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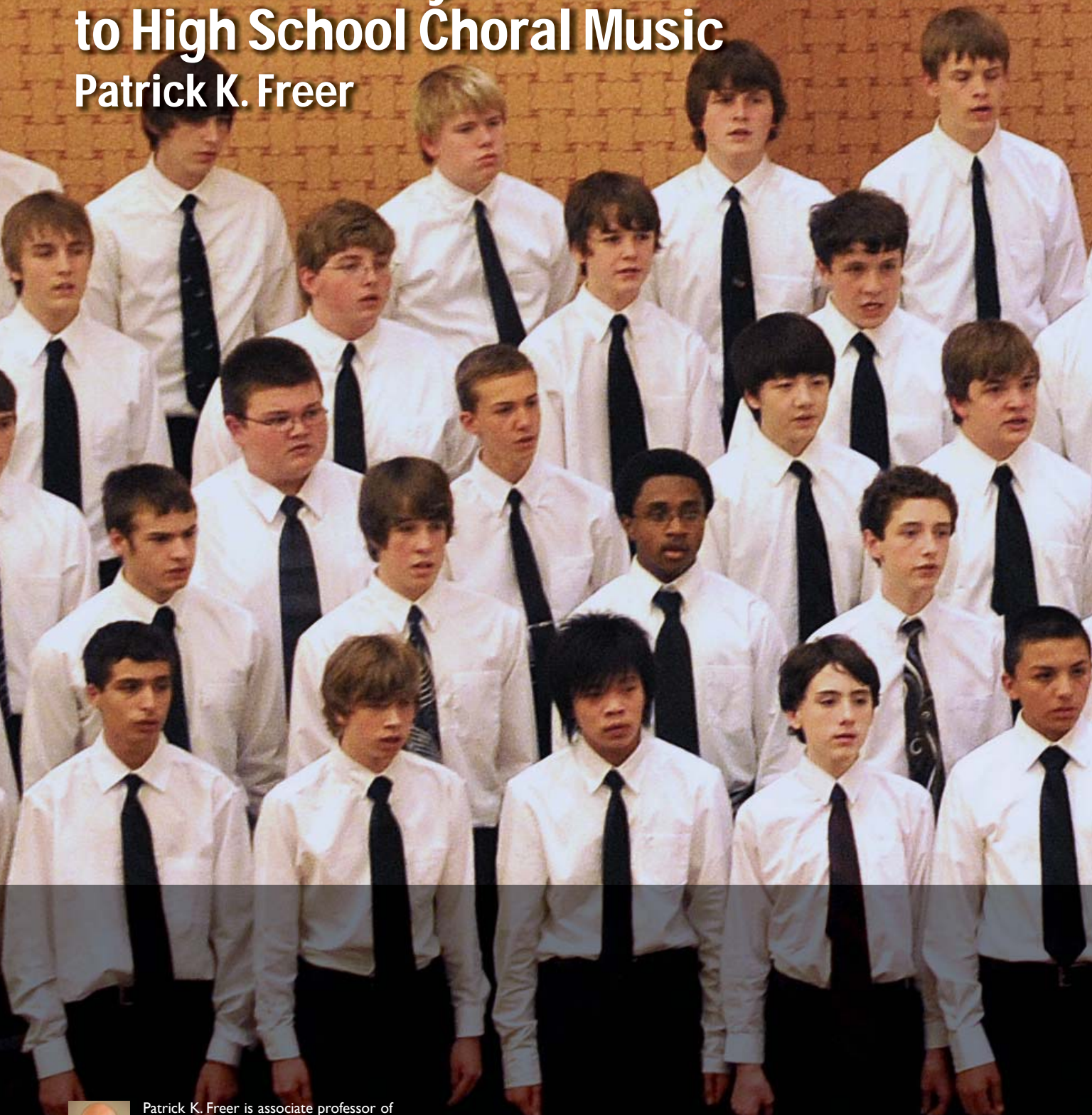
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# The Successful Transition and Retention of Boys from Middle School to High School Choral Music

Patrick K. Freer



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“It’s halftime. Both teams are in their locker room discussing what they can do to win this game in the second half.” This was the opening line from the now-famous “Halftime in America” 2012 Super Bowl advertisement with narrator Clint Eastwood. It’s time to consider halftime in secondary choral music education, at least the transition from the first half (middle school) to the second half (high school) for young men in choral music. The decisions made and the way the transition is handled will determine if boys return to

sing in choral music during the high school years or beyond.

