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Adapt, Build & Challenge: Three Keys to Effective Choral Rehearsals for Young Adolescents

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Patrick K Freer



p.48

Adolescents are walking, talking, singing contradictions. When they enter grade six, most of them have gained the skills necessary to sing with ease. By the time they leave grade eight, most students will have experienced the greatest period of physical (and vocal) change of their lives. These youngsters are fiercely independent, yet they yearn for structure and guidance. They may express a dislike for selected repertoire, yet they often clamor to sing it repeatedly, once it has been learned. They may appear bored and disinterested, but that façade is only an invitation for someone to pay attention to them.

Directors who work with adolescent choirs recognize these contradictions and embrace them as part of the excitement that each rehearsal brings. The physical, intellectual, and emotional changes encountered by these students can lead to ever-increasing levels of musicianship, vocal skill, and artistic knowledge. But, students experiencing these same changes may become frustrated or bored, ultimately replacing choral music with other activities that connect more directly with their interests and perceived abilities. Successful directors know that they must choose repertoire, design rehearsals, and plan performances to continually meet the needs of their young adolescent singers, many of whom come to our classrooms following positive choral experiences at the elementary level.

Continuity and Transition

A quarter century has passed since the children's choir movement in the United States forever changed the perception of what children were able to accomplish when presented with a high quality combination of repertoire and instruction. Where outstanding choral performance might have previously been thought of as the domain of high schools and universities, children's choir directors proved that elementary-age students were capable of equally outstanding vocal work. The key was recognition that these youngsters were able to

learn rapidly when repertoire and instructional methods were continually adjusted to reflect their growth in musical knowledge and skill development.

Choral music at the middle-level has also experienced success during the past twenty-five years. Middle school choruses perform at nearly every major convention, and honor choir performances featuring young adolescent singers are frequently marvels of technique and emotional impact. Directors of these ensembles build success into their programs because they adapt their rehearsal strategies to meet the needs of their students, whether they come from a rigorous children's choir background or are just beginning to explore the world of singing and choral music.

Choral music is usually an elective subject at the middle school level. This option is commonly presented for the first time as students enter sixth or seventh grade, and are eager to exercise their newly granted powers of course selection. Middle school directors, therefore, must decide how to meet the needs of three broad groups of students: those who continue singing without interruption, those who begin singing but eventually withdraw, and those who don't initially elect to sing in a chorus but who later wish to join. Young adolescents want to try many things, and they will ultimately gravitate to those opportunities where they can experience success. Far too many adults can recall being told by their middle school music teacher that they could not join the chorus because their voice was changing, because they couldn't match pitch, or because they couldn't read music. Instead, effective middle school choral directors plan for how they can meet the musical needs of all their students. Some directors are able to meet these needs by offering different choirs for different types of students. Other directors must find ways to address the multiple needs of students simultaneously within the same rehearsal.

Fortunately, some of the ways that distinguish how middle school students learn can assist directors with these issues. Young adolescents are characterized by their need to seek situations that provide opportunities for independence, competence, achievement, physical activity, creative expression, and positive social interactions with peers and adults. These youngsters also desire situations that provide clear structures and limits, unambiguous feedback, and repeated opportunities for improvement.¹ Teachers teach individual students, not just the large ensemble. Successful middle-level choral directors find ways to ensure that they are seen by students as caring, aware of their musical and developmental needs, and flexible enough to respond to changes in those needs.²

Effective middle-level choral directors recognize these characteristics when organizing instruction for their choirs, fully embracing the implication that appropriate rehearsal techniques for younger or older singers may not be optimal for young adolescents. For instance, the traditional choral formation where eighty or one hundred singers stand or sit in straight rows while focusing on a director (with no talking, moving, or interacting) may be appropriate for concerts, but that kind of static physical setting can prove particularly arduous for young adolescents whose muscular and cognitive growth processes result in the need for frequent movement and personal interaction.³ This mismatch between what adolescents need and what traditional choral instruction provides can eventually affect motivation to sing, achievement, and the desire to continue participating in choral music.⁴ When students withdraw from, or are excluded from, choral music during middle school or in the transitions into and out of middle school, the impact far exceeds the loss of that student from the school chorus -- the individual may be lost from choral music forever. Choral music educators must ensure that all students have opportunities to participate and experience success in choral music. This success requires

¹ *Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*, by Anthony W. Jackson and Gayle A. Davis. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).

² National Association of Secondary School Principals. "Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading MiddleLevel Reform." (Reston, VA, 2006).

