

Everyday **Advocacy** for Your Choral Program

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WHAT IS ADVOCACY? Advocacy is an opportunity to share with other people, many of whom are decision makers in some way, why choral music matters—to us, to our singers, and to the world. Advocacy should not be a term that frightens us. It should be a term that inspires us to explain to others why choral music makes a difference for the better. There are many people who never had the opportunity to experience or understand the art form that is so important to us as choral conductors and music educators.

There are lots of ways to share the impact of music education, and many organizations have spent a good deal of time and energy compiling statistics, sharing research, and distributing creative tools for large- and small-scale advocacy. The National Association for Music Education (NAfME), Chorus America, Americans for the Arts, and National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) are some of the organizations who do this sort of work regularly, and we should all familiarize ourselves with the advocacy tools they provide. But statistics and studies tell only part of a story. They tell the larger story of why music or the choral art form is important and discuss the impact choral programs have in general, but these are probably not the primary reasons your principal, community foundation, or singers and their families support your choir. They are likely to be more interested in what you have to say than statistics provided by a national organization. Why are you a choral musician? Why do your singers show up to participate? When we tell our own story in conjunction with research about the impact of choral music, we provide complete and compelling reasons to prioritize, staff, and fund choral music in our schools and our communities.

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Part of the problem is that we know we *should* advocate for choral music, but we aren't sure how to do it. What do we say? To whom do we say it? We have our hands full selecting repertoire, writing lesson plans, studying scores, teaching and conducting, and meeting the individual needs of our singers. We are busy! Isn't a beautiful concert advocacy enough?

Simon Sinek's 2009 TED talk¹ and subsequent book, *Start With Why*, took the business and leadership worlds by storm. His thesis was that people are not as interested in a product as they are interested in why a business exists in the first place. The core belief, cause, or reason a business exists can be a compelling story. If a company sells its story, consumers are more likely to purchase its product, he claimed. He encourages CEOs to build a culture within their companies that is mission-driven and to hire people aligned with the company's core beliefs rather than those who are just excellent sales people. Identifying and prioritizing why a company exists, he argued, is foundational for success.

Although Sinek was speaking to business leaders, it is easy to see how his ideas are relevant to teaching and to advocacy. When we identify our core beliefs and values, we become better teachers, leaders, and storytellers. We can explain why it's important for a student to schedule choir amid Advanced Placement (AP) classes, a foundation to award our program a grant, or an adult to attend a weekly Tuesday night rehearsal across town. While we may have spent time creating our own mission statements as undergraduates, for most of us it has been a very long time since we checked in with our own "why." Consider:

- Why do you teach and conduct choirs?
- Why do your singers choose (and continue) to participate?
- Why did you enter the profession?
- Why do you stay in the profession?
- Why does singing matter to you?
- Why does singing matter to your choristers?

These are not easy questions, but the answers will help you shape your everyday advocacy stories.


It's All in the Marketing

If your program has a mission statement, or if you have a clear sense of your "why," be sure you have refined your message for your stakeholders. This will ensure that people understand and care about what you have to say. In essence, it's marketing—you are selling your advocacy story in a way that will be compelling to your supporters and to those who have never experienced choral music. How we convey our message is important.

Sinek does not discuss "how" in his TED talk, although he certainly doesn't ignore this crucial aspect of storytelling. Rather than discussing "how," he demonstrates it through the cadence of his spoken delivery, by using specific (and sometimes visual) examples, and by repeating key phrases as he delivers his message. We are not necessarily aware of the way in which he uses his presentation to sell us on his idea, and it works. In fact, if you have watched other TED videos that left you feeling inspired, you will see that they are all carefully crafted and practiced stories. This isn't a bad thing. On the contrary! Great storytelling is powerful, and humans have shared important information through story throughout time and across cultures. You have probably noticed that some of the best teachers are those who know how to engage a group of students through story. Great storytelling is great marketing, and advertising is built on powerful images, ideas, or vignettes.

