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How many times have you noticed that it's the little quiet moments in the midst of life that seem to give the rest extra-special meaning?

—Fred Rogers

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## Challenge Your Singers and They Challenge Each Other

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Veteran choir teachers can relate to the fact that only a few times in a career does one get a special group of singers who inspires, motivates, and challenges one to find music and methods that will dramatically enhance the ensemble's potential for success.

That happened to me at Napa High School in 1992–93 with a beginning men's choir. I've never before or since worked with a beginning men's choir so eager to learn, so quick at figuring out any challenge, so intelligent, and so much fun to be with. Those guys were the beginning of a tradition and pedagogical method I use to this day, an approach that has motivated and challenged nearly all of our choirs to sing at the highest possible level for high school students. Here's how it evolved.

In less than a month, the 1992–93 beginning men's choir had learned and memorized the music for the November fall concert. No problem, I thought. We would start the December concert music early and be that much better prepared. Well, the December concert music was learned and memorized about a week after the fall concert. There was still a month to go! What should I do?

The group wasn't perfect, of course, but these guys were the best beginning men's choir I had had up to that time. I remembered that while I was in college, Weston Noble came as a guest clinician one weekend and demonstrated his amazing voice timbre matching technique which he used with the Luther College Choir. I had also read that singers perform better when a strong, confident singer stands behind them.

I knew that every Friday, our Napa High band director allowed his instrumentalists to challenge for chairs. For example,

if the second-chair clarinet decided that she could play a part more accurately than the first chair clarinet, she could challenge for the higher chair.

The band director chose a section of a work being rehearsed. The two players would find a practice room and record the designated portion. The director would listen to the two recordings and choose the better rendition, not knowing who played it. The second-chair clarinetist became first-chair if she played it better.

A great idea, I thought. Immediately, I took the time to place each guy who would sing a pre-selected portion of a song I chose. Strong, confident, in-tune singers were placed on the top row. The other fellows filled the rows below according to demonstrated singing ability. The improvement in sound was immediate and dramatic. Singer-leaders were free to lead. Singer-followers had more confidence because of strong voices behind them.

Early on, challenges occurred frequently so a few rules were put into place. No person could be challenged more than three times in one day. If you were "knocked down" from an upper row on the risers (lost a challenge), you could challenge any spot above you, but you could challenge only three times in a day. Some days we only allowed one or two specific sections to challenge.

As this new process continued, I found I could choose a difficult section of a song, one which not all singers were mastering, and use it as the challenge for the day. Of course that portion of the musical work would get the extra practice needed. In addition, the singers would listen with great interest to the specific suggestions I offered for performing difficult passages.

Especially with high school boys, whom I have found are, almost without exception, more competitive in this type of situation than high school girls, and especially with beginning ensembles, the challenge process has been a strong motivating tool for focusing the efforts of our ensembles and for celebrating individuals' success as they move up the rows towards the back.

There has been no greater spontaneous applause in our choir classes than when a singer moves up from a lower row. Over time, this type of affirmation has turned on more kids to singing than I can count!

You might ask what happens when everybody makes the top row. We equalize the rows, place an equal number of singers on each row. In a large placement round of singing, even the smallest mistake is counted against a singer towards a point total that determines a student's final standing position on the risers. These rather large "sing-offs" have an intensity, focus and

student buy-in that is incredible.

Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind.

- This system works best in beginning classes which tend to include a wide range of talent and ability. Challenges do help move less talented and/or reluctant singers to a higher level. In advanced classes, challenges and the resultant placements are not employed nearly as often because the ability of these more advanced singers is typically narrower from best to not-as-good. Also, more experienced singers function at a higher level and have more developed talent than beginning classes
- Singing by himself or herself before peers is the most stressful thing a guy or girl can do in a choir class. Once singers have been through this process, confidence levels rise immeasurably. I've found that almost no singer is truly nervous prior to concerts or competitions. Why? Every singer has already been through the toughest test imaginable—singing in front of peers and surviving!
- Keep track of student row positions. When the time comes to audition students for next year's advanced choirs, data on row placement and highest row achieved is available and used to place students in the next choir class.
- "Moving up" is an incredible high for most of the singers. It builds a confidence that usually withstands losing a later challenge.

This system or method is not perfect. On some occasions, a student who has challenged several times without success can get discouraged or turned off about singing.

Important: Make it a point to offer at least one positive comment about each singer who is challenging for a new spot. Give immediate feedback. This helps lessen discouragement. Through the years, the benefits of this practice have far outweighed any negatives.

Little did I realize twenty years ago that this challenge system would become such a large part of the choir experience at our school. Seeing singers, with little or no previous choir experience, discover their voices and find their niche in a choir has been deeply rewarding.

During my tenure at Napa High School, challenges and resultant row placement have been an integral part of bringing hundreds of singers to a high level of excellence in their

choral experience. The process literally gives young people a place on the risers that is theirs. They can offer help or receive encouragement. They share the lasting joy of singing choral music with friends and peers, an experience they won't forget.



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Music gives soul to the Universe.

—Plato

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## Literacy Achievement and the Impact of Choral Music Participation

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During my years as a middle and high school choral director, I realized that American education was going through dramatic changes in the beginning of the 21st century. The way children were educated was constantly evolving. Public, private, parochial, charter schools and post-secondary educational institutions were and still are being affected by various federal and state regulations.

Students, teachers, and educational leaders in these institutions are directly affected by regulations, increased academic demands, and an ever-changing educational landscape. Administrators and choral directors at every level should, in my view, examine reasons and the rationale for success in our institutions of learning while maintaining a commitment to musical excellence.

The concept of a connection between music and literacy goes back to the time of Plato. Learning and retaining literacy skills and the transfer of musical knowledge share a common heritage.