³ Joseph Shively, "In the Face of Tradition: Questioning the Roles of Directors and Ensemble Members in School Bands, Choirs, and Orchestras." *In Questioning the Music Education Paradigm*, ed. Lee R. Bartel, 179-190. (Waterloo, ON: Canadian Music Educators' Association, 2004).

⁴ Rick A. Stamer, "Motivation in the Choral Rehearsal," *Music Educators Journal*, 85, no. 5 (March 1999): 26-29.

p.49

adapting rehearsals to meet the needs of the students, building on what they know and can do, and challenging them to reach new heights of musicianship and artistry. Middle-level choral directors, then, employ three key principles when planning for rehearsals that are effective for their students, whether they work with choirs that are large or small, auditioned or nonauditioned, beginning or advanced:

A=*Adapt* rehearsals to the changing needs of young adolescents;

B=*Build* on what students know and build toward what they need to know

C=*Challenge* students in ways that match their skill levels.

Adapt

Working with middle-level choirs requires that directors value the unique qualities of young adolescents.⁵ Directors who work most effectively with middle-level choirs enjoy being an integral influence on their students' emotional and intellectual development. Perhaps more important, they understand and value the beauty of the adolescent changing voice while adapting instruction to accommodate the multiple stages of vocal development. The process of vocal change, the resulting acoustical characteristics, and the musical possibilities of young adolescent voices are well documented for both boys⁶ and girls.⁷ Students at the middle level are fascinated with their physical development in general and with their vocal development in specific. Young adolescents are usually eager to track changes in their voices and report those changes to their directors as frequently as possible.⁸ To do this, they need to understand what is happening, why it is occurring, and what they can expect to happen next. Effective choral directors share information about the process of vocal change, using terminology and concepts in a consistent manner so that students learn to use those terms themselves.⁹

Students who are invested in knowing about their changing voices can help their directors determine how rehearsals and repertoire might be adapted. For instance, a group of students might be able to examine a voice part and determine whether they are able to sing it or not. If the answer is no, the students can use the knowledge of their voices to suggest alternatives. Some middle-level choral directors capitalize on this knowledge by allowing students to choose between two possible repertoire selections after they compare the vocal ranges of the pieces with the ranges of their choir members. This provides students with an opportunity to make some decisions about their future work -- an important need of young adolescents. It also keeps the focus on what students can do rather than on what they cannot do.

Other issues related to adolescent vocal development present opportunities to adapt to the needs of adolescents. Middle

⁵ Claudia Wallis, "What Makes Teens Tick," *Time*, May 10, 2004, 56-65.

⁶ John Cooksey, "Male Adolescent Transforming Voices: Voice Classification, Voice Skill Development, and Music Literature Selection." *Bodymind & Voice: Foundations of Voice Education*, ed. Leon Thurman and Graham Welch, 821-842. (The VoiceCare Network, et al., 2000).

⁷ Lynne Gackle, "Female Adolescent Transforming Voices: Voice Classification, Voice Skill Development, and Music Literature Selection." *Bodymind & Voice: Foundations of Voice Education*, ed. Leon Thurman and Graham Welch, 814-820. (The VoiceCare Network, et al., 2000).

⁸ Mary A. Kennedy, "'It's Cool Because We Like to Sing': Junior High School Boys' Experience of Choral Music as an Elective," *Research Studies in Music Education*, 18 (June 2002): 24-34.

⁹ Patrick K. Freer, "Success for Adolescent Singers: Unlocking the Potential in Middle School Choirs." DVD series. Edited by Piero Bonamico. (Waitsfield, VT: Choral Excellence, Inc., 2005).

p.50

school directors repeatedly find themselves working with students, often boys, who experience difficulty with phonation or vocal control. Effective directors adapt to the needs of those particular boys, providing them with information about their physiological development and strategies for successful singing with the larger group. These directors use a variety of non-threatening ways to engage students in vocal production as a vehicle for initially assessing their vocal development.¹⁰ For instance, directors often ask their students to count backward from 20 to 1 in a slow, *legato* manner as a way to identify the fundamental pitch on which the student's speech is based. By locating at least one pitch on which the student can phonate, these directors lead the student toward success from the very first moment.

Effective directors regularly adapt their use of vocal modeling techniques when working with choirs of young adolescents. These directors encourage vocal modeling by students, either in the large rehearsal or in small group work. In addition to developing a cadre of student leaders, this technique is especially helpful when conductors need to present a vocal model for students of the opposite gender. When students respond to vocal modeling by adults, they routinely imitate the manner of vocal production rather than the actual sung pitch. Directors often find that if they model for their students, the youngsters of the opposite gender will sing either an octave higher or an octave lower than the intended, modeled pitch. The use of student vocal models is an easy-to-implement adaptation that nearly always eliminates this phenomenon.

