

Practical Teaching Ideas for Today's Music Educator

CHOR TEACH



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Welcome to the second issue of ACDA's new online magazine for choral director/music educators who are searching for answers and need fresh ideas or techniques to meet practical needs. The articles below have been gleaned from state ACDA newsletters around the United States. The topics presented each issue will vary, but over time, you can expect to see helpful teaching points in articles which address vocal pedagogy, choral techniques, vocalises for various age singers, boys' voices, girls' voices, choral literature, special needs singers, classroom management, technology resources, and much more.

ChorTeach, our name, is derived from the German word for chorus, chor. It is pronounced, as most of you know, like the word, core. I hope ChorTeach's articles will be a breath of fresh air for you, provide you with a few ideas or techniques that give you a lift and help your singers reach the goals you and they have set. ChorTeach is designed for those of you who work with amateur singers at all levels.

Do you have a favorite article from a previous state newsletter you would like to share with colleagues from around the world? Scan it. Email it to me (Word format only). I'll look it over. Be sure to include the following information: state newsletter title, volume and issue number, year, title of the article, author of the article, your name and email address. Articles chosen for inclusion in ChorTeach can be reprinted only with permission of the parent state newsletter.

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Mix It Up – You Won't Believe What Will Happen

by

Danny Detrick

(Reprinted with permission from *Texas Sings*, Vol. 24, No. 2 Winter 2008)

This year, I have had the best rehearsals with my choirs I can recall. Because the singers speak up, they tell me they are having more fun than ever. What has happened? We have “mixed it up” and have broken free from traditional sectional standing arrangements, e.g., S-B-T-A, and have moved to new mixed formations. The results have been deeply rewarding for me as the director and for my choir members too.

Traditional Arrangement By Section

For years, I held on to the idea that there is strength in numbers and that standing in sections is the best way to go for all ages, levels, and types of choirs. Having one voice type together would help me unify that section's tonal production, timbre, tuning, etc. Weaker singers would become stronger because they were surrounded by the lead voices in that section. I spent plenty of time “voicing” each section by placing singers in order of brightest-to-darkest tone, lightest-to-heaviest production, etc.

Traditional section-based formations do help smooth out the overall sound of a choir. For entry-level and training choirs, both in high school and middle school, section singing is probably the way to go. But as singers progress to more advanced choirs and exhibit solid vocal production and good reading skills, spreading the singers out and mixing the sections has an amazing affect.

Problems with Traditional Sectional Formations

I have been plagued by problems arising from the traditional, keep-all-of-same-voice-types-together arrangement

and have struggled to find solutions. In my experience, sectional singing magnifies tuning problems. All it takes is one tenor who sings flat to drag an entire section down, and he doesn't have to be the loudest singer in his section!

I have to admit that if a section is under pitch, it can be difficult to pinpoint the individual causing it. Of course I can take the time to have each person sing the problem phrase or pitch, but such an approach is time-consuming and often a negative experience for some singers.

Tuning also applies across the choir as groups work to align and balance chords. When you are an alto surrounded by other altos, it can be difficult to hear another part, tune with it, etc.

Sectional singing can magnify tone problems. Singers don't hear their individual vowel colors nearly well enough when they are in sections. As we rehearse, I see singers' jaws dropped. I think everything should be fine, but I still don't hear the tone I want. So I stare at the section and think or say, “Who is it?” The singers look at me and, of course, are positive they are doing exactly what is right.

Volume and balance issues can also be problematic. I find that there is competition within each section for vocal dominance. Lighter voices, instead of singing within the ensemble and listening to the music, spend their time either trying to be heard, or they simply give up and sing for themselves. Surely I am not the only director who has heard a student say, “I can't hear myself because the girl behind me sings so loudly!”

From my vantage point on the podium, the “girl behind her” doesn't necessarily sing too loudly. She just has a bigger voice and is a leader within the section. But the girl in front is frustrated and feels drowned out. The bigger

voice makes the smaller voice feel inadequate. The smaller-voice person does not think that her contribution to the section matters. And that's not good, of course.

Also, individual voices with vocal problems can hide rather easily within a section. How many times have you said, "Who missed that note?" and received a blank look from the section? That singer may not know about her mistake. At that point, I could go into individual testing mode, but the ticking of the clock forces me to ask the section to sing the passage again. I believe singing in sections gives singers a false sense of security and often masks individual pitch or rhythm mistakes or poorly produced tone.