Honing an idea so that it becomes more impactful is a great marketing skill and one we can all develop. In their 2007 book, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, Chip and Dan Heath analyze Malcolm Gladwell's concept of "stickiness"² to determine the principles that make an idea memorable. They came up with the acronym "SUCCES" as they identified these principles: simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, stories.³

While choral musicians don't necessarily need to consider each attribute when honing a story for advocacy purposes, there are a few that rise to the top. Remember that everyday advocacy is about working to balance national data and statistics that can feel broad and a bit nebulous. "Studies in the compendium show that the



arts help to create the kind of learning environment that is conducive to teacher and student success by fostering teacher innovation, a positive professional culture, community engagement, increased student attendance and retention, effective instructional practice, and school identity,” we learn from NAFME.⁴ This is important information, but it’s easy for someone outside the profession to see this as a statement full of buzzwords. Parents, students, administrators, and community members may have a difficult time understanding what this might mean to a student in their local high school, so we must help explain it. What we need here is an everyday advocacy statement—a concrete example to accompany the data results, a specific story from our own community.

If we take the statement above and consider specific instances where we can see “increased student attendance and retention” as a result of our choral program, we create deeper meaning. For instance, consider a letter my colleague received from R., who said that the reason he graduated from high school was because of choir. It was the only class in which he felt cared for and valued as part of a community. He wanted to feel that way every day, so he didn’t drop out of school. *This* is a simple, concrete, credible, emotional example of “increased student attendance and retention.” It is a story we can tell funders, administrators, and parents. It is concrete evidence that someone who has never experienced being part of a choral community can understand.

As advocates for choral music, emotion is also important because it can factor heavily into the decision-making processes. It’s likely the reason GoFundMe or Kickstarter fundraising efforts work: we read a compelling story of a person and their specific need, and we feel an emotional response. This translates into a small donation we might not otherwise make. The Heaths remind us that “when people think analytically, they’re less likely to think emotionally.”⁵ Now return to the “why” questions in the first section. Are there any emotional aspects to your answers? Is there anything there that might resonate with your community?

Consider engaging your singers in this process too. There is likely a significant emotional component to their experience in your choir. Diving into the emotional power of choral music is a way to help an audience member or decision maker care about your “why.” And

when someone cares, they are more likely to advocate on your program’s behalf; you have created additional supporters who can, and want to, tell your story.

Thinking carefully about *how* we share our “why” is an important part of advocacy. Nobody wants to be guilted into participation or funding (in fact, this doesn’t work), and abstract or analytical statements will get us only so far. If we wish to engage in everyday advocacy, we need to tell a compelling story about why choral music is important and impactful, keeping our message heartfelt, specific, and easy to understand. What if we made this a key component of every performance?

Tell Your Story: Tools for Everyday Advocacy

Although our rehearsal schedules, personnel, and repertoire vary widely, we all share our choir’s music with other people. While we know that a heartfelt performance is a type of advocacy, this section will encourage you to be intentional about your advocacy choices as you put together a concert. Whether formal or informal, your performance is outward-facing and can include a variety of tools woven into your everyday work life. Explore these suggestions with the idea of trying one or two; think about what might be the easiest to implement. Consider, too, what can be done by volunteers—board members, parents, teaching colleagues, or singers themselves—with the messages you want them to use. If you begin to weave choral advocacy into your everyday tasks, you will notice that it becomes easier. It will be just one more lens you use when you make decisions that affect your program or your singers.

Concert Themes and Program Notes

The idea of concert themes is one that many teacher-conductors use to pull repertoire together for a concert. Themes are helpful because they can help to push us into a different mode of creativity as we work to connect pieces, create an arc of performance, and look for common threads. But themes can be far too limiting (“animals,” “colors,” “nature”) and far too general (“folk songs,” “winter wonderland”) to be of significant pedagogical use. Furthermore, limiting or general themes don’t add depth to a program for our audience members or for our singers. They don’t inspire connection,

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global thinking, or deep conversations. When done well, thematic ideas can help us focus on larger concepts we want our singers (and attendees) to explore or learn more about. Whether musical or nonmusical ideas, themes are ways for us to explore our common humanity through the choral art.

