhance your ability as a conductor to care for the singers?* **CT**