

## Cross-Curricular Instruction in the Choral Classroom

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One of the greatest strengths of music education is that it is innately cross-curricular. Each choral work was written in a particular time and place by a particular person, all of which reaches into other subject areas.

I ask my singers questions such as: What was happening in history when this work was written? How do the rhythmic elements of the music in measure\_\_ relate to math?

Texts can offer a different perspective on cultures. Since I teach in a Christian school, the spiritual dimension/texts relate to student's Bible classes. The actual act of singing is profoundly physical, and my students love to impress me with their scientific knowledge of such things as the uvula or the trachea, for example. Music can be a powerful tool for integration and serves to bring people together into a strong community.

Rehearsing music for a performance-based class is unique because we work on several pieces over the course of many weeks. We are constantly refining the performance of the music. Like many choral directors, I strive to program various styles, time periods, and cultures in our repertoire. Being intentional about those elements makes for a well-balanced program and also quality cross-curricular instruction.

This year my high school choir sang *Riu, Riu, Chiu* in Spanish, *Molihua* in Chinese, and *Exultate Justi* in Latin. Learning these works (and a wide variety of works in English) has definitely strengthened the bond the choir shares with other subject areas in our school.

I spent a great deal of time with one of the Spanish teachers practicing *Riu, Riu, Chiu*. The students enjoyed learning this "jewel" and especially reinforcing the language that many of them were studying!

Our school is blessed to have a thriving international program. I have five Chinese students in my high school choir,

and they loved teaching the other choir members and me the pronunciation and meaning of *Molihua*. Several international students came to our concert just to hear that work. It served to bring our community together.

Below is my general outline for teaching *Riu, Riu, Chiu* (and most foreign language works) to my choirs. Before introducing it to the singers, I spend hours studying the score and practicing the language. I need to know every detail of the music intimately before teaching it to the students.

- I began by playing a good recording of the work as they followed along in their music.
- We studied the melody together slowly on the syllable "No" in order to learn the notes and rhythms.
- I spoke the Spanish slowly in rhythm (in short sections), and the choir repeated after me. Then I sang it, and they echoed me.
- We followed the above procedure by working on the phrases that repeated often (the refrain), then we learned the verses.
- Over the course of several weeks, we learned the entire work.
- We spent time in class talking about the translation. These moments, although not focused on the music, helped the students gain a better understanding of the meaning of the text and, in turn, perform it with greater understanding. The "antiquated" Spanish also resulted in several inside jokes, which resulted in plenty of laughter.

Each musical work we learn has its own story and message. By diving into that message, we begin to experience the whole work. In turn, that serves us well as well-rounded, whole people in a multicultural society.

I encourage you to utilize the gifts and unique qualities of your particular community. Capitalize on music's innately cross-curricular nature to build that community through song.

## Resources

Kemp, Michael, *The Choral Challenge—Practical Paths to Solving Problems*, GIA Publications (2013).

Collins, Don, *Teaching Choral Music* 2nd Ed. Prentice Hall (1999).

Brinson, Barbara, *Choral Music: Methods and Materials*. Cengage Learning Inc. (1996).