Mix It Up

After our Fall Concert this past year, I was not pleased with the overall sound of my top choir. I had not been able to fix several tuning issues. After a confessional call to one of my mentors (I admitted I was at a loss, and I begged for his advice), he came to listen to the choir. After singing in an S-A-T-B sectional arrangement, we mixed it up. Within each section, singers numbered off from 1 to 4. When that was accomplished, everyone moved to his or her numbered group thus creating four mixed sections with an equal number of voices on each part. We sang our music again. It was magic! We haven't gone back to the old section arrangement since that day. Here are the reasons why:

The students tuned better because they could hear the other voice parts and the overall sound of the music. My students now talk about how much they love listening to each other. Aren't we constantly asking our choirs to listen and tune to the other sections? Now each singer is surrounded by individuals rehearsing the other parts.

Tone production improved greatly. In this scrambled arrangement, I have found that sections learn vowel production and voice placement better from each other than they do from within their sections. I no longer hear a shallow, bright second soprano section. Now, I hear individual second sopranos if they aren't listening carefully

to their peers. With the change to scrambled formation, they are accountable.

Identifying problems became much easier. Instead of looking at a section and wondering which singer was having problems, I found myself pinpointing the problem because singers weren't buried within that section. A wrong pitch sung by a bass is no longer a section issue but an individual one.

Many times now I have seen a look of amazement on a student's face as he realizes he's singing a wrong pitch or rhythm. He truly did not know he was the culprit. The speed and accuracy with which I can identify problems has improved, and individual singers' corrections of problems have increased significantly.

Balance issues were resolved because spreading the voices across the choir diffused hot spots of sound. If an individual was singing too loudly, it was instantly apparent to me and to her, and she adjusted quickly. Smaller, younger voices which I thought would be terrified with the change actually love it! Having a student say "I can hear myself" —with a big grin on his face—is priceless.

Discipline problems evaporated—something I was not expecting! In the new scrambled arrangement, students are not four separate teams divided by gender but one choir creating sound and making music together. They talk less and are eager to jump into the music.

Musicality improved. My experience has been that girls are typically more expressive than guys. Girls, at my school, are more assertive when it comes to volume and tempo changes. If we need a dramatic decrescendo or a sensitive rubato at the end of a phrase, girls get it more quickly. They become leaders by example. The guys follow them!

Any time a given part is not singing, those individuals must continue to be involved and pay attention. Why? Everyone is surrounded by the other parts. How many times have the women in your choir been singing a verse designated for SA unison and you look at the men and realize that they have tuned out? They seem to bide their time until they have something to sing.

As we worked on the women-only verse of Robert Young's "In the Bleak Mid-Winter", I became acutely aware that my men were enthralled with what was hap-

pening and continued to listen intently to the ladies around them. Even though they weren't singing, the men realized they were a part of the music.

Individual accountability has skyrocketed. This has been incredibly important.

The Bottom Line

A mixed arrangement with singers, a modified scramble, has helped my students individually and as a choir immensely. It has also sharpened my hearing and my ability to diagnose problems. I told a colleague what we were doing and suggested he try it. His voice mail the next day reflected an excitement each of us can experience. His choir had as much success with this new approach as we did. He went one step further and tried it with his women's choir and had superb results.

My mixed choirs now utilize three standing formations:

1. traditional sections—all the sopranos together, all altos together, etc.
2. soprano/tenor mixed, bass/alto mixed or a slight variation: soprano/bass mixed, alto/tenor mixed
3. completely scrambled, e.g., SATBSATBSATB throughout the choir

Our goal now is to rehearse completely scrambled as much as possible. My students were initially concerned about learning new music in this formation, so we agreed to start in sections but progress to mixed formation as soon as we could.

I was reluctant to try this new idea with our Junior Varsity Mixed Choir, but the ensemble had surprising success with arrangement 2 above. I didn't spend long hours trying to decide who stood where. Once the voices were spread out, it became quite clear if an individual

needed to be moved to another spot. Some young and/or insecure singers will need to have a person from their section standing with them for some time. To date, those cases have been small in number in my school.

If you aren't already "mixed up," I encourage you to experiment with it. Let your singers grow in a new way, and see what happens. You—and your singers—are in for a pleasant surprise!

