

and requires a well-grounded, centered physical stance and a well-supported chest voice. After I have taught our singers how to sing this music authentically and in a healthy manner, the sound can be utilized in more traditional women's repertoire, especially when a vibrant, rich timbre is required.

Letting my students know that big, powerful sounds are achievable and within their reach with consistent practice boosts their morale and gives them ownership of their voices.

### Final Thoughts

Stigmas attached to women's choirs need to be addressed and laid to rest through proactive, well-informed teaching. Women's choirs should not be a dumping ground, the leftover choir for females who did not make it into the premier SATB ensemble.

In addition, a women's choir should not be a testing ground for graduate conductors. Conductors of women's choirs should not be pigeon-holed and relegated to the musical background. Rather they should be taken just as seriously as the conductors of SATB ensembles.

Such prejudices will take time to overcome. Right now, you can and should begin building a women's choir that takes pride in its work, one that fosters progress rather than negating it. Through appropriate language, wise programming, and dynamic, healthy vocal development, you are encouraging your women to sing out unapologetically with individual and collective empowerment.



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By three methods we may learn wisdom. First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

—Confucius

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### Recruiting Boys into Choirs — Techniques That Work

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January has flown by. The MMEA state conference has come and gone, and student enrollment conferences for the fall 2014 semester are quickly approaching. Besides having MSHSAA Large-Ensemble and Solo & Small-Ensemble festivals looming, many of us are thinking about one thing: choir auditions!

If your school district is like mine, administrators are hyper-focused on numbers. Why? The number of students enrolled dictates staffing. How can we increase our choir's numbers? More specifically, how can we retain and recruit more young men?

It's no secret that our culture has convinced young men that singing is not a manly trait. No matter how passionately you disagree with this idea, go to your school lunch room and speak with five to ten guys about singing in choir. Chances are you will quickly hear statements such as "I'm not a choir guy;" "I cannot sing;" or "choir is for girls." A table of guys might just stare at you and offer no response to your question.

The following methods have proven to be beneficial not only to my choral program but to those of a number of my colleagues. Some of the approaches have been shared by other teacher friends. Many ideas can be utilized to recruit boys as well as girls. Although I am writing from the perspective of a high school teacher, many of these strategies are equally effective for middle school choral directors. The first step is getting guys to walk through the door into the choir room.

### Target Group: Middle School Boys

Provide joint concerts with the middle schools that feed into your school. This strengthens both programs. The more opportunities middle school kids are given to see what is in store for them in the future, the better.

Use area churches that have decent acoustics. Consider including/inviting elementary students, thus providing them opportunities to hear middle and high school ensembles. These

concerts can be formal performances, clinics, or mini-tours.

Arrange for your high school singers to speak to the middle school choir. Timing is important for this activity to have maximum impact. It is best to schedule this activity before any enrollment information is dispensed.

Select a few high school choral students to spend a day at the middle school. Have them talk about the high school choirs and the difference that their choir class is making in their lives. Be sure the high school students have varied interests and can relate to all students (e.g., an athlete, a top academic student, a band or orchestra student, a science student, etc.). Have a structured plan for the presentation. Leave time for questions.

Have selected high school students send letters to middle school singers. Create a writing assignment in which your high school choral students write letters to the middle schoolers. Make it a contest.

A possible format might include the following: 1) Introduction of the letter writer, including his/her current activities at your school; 2) Explain what the writer has gained from being a choir member and what he/she likes about the class; 3) Explain why a middle school student should take choir in his freshman year of high school.

After your students have created a rough draft that you have proofread and approved, provide choir program letterhead stationery for your choral students to write their final draft. This makes the letters seem official and, more importantly, causes middle school choral students to feel that they are getting something special from the high school.

Also, with your high school's push to provide writing activities in all subject areas, this activity will help fulfill that requirement. After you have screened all letters, personally deliver them to the middle school choral teacher for sharing with his/her students prior to enrollment for freshmen classes at the high school.

Take your high school students to perform at the middle school. This is the number-one recruitment tool for most college and university programs, and it can also be an effective recruitment tool for high school choral programs. Wow the middle school kids with a performance that includes a mixture of musical styles and, of course, something fun and appealing.

#### **Target Group:**

#### **High School Boys Currently Singing in a Choir**

Offer a "Man Day." In our district, we put together a day in which the men's choirs from each high school rehearse at an

off-site location. A guest clinician works with each choir. Three guest community men's choirs perform. The primary focus is singing for one's entire life. Our boys love missing school for the entire day, and they enjoy hearing the older men's groups perform. The camaraderie that develops among all the guys is wonderful.

