

I love the internet. When I need to demonstrate the difference between healthy breathing and poor breathing technique, YouTube has hundreds of examples for my students. I can easily Skype my friends at the University of Idaho for help with translations and pronunciation. There are dozens of apps for teaching the elements of music in fun and interactive ways. These days, there is not much that cannot be accomplished through technological means.

### Concerts

This seems like a no-brainer, but it is important. We must plan and execute our concerts with our students, administration, and audience in mind. Far too often, I find myself looking through music and wanting to choose music I like. What elements should I teach? What will sound great and cast the students in a positive light? What musical works are most impressive? It is good to think about these questions; however, we must remember that our ears and tastes have been developed through training and a variety of music experiences. That may not translate well for our students.

Here are the questions I ask myself before I decide to teach any work: (1) Does this music teach the concepts my students need to learn? (2) Will it challenge them without being frustrating? (3) Will my administration be appropriately impressed by the cross-curricular nature of the work? (4) Will the parents enjoy sitting through this music? To make it into my concert repertoire, I must have said yes to at least three of the four questions.

Teaching music can be a lonely job in a rural district. Remember, you are making a difference in the lives of your students. There is a way to accomplish your goals. If you have any questions or comments, feel free to e-mail me. I would love to hear what has worked for you. May you have a wonderful and successful year!

*Author's Note:* These tips and tricks were designed for a middle school choral program and can be modified or adjusted for a high school or elementary choral program.

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### Choral Zen: How a Healthy Attitude Makes a Better You and a Better Choral Universe

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We've all done it—you see another choral director having a real triumph and suddenly you find yourself engaging in one of the seven deadly sins—probably envy. Does this make you a bad person? Hardly. It does, however, show a common human frailty that, if not dealt with and ultimately overcome, could seriously hamper your ability to enjoy successes and be a positive influence in the world.

We all know both types of musical professionals: the consummate, grounded, nurturing, positive type who we want to be like, and the competitive, jealous, scheming, vicious type we avoid at all costs. Type number one reminds us of all the mentors who brought us through our early years and gave us the inspiration to carry on the musical traditions that we love so dearly. Type number two reminds us of all the human stumbling blocks who might inspire anyone to switch careers as quickly as possible. So how do we become the embodiment of all that is right with our profession and not the embodiment of the old joke “What is the only thing two choral directors can agree on? The ineptitude of another choral director.”

The first step toward being the positive individual we are all capable of being is to deal with the negative voice lurking inside us. Turn it toward the “light.” How do we do that? First, recognize that the voice is there and does not represent our best interest. Now why, you may ask, would we be intrinsically equipped with an inner voice that is not engaged in seeking our best interest?

That is a complicated question that can only be answered through deep study of the human psyche but can be at least brushed upon by stating that the voice IS concerned with our best interest but basically only with our exclusive and selfish best interest—that is, our own good to the *exclusion* of everyone else! Through a combination of nature and nurture, we develop this inner dialogue. Because the dynamic of being reared by responsible parents and caring teachers includes quite a bit of admonition to be kind, fair, and friendly, we

also hear various competing voices from our inner dialogue that urge us to be the better person and to help others. While a conscience is indeed to be desired, tyrannical control over your inner thoughts or a complete inability to have mental quiet is certainly not.

The quest to gain control over our restless inner voices, or quieting what Buddhist practitioners call “monkey mind,” can be a huge undertaking in itself. Learning to meditate is one effective means toward this end. Meditation need not be complicated. You don’t need a mantra, a guru, or incense. What you do need is a short period of time set aside for the purpose of relaxation, re-setting, and centering. Give yourself permission to stop obsessing over this fall’s repertoire choices, the upcoming solo auditions for *Missa Solemnis*, or anything else that is clouding your focus at the moment.

- Find a comfortable place to sit—you can sit cross-legged on the floor if you like, but if you are like me, that might mean a visit from EMS to get back up, so a sturdy chair will do.
- Sit with good posture but not stiffly.
- Allow your hands to lie loosely in your lap.
- Concentrate on the breath. (Easy enough for a singer!) Choose the space under the nostrils or the rising of the chest or stomach as your focal point to notice the entrance and exit of your air.
- Think “in,” “out,” or “inhale,” “release”—any two expressions of breathing that give a focus to the breath.
- When any otherwise normal but not necessary for the moment thoughts (“When are those darn *Missa brevis* scores going to get here?”) invade your concentration, notice it briefly but return to the breath. “In. . . Out”
- Noises in the room (“I never noticed the ceiling fan was in E-flat!”) are particularly challenging for musicians but can, with practice, be released into the background. (“Yes, that is E-flat major.”) Return to the breath.
- Make sure your cellphone is off. The buzzing of a vibrating phone is really no less distracting than your Verdi *Dies*

*irae* ringtone. Focus on the breath. “In. . . Out”

- *Do not allow yourself to audiate music while you attempt to meditate.* This will not work. Return to the breath.
- Try this for five or ten minutes a day at first, increasing the time as you are able. A good goal is to achieve the ability to meditate 20-30 minutes a day as often as possible.