For example, a recent program theme from the Lawrence Academy Girl Choirs in Wisconsin was “We Raise Our Voices,” a concert based on the words and lived experiences of Malala Yousafzai. The title was inspired by the following quotation from Malala: “I raise up my voice—not so I can shout but so that those without a voice can be heard. We cannot succeed when half of us are held back.” It would be easy for us to focus on the phrase “raise up my voice” and connect it to singing. Equally easy, since Lawrence’s is a choral program for those who identify as female, would be to create a concert that was about female empowerment, or about Malala’s specific cause: the importance of education for girls and women.

Instead, the approach to this theme was much broader, which encouraged the teacher-conductors to program diverse repertoire and explore a wide range of musical skills, emotions, and knowledge. It centered the words and life of a young Muslim woman from Pakistan and drew parallels to music and people across time and place. Here is an excerpt from the artistic director’s thoughts from the printed program:

“Although it would have been easy to create a concert that focused solely on access to education and empowerment of girls and women, I was drawn to Malala’s entire story. She faced adversity, speaks publicly on behalf of other girls and young women, and believes in peace and forgiveness. As a young person, she lives as a refugee yet uses her remarkable story to increase girls’ access to education around the world. It seemed obvious to me that we could also examine access to music-making opportunities for women and girls throughout history, explore the role of music in protest or social change, and be inspired to use our own voices for causes we care about.”⁶

The theme was unpacked in extensive program notes

beneath each selection, so the audience could see exactly how pieces like *Hine Ma Tov* (Naplan), *Blustery Day* and *Miss Rumphius* (Ebel-Sabo), *De Colores* (arr. Weston), *The Duel* (Cary Miller), “Esurientes implevit bonis” from *Magnificat* (Vivaldi), *Family Tree* (Hatfield), *Aure volanti* (Caccini), *Járba, Mâré Járba* (Roma, arr. Adkins), *Iraqi Peace Song* (Hillestat/Reiersrud/Tennenhouse), *O virtus sapientiae* (Hildegard), *Miserere mei Deus* (Aleotti, ed. Bowen), *How Can I Cry* (Smiley), *Still I Rise* (Powell), *Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around* (arr. Dilworth), and several others related to the thematic idea. The program notes not only shared information about the composer, time period, compositional devices, or text; they also showed how each piece connected to the theme. Here is an excerpt from the program notes for “Esurientes implevit bonis”:

“In this movement, Mary acknowledges that God sees and lifts up those in need. [Choir] members explored the concepts of ‘needs’ and ‘wants’ outside the context of this verse. They reflected on the question, ‘What needs are universal to all humans?’ ... Singers shared ideas related to physical needs (shelter, food, clothing) and emotional needs (love, safety, peace). ... Just as Malala uses her voice to speak up, singers pledged to use their own voices to advocate for the needs of others in our community. ... Musically, this piece stretched our singers, as the vocal lines include parallel motion, imitation, and melodic sequences that require well-developed independent singing skills. The learning process required persistence and tenacity, the courage to make mistakes, and an unwavering focus on finishing the task as confident and accomplished musicians.”⁷

Notice that this teacher-conductor shares musical and nonmusical learning goals, briefly describes the process by which those goals were met, and explicitly states that learning this piece was a challenging process. These notes also brilliantly connect a biblical story set by Antonio Vivaldi to Malala Yousafzai and demonstrate how singers made connections between these themes and their own lives. These are powerful ways to explicitly show why being in this choir, or supporting this choral program, is



valuable.

Programs that contain this much information, along with singers' names and other basic data, are admittedly expensive to create. Consider, therefore, ways to make the printing cost effective. Might your school's graphic design and printing classes work on this as a project? Can you find a business sponsor to cover the cost of professional layout and printing, or could you sell advertising to parents or local businesses? Is there a Booster Club with money to support this advocacy idea? Alternatively, what if singers themselves wrote program notes—with the same type of content—and narrated them to the audience in real time? Singers could contribute ideas, the teacher-conductor could compile them into a short paragraph, and a singer comfortable with public speaking could share the notes on behalf of the choir before each selection. Is there a screen and projector available for your use? If easy enough to see, notes for each piece could be projected while the choir sings it. In short, don't let money stand in the way of your goal to educate and advocate during your concert.