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit (Aristotle)



"Choir Lite" – Less Time, Just as Fulfilling!

by

Lee G. Barrow

(Reprinted from the ACDA Southern Division Newsletter,
Vol. 25 No. 1, Fall 2008)

During my 25 years as a church choir director, I have often sought to recruit new members for my choirs. One of the most common excuses I heard from potential members for not joining was the ongoing time commitment required. Many aspects of their lives—dealing with children, frequent out-of-town trips, job responsibilities, and at one church, part-year residency—made these singers reluctant to commit to the nonstop regimen of regular weekly rehearsals and Sunday services. I sometimes tried a "join and come when you can" approach, but few responded, and with those who did, the resulting uncertainty of exactly when they would attend was less than

satisfactory for all involved.

Several years ago, a part-year resident couple who traveled often heard that we were performing one of their favorite large works. They approached me and asked if there was any way they could join us to perform just that particular work. Since the husband was a tenor, how could I refuse? Thus a tradition was born.

After that experience, I developed several yearly invitations to join the choir with a short-term commitment which I designated "Short-Term Choir" or "Choir Lite." At least twice each year, I advertised the idea, which included a six-week period leading up to a major performance occurring most often at Christmas and Easter.

Singers were encouraged to join just for those six weeks. The requirements were simple: come to at least four of the six rehearsals, and then sing with us at the designated service or performance. Singing at the intervening Sunday services was optional but encouraged, as long as the singers had attended the previous two rehearsals and had learned the anthem well.

Rehearsals were planned in such a way that the "short-term singers" who were not singing on Sundays could leave early. After first rehearsing the coming Sunday's anthem (I always started and ended the rehearsal with the upcoming anthem), we then worked on the cantata or other music for the special service. Those who were not singing on Sundays could leave, and I concluded our rehearsal with the music for future services.

A number of people responded to these invitations, excited to have the opportunity to serve without a long-term commitment. Most also joined us for the intervening Sundays. For those who didn't, starting the rehearsal with the next Sunday's anthem often got them interested enough to change their minds.

Another benefit of this approach was the identification of potential "pinch hitters" for those Sundays when the absence of regular members created a weakness in one of my sections. Many of the short-term singers were happy to join us for a couple of weeks to fill out a section when needed.

Most importantly, about a quarter of the short-term

singers eventually joined the choir on a long-term basis. The short-term commitment got them in the door, but the camaraderie and sense of fulfillment kept them coming back. This method of recruitment was far more successful than all of my previous efforts combined. Not only did the Short-Term Choir Program increase the number of singers for our special presentations, it also increased the number of regular members in my choir.

How about trying this "choir lite" approach to recruitment? It is, indeed, fulfilling!



The Best Things in Life are Free— Especially Choral Music

by

James A. John

(Reprinted with permission from the Eastern Division *Troubadour*,
Summer 2007, revised January 2009)

The Choral Public Domain Library, or CPDL (www.cpd.org), has been in existence for ten years. Currently one of the largest free sheet music websites in the world, CPDL makes access to choral scores easier and more economical than ever before. If you are familiar with CPDL you have probably found it helpful.

You may also have discovered — as I have — that the quality of what's available varies widely. The sheer volume of material can be overwhelming, requiring time and effort to sort out editions and make intelligent choices. Learning to get the most out of this formidable resource is a challenge, so I decided to explore CPDL in greater depth.

Rafael Ornes, Minister of Music at Valley Presbyterian Church in Portola Valley, California, founded CPDL in

December 1998. Ornes, a graduate of Stanford University, received an MA in Choral Conducting as well as a BS in Electrical Engineering. The site began with six scores edited by Ornes and has since grown to contain over 9,900 works edited by about 450 contributors.

In 2005, CPDL was transferred to wiki format. "Wiki," a Hawaiian word meaning quick, made the site more versatile by connecting it to the family of Wikipedia websites, thus allowing for quick access to additional information such as texts and translations, composer biographies, and extensive cross indexing.

When I began using CPDL, I thought of it primarily as a resource for editions of Renaissance music. Though this is still one of the site's strengths, CPDL now contains a vast array of works from all musical eras, including contemporary pieces by composers who are willing to share their compositions for free.

A click on Score Subcategories on the main page reveals the following breakdown of scores by musical era: Medieval (292), Renaissance (3,947), Baroque (1,294), Classical (594), Romantic (1,786), Early 20th-century (394), and Modern (1,507).