For middle-level directors, adapting to the changing voices in their choirs means beginning with what the students can do and then leading toward greater skill development within the current physical and musical capabilities of the students (the constructivist approach to learning). Adapting to students in this way frequently takes on the guise of vocal exploration games much like those used with beginning elementary choirs.¹¹

The incorporation of games and other non-traditional rehearsal activities also addresses student needs for frequent changes in activity, focus, and location within the room. Research indicates that the length of any classroom activity should approximate the general age of the students. For instance, directors of seventh grade choruses need to provide a shift in the students' activity or position in the room about once every twelve minutes (the average age of seventh graders is 12). This can be accomplished in a number of additional ways: alternating large and small group work, having brief, simultaneous sectional rehearsals in the corners of the room, incorporating cooperative learning techniques, and having students move around the room or engage in other physical movement while singing.¹² During these situations, the directors

should find the opportunity to interact with individual students, monitor their progress, and provide targeted instruction for them.

Choral directors are accustomed to using movement and gesture with their choirs to release vocal tension and encourage relaxation. Adolescents respond favorably to these techniques, especially motions and games that require gross motor movements with objects like balls and Frisbees. Students can become tense when they spend too much time in one location without physical movement. They can become so focused on trying to produce a "correct" sound that they lose awareness of tension that may inhibit vocal production. Effective middle-level directors can adapt to adolescents' need for gross motor movement by giving them something to do while they sing -- swaying, walking, or passing a ball to the beat, for example.

The warm-up session at the beginning of each rehearsal is an ideal time to incorporate many of the movement activities that encourage healthy adolescent vocal production. Effective middle-level choral directors adapt their warm-up procedures to adolescents' simultaneous need for structure and autonomy by sequencing the stages of the warm-up (relaxation, posture, breathing, resonance/vocalization), but constantly changing the contents of each stage to reflect the music being rehearsed. Young adolescents value the structure, welcome the variety within that structure, and see how they are developing skills necessary to be successful with the repertoire. Effective middle-level directors often return to the warm-up exercises later in the rehearsal as a reminder of the skills the students have already achieved.

Like all choral members, young adolescents experience success when they use their skills to achieve goals within the choral rehearsal. Young adolescents tend to gauge their personal success during peer interactions, processing information and providing feedback to one another. Effective middle-level choir directors take advantage of this opportunity by having students solve musical problems

¹⁰ Graham Welch, "The Developing Voice." *Bodymind & Voice: Foundations of Voice Education*, ed. Leon Thurman and Graham Welch, 704-715. (The VoiceCare Network, et al., 2000).

¹¹ Leon Thurman, et al., "Design and Use of Voice Skill 'Pathfinders' for 'Target Practice,' Vocal Conditioning, and Vocal Warmup and Cooldown." *Bodymind & Voice: Foundations of Voice Education*, ed. Leon Thurman and Graham Welch, 786-802. (The VoiceCare Network, et al., 2000).

¹² Patrick K. Freer, "Rehearsal Discourse of Choral Directors: Meeting the Needs of Young Adolescents" (Ed.D. diss., Teachers College Columbia University, 2003), 156-161.

p.51

in groups and by allowing for moments of unstructured conversation within the rehearsal session. Students quickly become bored or frustrated with rehearsals that are conductor-centered and do not allow for student interaction and group processing of the rehearsal's content.

Adapting the structure and activities of rehearsals to meet the needs of young adolescents may appear to be more about education and less about traditional choral conducting. Directors of middlelevel choirs need to take care when considering the balance between their separate yet intertwined roles as educator and conductor. Perhaps more than at any level, rehearsing with middle-level choirs exposes the direct relationship between the manner in which directors teach and the experience of students in the rehearsals. As the influential middle school director Sally Herman stated in a *Choral Journal* interview, "It all boils down to making the students feel successful. You make them feel successful by your level of expectation.... The students you're going to have discipline/motivation problems with are the students who haven't yet

found a way to be successful in your classroom...."¹³ Directors who seek to understand the constantly changing needs of their young adolescent singers will eventually become comfortable with the process of spontaneously adapting their instructional methods and techniques to meet those needs.