Have upper-level, experienced singers speak to your men's choir. Immediately before enrollment begins, ask several of the seasoned male choir members to talk about why underclassmen should stay in choir for four years. It is important for younger guys to hear this message not only from you but from the older guys they respect.

Focus on quality and make the groups important. Guys like feeling that they are part of something special. Be consistent. Structure each day carefully. Have a routine.

Choose a uniform for the ensemble that builds a sense of pride. Our guys wear slacks, blazers, and ties. Have fun. Don't be afraid to joke, even on day one. Focus on team atmosphere and school pride. Perform the National Anthem and school song at games and assemblies. Make this men's choir a visible presence in the school.

Plan an open house. If scheduling allows, invite students to attend a rehearsal of your top auditioned choir, or have your top students invite younger singers to the open house rehearsal. If this choir meets during lunch, visiting students can eat in the choir room while they watch the rehearsal. If your school offers a career day or an electives fair, it is a great opportunity to schedule a choir open house/rehearsal. Find any way you can to get kids into the choir room and see music making in action.

#### **Target Group:**

#### **High School Boys Currently Not Singing in a Choir**

Offer a choral department open house. See above. Invite guys not currently singing in your ensembles.

Increase the choir program's visibility at your school. Design a choir t-shirt/hoodie. Shirts are a mobile poster for your program. Consider letting the singers design the shirt but get administrative approval before printing them. Have kids wear their t-shirts when singing at games or events of any kind.

Put together a Choir Awareness Week. The week before choir auditions, have announcements about the auditions read each day on the school's PA system.

Send e-blasts to your singers' parents about auditions. Arrange for choir students to be in the cafeteria before school or during lunch shifts to sign students up for choir auditions.

Have a week of choir auditions held after school. Be sure that kids have multiple opportunities to meet you. You must get out into the hallways and talk to students about your program.

Use your current students' knowledge to find out about students who sing but are not enrolled in any ensembles. Most of these students have grown up together. They will remember who sang in elementary and middle school or who currently sings at church on Sundays. Tap into this information.

Create and send an invitation to the non-choir singing students to come to the choir room and meet you. Your personal invitation might say that one of their friends has selected them as a person who would enjoy and benefit from participation in the choir. This idea could be used in conjunction with Choir Awareness Week.

Produce a recruitment DVD. Include both rehearsal and performance footage along with student and teacher (you) interviews. Show your singers engaged in team building activities, joking around, and having fun. Include quotes from recent graduates and maybe even parents. Duplicate the DVD. Give it to everyone applicable and post it on your choir website.

**Target Group:**  
**High School Boys Who Have Sung  
in the Past but Are Not Singing Now**

Don't give up on guys who have sung in the past but dropped out. For many of us teachers, a number of students have told us they wished they had stayed in choir.

Go to the guidance counselors and get your old choir rosters. Find those singers who left because "they didn't have room in their schedules." Tell them that they are missed, they already read music, and might even miss singing and you!

**Conclusion**

Don't give up! You may feel that no matter what you do, you cannot improve your numbers. If you have followed through with many of the above activities and nothing is happening, reach out to your colleagues across the state for other suggestions.

If you are doing your part, the number of students in your choral program will increase. If it happened to me, it can happen to you!

Stay creative. Stay positive. Believe!



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All our progress is an unfolding, like a vegetable bud. You have first an instinct, then an opinion, then a knowledge as the plant has root, bud, and fruit. Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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**Battling the October Blues:  
Stimulus Variation in Rehearsals**

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(Used with permission of Alabama's *Reprise*, Fall 2013)

Fall brings such beauty to our region of the country. We have perfect sunny days and cool nights, less humidity, and glorious fall colors. But if you're like me, fall can also bring challenges into the rehearsal room. By this time, your choir(s) may have already performed at least once, or you may be preparing for an upcoming performance.

I always find that in mid-October, attendance problems pop up along with occasionally dazed and overwhelmed singers. Additionally, you may find your own energy waning. My gas tank is perpetually running on low at this time of year. Yet, our list of "to-do's" gets longer, and the pressures of daily work get heavier.

How do we continue to be the best teacher/conductors we can be while keeping our singers' attention and motivating them to do their best?

First, we must take care of ourselves. As conductors, we understand the meaning of the word *sacrifice* all too well. But we also know that lack of sleep, lack of healthy eating habits, and lack of exercise make it harder to do our best and work at our optimum level.

I learned the hard way that my lack of respect for my body was keeping me from performing at my best. I have found that