A deeper look uncovers astonishing breadth: choral music in every conceivable voicing for two to ten or more voice-parts; nearly complete editions of the works of Byrd and Victoria; a full score and orchestral parts for Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*; numerous Bach cantatas (many including orchestral parts), all of Bach's motets, and a full score of the *B Minor Mass*; vocal scores of major works including all of Haydn's late masses; several editions of the Mozart *Requiem*, one of which is an urtext fragment of Mozart's incomplete manuscript full score with original clefs and notation; an edition of Brahms' *Requiem* for chorus and organ; a vocal score of the Fauré *Requiem*; and the list goes on.

To put such an extraordinary compilation of material in perspective, it is important to keep in mind CPDL's main purposes as stated on the website:

- 1) to make sheet music available for free;
- 2) to create a website for public domain music that in-

cludes only legally down-loadable scores;

- 3) to develop a viable collaborative model for sheet music distribution;
- 4) to publish scores that are not otherwise commercially viable; and
- 5) to create a website that catalogs a large number of other free sheet music websites.

Notice there is no mention of editorial criteria or standards. Keep in mind that CPDL belongs to a new generation of websites such as YouTube and MySpace, where content is user-generated and democratically produced. Anyone can upload a score or make editorial changes to the music on the site. This accounts for the unevenness in quality, and, in fact, is a key to using CPDL effectively.

After downloading a score, for example, proofread it carefully. Some editors are meticulous; others are not. Each editor's name is linked to an information page where he or she can post information about his/her background and provide contact information. If you have a question, try contacting the editor. If there is no contact information provided, CPDL has online discussion forums where questions can be answered. Requests can even be made for editions of scores not currently available on the site.

You should know that using material from CPDL is almost always more time consuming than buying a commercially available edition despite the immediacy of viewing and printing PDF files. Occasionally I have found things in a pinch that have saved both time and money, though even in the case of something as straightforward as Rheinberger's *Abendlied*, of which CPDL has two good editions, there are minor discrepancies to be resolved and other small details to be cleaned-up before duplicating and distributing the music to your singers. Of course, purchasing a score from your retailer is no guarantee that you will be spared these same tasks.

CPDL is an excellent alternative if you can't find an existing edition you like. Last year I searched extensively for a score of Monteverdi's *Lagrima d'Amante al Sepolcro*

dell'Amata, but all the available versions were heavily edited. The one I found on CPDL, in my opinion, turned out to be the best. It was carefully transcribed with few errors and served as an excellent clean copy to which I could add my own editorial indications. I spent many hours, however, marking the music.

The fact that CPDL's content is controlled and maintained by its users means that anyone using the site has the power to contribute and make it better. The first step towards this end is to sign up for an account, an easy process which allows you to correct errors found on the site. Corrections cannot be made in the scores themselves, but there is a space under each edition for editorial comments where notes can be added.

Recently, I used an excellent CPDL edition of Weelkes' *As Vesta Was From Latmos Hill Descending*; however, I discovered a measure in the Soprano II part that was incorrect. I went back to the website, and though I was unable to contact the editor—no contact information was provided, I posted a brief note so that the next person using the edition would know to look for the error.

Another obvious way of contributing is by uploading your own editions of choral music. If you have transcribed a score, you know to apply the highest editorial standards to your work. Why not share it with the choral community? Much gratitude is due CPDL's volunteer editors for the wealth of material they have made available to all of us and for their tremendous donation of time and energy. Special thanks, as well, go to Rafael Ornes for founding and overseeing the site's day-to-day workings.

I was surprised to find out that although CPDL is a free sheet music site, running it costs about \$2,000 a year. To help cover these costs, CPDL has developed partnerships with Sheet Music Plus and Choralia. If you click the link to Sheet Music Plus at the bottom of the main CPDL page, eight percent of your purchase will go towards offsetting the site's expenses. Also, one-third of all donations made to Choralia, a website providing free training aids for amateur choral singers, are reinvested in CPDL.

CPDL is an exceptional resource for choral directors at all levels. The more that we, as choral conductors, take

responsibility for its quality and content, the more it will continue to flourish and improve over time. By using the site interactively in the ways described above, we can take advantage of our collective expertise and gradually make CPDL even more valuable for everyone.



*New Bridges to Cross:
Ideas to Motivate and Stimulate
Multicultural Emphasis in the Choral Classroom*

by

Sarah Ross

(Reprinted from the *Arizona Antiphon*, Vol. 13, No. 1 Fall 2007)

As the school year gets off to a roaring start, it may seem like there are too many things to think about—finances, instruments, lesson plans, health passes and many more. A wise music teacher will think twice before adding one more thing to an already overflowing plate of responsibilities and goals. The best strategy is to keep it simple: implement one idea, adopt one goal, or add one element that takes the program one step closer to ideal.