This article explores the problem and offers potential strategies based upon new research and theory that has emerged during the past few years. Some of this confirms what we know, and other information provides new insights. For instance, a common practice is for high school teachers to visit middle schools as a way of establishing a rapport between young men and their potential future teacher. This establishes a perception that the high school conductor

is trying to recruit boys for his program. Research indicates, however, that the reverse is far more effective: having middle school boys travel to the high school and sing with older males in the high school chorus room and auditorium. This concretizes an image of what it means to have a home, belong to a peer group, and envision a role as a future male choral singer, a future that we would like to encourage. The transition to high school nearly always involves larger schools, older peers, and new same-age classmates. At it leads toward

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the future, the transition simultaneously needs to remain attached to the social connections made during the years of middle school choral music. Information presented in this article will lead to the conclusion that one of the reasons boys drop out of choral music during the transition to high school is because of social disruption—and the solution lies as much with middle school choral teachers as with their high school colleagues.

Several definitions are central to this discussion. First, transition is what the boys do, and retention is what their teachers do. If we are to broaden our focus from the simple goal of retention to the more complex transition of boys in choral music, we might also consider the lens through which we view the issues. Do we view choral music's boys sympathetically or empathetically?<sup>1</sup> Sympathy arises from assuming another's position or experiences as one's own. We cannot do that, even if we were once boys with negative choral experiences. Nor is it helpful to position present-day boys as victims of poor, past practice in choral

music or transitions. After all, we can only influence the future. Two dangers emerge from a sympathetic view: ego (there's nothing about this situation that cannot be understood) and seduction (we can be misled or coerced by the problem and its presentation). Instead, we need to engage in an empathetic understanding of the issues. From an empathetic viewpoint, we seek to keep an emotional distance, avoid the presumption of total understanding, and retain a position of analytical curiosity. To that end, this article will present a review of research based in the United States that proposes a way forward toward the successful transition of choral music's boys from middle school to high school.

## Background and Problem

How do we lead boys to a positive conception of themselves as choral singers—a self-conception strong enough that it persists through the transition to high school? We

may glean a partial answer by considering how two people can have substantially different experiences of the exact same phenomena. We have all attended concerts with another person, only to find that our experiences were completely unique, paralleling our relative levels of musical knowledge and skill. So it is with our students. Those who, during the middle school years, become immersed in the knowledge, skills, and camaraderie of singing may embark on a lifetime of singing whenever they can. Others, lacking a social experience rooted in skill development, simply leave. Is there something we might do differently?

First of all, choral singing continues to be the most popular form of participation in the performing arts. A large survey by Chorus America found that 22.9 percent of American households have a choral singer; nearly 43 million adults and children regularly sing in choruses, and that there are nearly 270,000 choruses in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Choral singing is clearly something that many people do. And yet, respondents to the Chorus America survey noted problems. Twenty-five percent of teachers indicated there were no choral programs in their schools, and 20 percent of parents reported an absence of community youth choral programs. Twenty percent of the parents stated that their child involuntarily stopped singing when their school choir was eliminated due to budget cuts. Most pertinent to any discussion of boys and singing, however, was the finding that one-fifth of the parents reported their child involuntarily stopped singing because their changing voice rendered them ineligible for continued participation in school chorus.

Choral music education in the United States has long embraced the democratic principle that education must be equally available to all children. Choral music programs have flourished in American schools because they are relatively inexpensive, with large numbers of students in ensembles taught by a single teacher, and because of the artistic achievements of these ensembles. At the same time, however, there remains the tacit possibility that since music often receives less administrative oversight than other academic areas, choral music teachers



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may dissuade boys from singing during the period of adolescent voice change. There are reasons for this beyond the scope of this article with its focus on the middle school boys who are enrolled rather than those who could or should be singing. But, it does set up a comparison with our counterparts for whom continuous singing during adolescence is not viewed as desirable.

Strictly speaking, the British boy choir tradition does not view choral participation through a democratic lens.<sup>3</sup> Boys sing until their voice “breaks” at around age 13, and then they are dismissed from serious choral participation until their voice “settles” at around age 16. This author recently returned from a research project in England that confirmed this process is very much the norm despite advances in research and vocal pedagogy. The greater problem is that boys who stop singing during the voice change process rarely reengage at the conclusion of the process. Teenage boys in the United States are additionally confronted with the disruption of transition to high school at precisely this moment in their development. The result is diminished ranks of tenors and basses in high schools, colleges, churches, and adult community choirs. Many older boys who withdraw from singing report they no longer like choral music. That perception may stem from a reverse situation in which, for a time anyway, choral music doesn't really like adolescent boys and their changing voices. Fortunately, this seems to be changing, largely because of ACDA's recent focus on middle school and junior high choral music.