“What exactly is this going to do for me?” you may ask. Here are a few of the results I and other practitioners have noted:

- A lessening of the constant nagging voice, or “monkey mind,” that many of us experience—that constant, insistent, commentary that tells us, “You are never going to teach those altos the second movement counter-melody in the few rehearsals you have left!” “If the congregation doesn’t shut up during my prelude this Sunday, I may have to hit someone!” “You shouldn’t have eaten that brownie. You’re going to look fat on the podium this weekend.” There is a time and place for all these inner sentiments. The problem is, for many of us, they never stop. That is what makes them intrusive, distracting, and counter-productive to a healthy mental state. You cannot focus on what is paramount at the moment if the concerns of the entire week are swirling in your consciousness at every moment.
- The ability to think about *one pressing issue*, to truly examine it and to make a clear-eyed decision without feeling like you have to rush through it to get to other things.
- An increase in patience. Heaven knows, if there is any profession where a little extra patience could make a huge difference, it is the choral profession. Section leaders, keyboard collaborators, soloists, board members, and singers of all voice types are constantly vying for a word with, or some attention, from the choral conductor. Add to this limited rehearsal time, weather-related school closings, tightening budgets, and the general hustle to prepare concerts, and you’ve found an individual whose patience is tested on a daily basis. A quiet mind is a real advantage when you are trying to resist the urge to snap at someone, quit your church job, or tell the school prin-

cial what you *really* think about the revised duty roster for arts teachers. (Breathe in, breathe out.)

- An improved ability to prioritize. When the mind is cluttered with various and sundry detritus that may or may not be the most important consideration at hand, the first seemingly urgent decision that presents itself can cause us to drop what we are doing and race to address what appears to be the most pressing thing on the horizon. A quieter mental state can give you the presence of mind to set aside teapot tempests and do as Stephen Covey suggests when he advises us to “put first things first.”
- The ability to work on multiple projects without quickly becoming overwhelmed. While we do want to clear our minds to be able to address issues one at a time, every choral conductor knows that the luxury of working on just one project or issue at a time will not always be a possibility. Mental calm can make multitasking less of an impossibility.

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### What Do You Program?

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There is something I have always found exciting about discovering a great choral work I have never heard before. I marvel at the depth of creativity composers across the ages have employed by melding the building blocks of music with a text. Whether it’s a motet from the early fifteenth century or a new work from the abundance of composers writing today, discovering a well-crafted setting creates excitement. For me, I just want to jump into rehearsals.

I am, to use a term favored by a colleague of mine, a choral literature wonk—a person obsessed with finding inspiring choral literature and sharing it with others. I am happy to spend my free time listening to a work I’ve never heard or exploring a composer’s website. I amass choral octavos to a level that should guarantee me an appearance on A&E’s *Hoarders*,

a fact to which my family will readily attest.

The good news is, I know I am not alone in this affliction. Odds are, if you are reading this, you have it too. Choral Conductor’s Anonymous, here we come! Our challenge is not that there are too few pieces of quality choral music to share with our choirs but that there is not enough time to program all of the great music we’ve discovered. But it’s this very problem that leaves me so perplexed when we set out to explore the choral offerings sent to us in catalogs and advertisements.

*Before continuing, I remind you that this guest blog does not—at least officially—represent the opinions of the folks here at MusicSpoke.*

About a month ago, I had a long drive and decided to listen to some of the many recordings sent to me by choral music publishers. In the selection of choral literature, my top priorities are the quality of the text and the care the composer has taken in setting it.

A good text that is well set has never failed to inspire and motivate my singers regardless of their age level. Yet every year it seems that I have to skip more tracks on a promotional CD. This year the experience lived up to my expectations. This year’s listening included works by composers who felt it necessary to add their own text to both the Psalms and a poem by Christina Rossetti, a setting of “Dies Irae” that had such a peppy piano accompaniment and so many shimmering major chords that it seemed to exude a perverse excitement and delight for the pending Last Judgment, the requisite dozens of settings of Latin texts with “driving” piano accompaniments, and my personal favorite, a song that included references to lol, emoji, and the line, “It doesn’t matter if your spelling’s bad.” (Yes, it does matter!)

At some point, it should be incumbent upon a composer to at least gain a basic understanding of the text they are setting. Given the fact that there is much wonderful music out there that treats a quality text with dignity and respect, why do some publishers force me to wade through so many compositions that have the nutritional value of a Twizzler? The answer? Because too many of us are programming far too much of this music.

For the love of all that is good in the world, choral directors must stop programming this drive! I love to eat cake and candy as much as the next guy, but our choirs and audiences deserve a more balanced and healthy diet. Check out some of the great music (both contemporary and historic) for all