Taking the time to write program notes that explain both musical and extra-musical learnings is a deep form of advocacy and develops audience members who understand and care about a choral program. In addition, if program notes are supported by a concert theme that—while unifying the concert—encourages global thinking and allows for a diverse range of repertoire, it's easy for audience members to understand the power of choral music.

Invitations

An easy way to advocate for your program is to send invitations to local elected officials and other decision makers (superintendent, school or foundation board members, mayor, state or federal congressperson, etc). When you do, include your program's mission or your personal "why" along with your concert theme. Getting decision makers in the concert hall gives them a first-person experience with your program and helps them understand why it matters. When they attend, they are likely to interact with parents or community members who already love what you do, so they will also hear positive stories from those in the seats around them. It's hard not to be swept up in the joy a choral concert brings.

Consider inviting arts colleagues and local arts leaders with a similarly comprehensive invitation. Even if they don't attend, they will know a little more about your program and why you believe choral music matters. If they do attend, they will have an impactful first-hand experience with your singers. These colleagues may turn into collaborators, thereby strengthening ties in your community.

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Another group of advocates are your alums. Do you have a way to encourage their attendance at your concerts? Are social media or an emailed newsletter ways to engage more alums than you currently do? Many alums feel sentimental about their time in choral programs and can be the very best advocates. Inviting them to your performances is a great way to keep them connected with your program. This can lead to donations, volunteers, or rehearsal visits that inspire your current singers.

Regardless of who you invite, try to keep track of who actually attends. (One way to do this is to leave a ticket with their name at Will Call. After the performance, you can see whose tickets remain unused. If your concerts are free, have volunteers who pass out programs watch for certain "dignitaries.") Follow up with a thank you card and be sure they know the date of your next performance. For those who don't attend, consider mailing a concert program so that they can see the concert theme fleshed out, and be sure to include an invitation to your next performance. Eventually, they may choose to join you.

Advertising

Depending upon your program, you may have a school newsletter, web page, or social media channels.

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You might do press releases and keep your fingers crossed that your event gets picked up by the local paper or news station. But do you just advertise the concert's date and time, or do you share your mission and an impactful concert theme when you write that newsletter article? Could your social media channels point back to a web page that discusses your mission or theme more deeply? How else can you advertise for your *program*, not just your concert?

Local newspapers are becoming less responsive to local arts news in many areas of the country, and many papers that still include a few local stories are understaffed. What if you pitched the idea of writing a short arts-related article once per month with other arts leaders in your area? These articles can feature aspects of your program that people might not know about, highlighting the impactful work the arts can do. As you frame these articles, mention your concert, but don't make the article a substitute for a press release. Why should a non-musician care about your topic or your program? Lead with that idea and develop it so that musicians and non-musicians learn something more about your choir(s). This type of advocacy is holistic—and shows many ways the arts impact your community. As a bonus, the next time you advertise for a concert, the general public may remember an article you wrote and decide to attend.

As you gather arts leaders to create a schedule of articles for your local newspaper, consider organizing a program that offers free tickets to each group's performances. This idea serves as advertising, advocacy, and addresses access by removing the barrier of cost. Several communities are bringing arts groups together and partnering with their local libraries to create these opportunities. Each organization donates one or two certificates for two tickets to an event, and library patrons check out these certificates as they would a book. The certificates contain the organization's mission statement and concert details (date/time/venue/theme). Groups who have been doing this for years report that it grows their audience and increases community awareness of their program. It's up to you to decide what the parameters will be, and the library staff will need to administer the program, but it's an easy and low-cost way to invite new people into your concert hall, hopefully creating new advocates.

Some conductors send singers to local television stations to sing a few morning spots in the lead up to a per-

formance. But is the discussion about the choir's mission and the impact of the concert theme, or is more time spent talking about when the concert is and how people get tickets? Nuts and bolts are important, but spending more time on why non-musician, non-family members should attend might motivate them to join you. Ask the television station if they would be willing to put the organization's name and website on the bottom of the screen as the choir sings; this visual reminder will help those watching remember how to find out more.

However you advertise, think like a newspaper reporter. Why should someone attend this particular performance? Why is your concert theme impactful and interesting? Why does your choral program's mission matter? These are all ways to advocate for choral music by telling your choir's story.