Other research indicates a potential societal reason for the withdrawal of boys from choral participation. The present focus on individualism may partially explain why efforts to bolster male participation in choral singing in the United States remain problematic. A recent study of male barbershop singers noted that the vast majority of the participants were white, Christian, politically conservative, and overwhelmingly old.<sup>4</sup> Most were drawn to singing as a byproduct of a masculine camaraderie developed within Protestant choral traditions early in their lives. Singing with other men, termed “manly singing,” became part of their personal iden-

tities. Though this varies by locale and region, the America experienced by today's adolescent males is less white, less Christian, and less conservative than just a few decades ago. At its core, participation in church functions provided a community of like-minded individuals, and the social relationships of choirs likely strengthened those bonds. The practice of gathering in churches, community centers, and rehearsal halls may be succumbing to the immediacy of disembodied communication so readily available through social media and ever-changing technologies. If it is not part of their cultural experience, today's adolescent males may consequently view choral music as something that only occurs in schools.

If we are to reverse the well-documented withdrawal of male choral singers that occurs at the disruption point between middle school and high school, we need to empathetically understand the situation from the singer's perspective. From there, we can analyze the information to draw implications for practices that could positively affect change.

## Transitions as Connections

We may need to redefine the word “transition.” We often think of it as the point of disjunction between middle school and high school. Instead, we need to think of the transition as a connection between the two, or a process that unfolds over time. The connection will not occur if it is only facilitated from one direction. Only one direction of the connection is involved when, for instance, the high school conductor visits the middle school and attempts to “sell” the boys on enrollment in high school choral music. The connection will not emerge from mere familiarity or comfort with the high school conductor, because there is no real connection there. Middle school boys strongly value two elements of the choral music experience: their personal vocal skill development, and the social relationships they make in choral music both with their peers and with their teachers.<sup>5</sup> Connections have two ends, and the missing end for most

high school freshman boys is the middle school conductor.<sup>6</sup> To complete the connection, the middle school conductor needs to remain involved with the boys through, at least, their first year of high school. The transition needs to be configured as a “social convoy” of both peers and respected adults traveling together.<sup>7</sup> In our case, the convoy needs to comprise the social network developed during middle school choral music, not the intangible promise of a future social network in high school.

And, difficult as it may be, we need to acknowledge that some boys will not continue as choral singers in high school. High school boys report that they often feel pressured by their choral teachers to remain enrolled out of obligation, and that such pressure eventually results in negative perceptions of the choral experience.<sup>8</sup> Other emerging research indicates that a pivotal moment occurs during the conversation wherein a boy informs his choral teacher of his impending withdrawal.<sup>9</sup> How the conductor responds can largely determine whether the young man ever again engages in choral singing, even as an adult.

The connection is two-way, it is profoundly important to adolescent boys, and it can extend far beyond the high school transition, signaling that the young man can return to choral singing whenever and wherever he wishes.

## Emerging Adulthood

The process of transition to high school begins a distinct phase of development now known as emerging adulthood.<sup>10</sup> This phase broadly encompasses the stages we have previously referred to as late adolescence and young adulthood. The concept of emerging adulthood is based upon new brain research, indicating that cognitive growth continues through about age 25, after which the fully mature brain takes on permanent characteristics. This research also reveals that repeated activities during adolescence actually shape structures and processes within the developing brain.<sup>11</sup> The good news for choral music teachers

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is that the neural pathways established during young adolescent choral singing remain largely intact through age 25. In other words, boys may not need to continuously sing in choral music during the transitions from middle school to high school and from high school to college. But, that's looking at the issue of transition from a perspective of brain development. It really doesn't help from an artistic or musical perspective.

Coincidentally or not, the transition from cognitive development to cognitive permanence around age 25 is roughly concurrent with the hormonally induced closure of the voice change process in both males and females—a process that takes far longer than the period of young adolescence found in

middle schools. The latter period of brain development, from the mid teens into the 20s, is in the prefrontal cortex that suppresses impulses and allows for future-oriented planning such as “do I see myself as a choral musician?” and “does singing fit with my concept of who I want to become?” This, then, is the most important information related to the transition of boys across phases of choral singing. During emerging adulthood, choral music teachers need to engage boys in conceptualizing and planning for futures in which they are involved in singing.<sup>12</sup> This future-oriented planning should involve consideration of boys' knowledge, skills, affinities, and social desires. From a developmental perspective, then, addressing the persistence

of male singers across transition points is as much the responsibility of high school and college conductors as it is the duty of middle school conductors.