Simplicity is also the best strategy when it comes to incorporating multicultural music and ideas into the choir classroom. Music educators can adopt a global perspective by modifying or enhancing already established activities and procedures. Listed below are some preliminary ideas designed to get the creative thoughts flowing.

Warm-up With an International Flare

Use simple, catchy folk songs in other languages to get

students' brains moving along with their voices. A folk song learned as a warm-up tool can also be a source of pride, e.g., My choir learned an entire song in Japanese in one hour!

Go Visual

Feature colorful national or world maps on your walls. Have students locate countries and regions depicted in their music. Connect the map to pictures and information about a specific group. Make the map personal. Indicate where choir members have traveled, or show locations of pen pals (see below).

Know the Whole Student, Not Just Her Voice

Help students find relevance in the music they sing by connecting it to their family heritage. Feature pieces that honor and highlight the unique cultural background of choir members. Ask around for popular or familial melodies from the community. Learn them, talk about them, expand on them, and, in the process, validate the students.

Dig Deeply into Cultures

Have students research and present background information on a culture featured in their music. Small research projects can be a great way to connect music with other subject areas like geography, history, languages, reading, and writing. Small research assignments like this make excellent substitute lesson plans.

Say One Thing Many Different Ways

When programming a set or theme for a concert, consider using pieces from other countries and languages. Audience members can read the translation in the program and understand the piece's place in the set. Such a collection demonstrates universal themes, such as love or loss, present in all cultures.

Compare and Contrast

In your programming, juxtapose works from different ethnic backgrounds that share a similar trait. The commonality may be meter, scale, topic, tone, or style. This manner of programming highlights an element of music for greater scrutiny while accenting unique cultural features of various musics.

Advocate for Authenticity

Teach students the meaning of authentic performance practice in theory and in application. The idea holds that music of another culture is best done as authentically as possible, from initial learning to actual performance. Maintain high standards; instill a commitment in choir members to honor a society by pursuing accuracy in performance.

Work Across the Curriculum

Most multicultural music lends itself naturally to connections in other disciplines. Consider working with the art teacher to study Native American masks and other artwork. Invite an English class to read poetry from around the world (haiku, Urdu, etc.) in class or at a concert. Bring in a language expert or native instrument players. Connect to history and geography in a way that is informative and interesting to your students. Other teachers will be grateful, and the choir students will have an unbelievably well rounded view of their music.

Technology Central

Today's students are increasingly connected on a global scale. Take advantage of the technology students already use and empower them to make their own multicultural associations. Ask students to look up cultures, videos, and images online. Use multimedia in your classroom.

YouTube It

YouTube is a student-friendly technology resource that offers views of every culture imaginable. Looking for a North Korean children's choir? It's there. Looking for a traditional Muslim call to worship? It's there, too. This works especially well for students who are audio or visual learners. Better yet, ask students to bring in what they can find on a certain culture, a video they think is especially interesting. Preview it before using it in class. You'll be amazed at what your students will find!

Global Pen Pals

Check out the website, ePals.com, and others like it. These sites allow teachers to register their classes and then connect with thousands of classrooms around the world. Global pen pal programs encourage email exchange and chatting. They also become outlets for audio and video chat. Think of the experience students could have singing for another class in Uganda or Thailand and then hearing that country's choir sing for your kids.

Educate the Audience -- and the Students Too

Concerts can be educational for all involved. Global music experiences are a particularly interesting subject to explore in our highly connected world. Have students introduce a featured culture by inviting drama students to present a skit or ask an English class to read poetry. Coordinate a slideshow with your music depicting the people and places of another country. Feature a local Mariachi band or gospel choir.

Community Connections Make a Difference

Use multicultural concepts to link the choir and its members to the school's local community. Adopt an ethnic musical group from your area. Take a field trip to a cultural center or festival in town.

Of course these are only basic ideas. There are many other strategies to incorporate global perspectives into your choral music program, but, remember, don't let your

list become intimidating. Start by adding a few multicultural elements to those activities already a part of your program. Then take a chance. Try something new. Once students get a taste of even one international music experience, they will want more. Your students can be a big resource for you because students want to understand the world of music and other cultures more than you might imagine.