Singers' Voices

Musicians have a very public, yet simultaneously very private, job. We practice and rehearse until we are happy with our preparation, then step out into the world to share what we have done. What if, instead, we allowed our community to see our process, to watch how our singers grow, learn, and feel before the concert itself?

Open rehearsal or classroom days are good ways to show the joyful work we do. During these open days, provide a lesson plan write-up of sorts with octavos for visitors to look at, if possible. Your plan can be made accessible to non-musicians by discussing learning goals for that day and breaking them into musical skill, knowledge, and affective domains. Include the visitors in aspects of the rehearsal, whether singing or responding to a thoughtful question. After one rehearsal, they might be amazed at how much your singers—and they—have learned.

As assessment strategies have moved past "Listen for the correct notes and rhythms," we sometimes collect artifacts—index card responses, journal entries, perhaps projects or related art works. Save these and share some of them with the public in a newsletter article or social media post, as an addition to a note to your legislator, as part of a slide show before your performance, as a display in the lobby on concert night, or whenever you need to advocate for your program. Your singers' reflections on a carefully crafted question related to the music

they are preparing will show how you are educating them beyond the notes and engaging them in their learning.

Have you had your singers write to younger singers who might one day join your class or choir? What advice would they give to those singers? What do they love about being in your choir now and what do younger singers have to look forward to? Asking why music matters by framing it with specificity (“What advice would you give to a singer at Odyssey Middle School who might choose to be in our high school choir?”) can yield powerful answers. It’s easy to turn these questions toward whatever audience you have in mind. Reword it accordingly to target future choristers, legislators, school board members or principals, or funders.

If you have a small group of singers in leadership positions, consider looking at some of the national data and statistics with them. As mentioned earlier in this article, you may be able to discuss a particular data-driven advocacy statement together and concretize it with a story from your program. Pairing a statement from NAfME with a few sentences from one of your singers is a great way to give specific examples to help people understand the data and its importance. These could appear in your concert program, on a website, as a social media post, in a newsletter, or on a bulletin board—there are myriad possibilities. The primary point is that your singers may be the ones to tell the most impactful stories, so help them do so by giving them carefully planned questions that will elicit deep responses. Then share those responses as widely and creatively as you can.

Be Comprehensive

We never really know who will become our strongest supporters, so we must learn to balance a variety of approaches as we advocate for our programs. Using tools from national music and arts advocacy organizations, being aware of the current laws, and learning to tell our own stories effectively can ensure a balanced approach. The companion articles in this issue of the *Choral Journal* will give you more of this information, as does ACDA Advocacy and Collaboration committee co-chair Lynn Brinckmeyer’s book *Advocate for Music! A Guide to User-Friendly Strategies*.⁸

If we want to tell our stories clearly and compellingly,

we must identify our core values and guiding principles; these are the heart of everyday advocacy. Our stories become the message of everyday tools to engage and educate our communities. Go beyond the general research, beyond the beauty of the choir’s performance, and articulate the most profound reasons you and your singers are involved in your choral program.

Former U.S. Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill is remembered for saying, “All politics is local.”⁹ Whether or not this statement is true, we do well to remember that local issues are important to communities, and that sharing the value of choral music is an important part of our job. If we don’t advocate for the choral art, who will? ■

NOTES

- ¹ Simon Sinek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” *TEDx Puget Sound* (September 2009) https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en.
- ² Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2000): 89-132.
- ³ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007).
- ⁴ Music Achievement Council, *Tips for Success*, “Telling the Story: What Research Shows,” <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/music-achievement-council-resources-educators/telling-story-research-shows/>.
- ⁵ Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 167.
- ⁶ Karen Bruno, Program Notes, “We Raise Our Voices” (Appleton, WI: Lawrence University Memorial Chapel, March 23, 2019).
- ⁷ Toni Weijola, Program Notes, “We Raise Our Voices” (Appleton, WI: Lawrence University Memorial Chapel, March 23, 2019).
- ⁸ Lynn Brinckmeyer, *Advocate for Music! A Guide to User-Friendly Strategies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 83-122.
- ⁹ Thomas P. O’Neill and Gary Hymel, *All Politics is Local and Other Rules of the Game* (Holbrook, MA: Bob Adams, Inc., 1994).