## Being Boys, Becoming Men

Choral music educators and conductors confront two central gender-related tensions when working with male students during adolescence and emerging adulthood.<sup>13</sup> First, they must balance the need to preserve boys' individualities while carrying out the enculturation tasks of educating and rehearsing. Teachers often worry that the demands of curriculum and instruction, or repertoire

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and rehearsing, can stifle the individual development of boys and lead them to respond negatively. The second reason has to do with the relationship between the teacher's self-identity and their male students. The male conductor's personal, sympathetic identity as a long-ago boy singer or the female conductor's attempt to sympathize with her male students will influence their perceptions of what "being a boy" means. For instance, it is simpler to have identical expectations for boys and girls than it is to empathetically incorporate knowledge of gender differences in cognitive, physical, psychological, and social development—including differences in vocal capabilities.

But, our understanding of what it means to "be a boy" and "be a male singer" is critical to the successful transition of boys into high school choral music.<sup>14</sup> For many boys, masculinity begins with managing the expectations and perceptions of others. Many boys establish a sense of masculinity by choosing the latest grooming products, or as one mother commented, "Every day he walks out the door in a cloud of spray-on macho."<sup>15</sup> Other boys hit the gym or engage in risky behaviors in attempts to define their masculinity.<sup>16</sup> Despite popular perception, self-esteem is as much a problem for adolescent boys as for girls, where for boys, self-esteem is strongly correlated with their sense of physique as influenced by images popularized through mass media.<sup>17</sup>

## Challenges to Masculine Norms

Other influences on masculinity have direct effects on boys' singing and their perceptions of belonging within choral music. Research indicates that boys raised without their fathers enter puberty and the voice change earlier than those with fathers due to stress and the early establishment of gender roles.<sup>18</sup> Also, recent changes in the average physical body composition of adolescent boys may have a profound effect on choral music during the transition from grades eight to nine. Contradicting an earlier study, research now indicates that obesity in boys significantly delays the onset of puberty and the concurrent voice change.<sup>19</sup> And, toward

the latter stages of voice change, weight gain also seems to accompany the emergence of groups of pitches on which boys are temporarily unable to phonate.<sup>20</sup> Choral music conductors must be aware that these boys need to be provided both with information about their vocal development (whether early or delayed) and a safe, comfortable classroom environment built on the personal relationship between teacher and student.

For boys aged 12 to 18, conforming to masculine norms has been found to be positively associated with increased feelings of competency, confidence, self-reliance, sense of self-assuredness, and decreased levels of social stress. For these boys, the strongest determination of "masculinity" appears to be "the avoidance of femininity."<sup>21</sup> This determination becomes a problem when repertoire texts at the middle school level appeal more to girls than to boys, and when those texts are dissimilar to ones sung by high school ensembles.<sup>22</sup> The problem of texts can be seen more broadly among adult ensembles. As this article was being written, there was a call posted on ChoralNet and in local newspapers regarding an un-auditioned adult community chorus. It read that the chorus "is accepting new tenors and basses for its spring season. The program, 'A Spring Bouquet' features songs about flowers, drawn from sources ranging from madrigals to musical theater.' Really? Is it any wonder that this advertisement failed to draw a single response from an interested male singer? We need to reflect current research about literature and texts that appeal to young adolescent boys. Our English teachers know this research, and its application has transformed English and literature instruction during the past ten years."<sup>23</sup>

## Rehearsals and Transition

Many of our common rehearsal practices additionally reflect how young adolescent girls think and learn, which only becomes a problem if the cognitive and emotional diversity of boys is ignored in the process. For a variety of developmental reasons, boys approaching the end of eighth grade need physical movement, fast instructional pacing,

substantial peer interaction, skill-based challenges, and highly rhythmic repertoire.<sup>24</sup> In the words of middle school boys, they value "silliness" and "fun," two terms that must be understood from the perspective of 11 to 14 year old boys rather than disparaged by adult sensibilities.<sup>25</sup> In many instances, adolescent boys may be seen as having behavior problems when their need for novelty or physical activity interferes with customary rehearsal procedures. The problem, instead, rests with conductors who are potentially behaving in a manner unresponsive to these boys. This relates to the high school transition when the failure to reflect characteristics of successful instruction for middle school boys leads them to withdraw when given the opportunity upon entering high school.

## Recent Research and Boys' Vocal Issues

We also know that boys are more engaged when learning draws upon their fascination with their physical development. We need to provide current, detailed physiological descriptions of the voice change process that so clearly intrigues most boys. For instance, recent research about male adolescent vocal development suggests that boys in the midst of voice change experience more vocal fatigue from speaking than from singing, but that a well-conditioned vocal musculature can mitigate the problem.<sup>26</sup> Other research indicates that subtle changes in the quality of the boy's speaking voice precede the onset of pitch changes by about three months;<sup>27</sup> these may be related to the vocal quality of nearly-pubescent boys that was so highly prized several hundred years ago and led to the practice of trying to preserve this quality through castration. Scientific research also confirms what we have long suspected: that boys who sing prior to and during the voice change emerge with stronger vocal musculature and greater vocal range than those who do not sing.<sup>28</sup>

With regard to hearing, the developing auditory system of boys can temporarily render some pitches inaudible, hence they cannot tell that they are not matching pitch.<sup>29</sup> In the case of profoundly deaf boys, it

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may stunt vocal development entirely since, in an effort to sense physical vibrations of sound, they may use only upper pitches with resultant atrophy of the musculature necessary for producing lower pitches.<sup>30</sup>

Since this is all related to growth and strength, boys experiencing frustration in chorus tend to gravitate to where their developing growth and strength is celebrated: sports. There is indication that sharing detailed information about related anatomy and physiology assists adolescents toward higher levels of self-esteem.<sup>31</sup> If we neglect to relate this information to vocal development, boys may choose athletics over choral music when given the choice at the point of transition. We want them to choose both.

## The Failed Transition

When the goals of school-based choral music programs are misaligned with the goals of adolescent boys, the singers may choose to forego singing in high school altogether. It is tempting to conclude that young high school boys simply don't like choral music and there's nothing to be done when, in fact, there are clear and tangible steps that can be taken. An illustration can be drawn from a 2011 BBC report that one of Wales' leading choral conductors complained how, in response to declining male interest, many schools are "dumbing down choral music" and not teaching skills in a misguided attempt to attract young men to singing.<sup>32</sup> The problem is that young men are not attracted to what is easy—they are attracted to that which is challenging yet attainable, specifically in choral music. This fact is rather indisputable given a raft of recent, related studies in choral music.<sup>33</sup>

Another reason that young men withdraw from chorus may simply reflect a limit of how many activities can be optimally participated in during adolescence. A recent study showed the optimal number of extra-curricular (outside the school day) activities as two or three. Anything beyond this number ultimately resulted in decreased academic performance.<sup>34</sup> And, boys often view choral music as extra-curricular sim-

ply because it often includes after-school rehearsals and evening performances. One possible solution would be to minimize these events and replace them with others occurring within the school day as is often the case with music performances at elementary schools. This idea would raise discussion of the legitimate tensions between choral music education and choral performance, but we need to recognize that the implications are potentially significant for issues of persistence and recruitment.

Recent events have focused attention on the emotional and physical safety of boys during the transition to high school. Research confirms that these issues extend into choral music and influence why boys remain or withdraw from participation. There is repeated documentation that males frequently perceive singing as a feminine activity, leading toward decreased rates of male participation following transition points. This can engender bullying and teasing, some of which is benign and some of which is more sinister. This behavior can prompt some boys to actively choose the familiarity of choral music at the middle school level while purposefully withdrawing at the onset of high school.<sup>35</sup>

Researchers in music education have begun to note how, in order to protect themselves from bullying, young homosexual men will either seek refuge in the choral setting or withdraw from participation in an effort to avoid being victimized by bullies. This lack of participation has been specifically found both at the middle school and high school levels.<sup>36</sup> The idea that they might be bullied is one of the three most frequently mentioned fears of eighth graders contemplating the transition to high school. The others related to navigating the physical and conceptual size of the school and the fear of academic failure.<sup>37</sup> Higher rates of bullying and teasing have been found among male music students than among female music students.<sup>38</sup> Choral music's boys need to be assured that the same choral environment that feels so safe in middle school will be present at the high school. We cannot make that promise until it is true, however. Once again, both middle school and high school choral teachers

need to collaboratively facilitate the points of connection between the two choral experiences.

## Toward Successful Transitions

We have established that there is a problem of young men withdrawing from choral music during transition points, particularly during the transition from middle school to high school. We have examined indications that these transition points correspond with the developmental markers of emerging adulthood, suggesting that the transition to high school can be successful if conceived as a connection with two attachments (middle school and high school) and as a social convoy involving peers and respected adults.

We know that high school choral students value many of the same instructional components they may have experienced in middle school choral music. These include:

- a nurturing classroom and rehearsal environment;
- the teacher's evaluation and specific feedback on musical skills;
- acknowledgement of success and collaborative planning toward future success;
- the development of skills that transfer to other situations rather than simple preparation of repertoire;
- the programming of challenging yet attainable repertoire;
- the inclusion of contest experiences, especially because these stimulate interest and motivation in male students;<sup>39</sup>
- the continual shift of rehearsal strategies that engage varied aspects of the extroverted personalities often held by high school choral students;<sup>40</sup> and
- the inclusion of multiple opportunities for feedback from peers since male adoles-



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cents in choir respond more favorably to feedback from their peers than from adults; the opposite is true for adolescent females.<sup>41</sup>

Much of the most recent research has captured the words of adolescent boys about their perceptions of choral music in an effort to determine how to best address the issues of transition and retention. The responses are uniformly consistent with the Self-Determination Theory of motivation proposed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan.<sup>42</sup> According to the theory, there are three concomitant elements to motivation

that intrinsically propel people, especially adolescents, when choosing their activities and pursuits: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Within our framework of adolescent boys and singing, we can focus our efforts on:

- competence: building boys' vocal skills and personal identification with singing;
- autonomy: providing boys with experiences wherein they utilize those skills within and, as they wish, outside choral music; and
- relatedness: working to establish, maintain,

and promote the security of social relationships within choral music.

## Tension between Autonomy and Relatedness

There is an interesting tension between the elements of autonomy and relatedness. On one hand, adolescents seek autonomy over personal issues and decisions, and they desire to build their personal skill levels as markers of independence and individuality. This autonomy seeking has been found to be especially true in music, where boys attribute

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their successes to skills they have rather than to the effort they expend. In other words, they believe that skills are fixed—they can either sing or they can't. Girls, on the other hand, are more inclined to believe that they can succeed at tasks through sustained effort that results in increased skill levels.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, autonomy yields to relatedness when boys, especially at the high school level, rely on their peers for reference and feedback about their autonomous actions.<sup>44</sup> A recent study of high school adolescents from 12 countries revealed that even more than for girls, boys depend upon peer support when sustaining affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement in school activities.<sup>45</sup> The result may be increased levels of competence—the characteristic adolescent boys in choral music value most highly.<sup>46</sup>

One way that choral directors often try to facilitate boys' sense of relatedness across the transition point is to have the high school men's chorus visit the middle school. Instead, boys suggest that role models are most effective when a generation is skipped. Have the college men's chorus visit the middle school, and have the high school men's chorus visit the elementary school.

High school students who withdrew from music at the transition point have reported that they did not feel a sense of relatedness with the social groups of band, orchestra, or chorus.<sup>47</sup> Other research, including studies of Black, Latino, and Asian students, indicates that adolescents experience increased levels of anxiety, loneliness and rejection across the transition, feelings that extend into the second year of high school.<sup>48</sup> Boys, especially, seek opportunities during the transition process to redefine

themselves from "nerds to normals,"<sup>49</sup> with "normal" defined by identification with a social group. We need to ensure that choral music fills that social need for boys at the beginning of high school.

## Transition as Halftime

Boys' needs for social support work hand-in-hand with the tension between autonomy and relatedness. In this case, we may wish to reconsider some of our current practices, especially those that focus on the transition of the individual boy from middle school to high school choral music.<sup>50</sup> The collective research suggests that focus on individual skills and autonomy promotes a sense of competence that assists in the retention of boys already enrolled in a choral program. The problem is that, for a period of time during the period of transition, the boys are not enrolled in chorus—they have to make a conscious choice to enroll. This research suggests that a more powerful, positive result will occur when the boys are considered as a group during the transition process. The social ties are what bind boys to choral music. Choral conductors should teach toward musical competence and autonomy within each boy, but the transition decision will be largely predetermined by whether the peer group moves on to sing at the high school level. The social component is not tangential—it is the central element in the success of transitions from middle school to high school. It is the element we need to address more thoroughly.

The question is not just "why do boys drop out of chorus?" The bigger question is "what can we do differently so that they stay?" Clint Eastwood's Super Bowl advertisement concluded with these words: "Yeah, it's halftime America. And, our second half is about to begin." We need to ensure that choral music's boys are still playing the game.

## NOTES

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