Build

Middle-level students want music, texts, and rehearsal experiences that reflect who they are, what they know, what they can do, and imagine. These are students with rapidly developing intellectual abilities, large capacities for emotion and compassion, and constantly shifting hopes and dreams. Directors can be tempted to select popular or trendy repertoire with the desire that their students will become engaged by the repertoire itself. However, young adolescents desire to learn what they don't know; they yearn for competence and the mastery of skills. They want to see that the knowledge they have is valued, and that they are learning new skills for the future.¹⁴ Effective directors build upon the knowledge and skills adolescents already possess about music, and they realize students often have rich musical experiences that occur well beyond the school environment. These directors view their students as partners in the choral experience and encourage students to learn repertoire both independently and with teacher support.

While this collaborative music-making environment is important for adolescent learning, it remains that effective choral directors are experts in the methods and strategies essential for building musicianship skills in their students, including skills related to vocal production, vowel formation, diction, notational literacy, etc. Successful middle-level directors recognize that choral repertoire provides the "textbook" (potentially the most glorious textbook in the lives of youngsters) through which students learn to engage with the processes of musicianship necessary for satisfying participation in choral music. These directors do not teach isolated skills to students; rather, they carefully select repertoire and sequence instruction with an eye toward the development of singing skills.

Successful middle-level choir directors quickly learn what students know and build on that knowledge. The need for this is readily apparent in choral programs where students come from multiple elementary schools employing different sets of syllables for sight-singing (numbers, solfa, etc.). The simple act of checking for student understanding allows these directors to uncover confusion that might otherwise go unnoticed so that instruction can be adjusted accordingly during subsequent rehearsals. Sometimes directors find that a student never learned how to follow a choral score. At other times, directors find that their boys with changing voices never learned to read notation on the bass clef (no wonder they're always trying to reach for high notes whenever a pitch is notated at the top of the staff!). Effective middle-level choral directors often use the warm-up session as an opportunity to both assess the prior knowledge of their students and establish a vocabulary of musical skills and techniques common to all participants. They also plan the warm-up carefully to ensure that students build the skills required for a successful experience with the repertoire that will follow.

No matter how carefully the director designs the warm-up and prepares for the rehearsal, young adolescents understandably grow weary of repeated rehearsals of the same repertoire. This often occurs when students lose sight of the process of building toward long-term goals. Directors can work to prevent this by engaging students in substantive discussions about their learning. The youngsters will eventually learn to see the value in repeated rehearsals by talking about their progress over time.

Successful adolescent musicians are able to articulate what they did, how they

¹³ Dennis Schrock, "An Interview with Sally Herman and Michael Nuss: Elements of Successful Junior High School Choirs," *Choral Journal*, 30, no. 9 (April 1990): 16.

¹⁴ Susan Monks, "Adolescent Singers and Perceptions of Vocal Identity," *British Journal of Music Education*, 20, no. 3 (November 2003): 243-256.

did it, and can analyze the results. Directors model this sequence by providing specific feedback that is related to whatever task was given to the students. This feedback is often not simply evaluative (good/bad), but is detailed and descriptive. Where directors might be tempted to move too quickly and address problem after problem in the music, young adolescents need specific and immediate feedback about their efforts.

Effective directors also build toward their students' independent musicianship by incorporating opportunities for peer feedback, either within the large rehearsal or when working in small groups. Their students leave the middle school choral experience with more than just the knowledge of the repertoire; they are equipped to move into high school and adulthood with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in choral music. As Sally Herman stated, "I think if we're going to be successful, the success comes by teaching the student not to need us, to teach the students to think for themselves."¹⁵

Teaching students to think and act as independent musicians requires that directors interact with students as the formative musicians that they are. When directors and students converse as fellow musicians, students feel empowered by both the subject matter and the interaction with the adult director. Directors who allow students to take responsibility for their own learning do not abdicate authority within the rehearsal. Rather, these directors take responsibility for planning experiences so that students are able to connect with their prior learning and build toward the next challenge.

Challenge

Choral music presents challenges to students such as reading notation, singing phrases in a vocally healthy manner, and unifying the vowel formations of multiple singers. Likewise, students have skills for handling the challenges presented to them. This match between challenge and skill has been shown to be a reliable indicator of experiences that are enjoyable and worth repeating. Some repertoire selections contain the optimal degree of challenge for a particular choir while other pieces provide challenges either too high or too low for that group. When repertoire matches the musical needs of adolescents, students intuitively recognize the relationship between their ever-increasing ability levels and their facility with handling the challenges presented in the repertoire. The relationship between challenge and skill has formed the basis of much research about young adolescents and teenagers, and it is linked to a larger body of work that examines why people seek to repeat some experiences and avoid others.¹⁶

In the real world of middle-level choirs (or anywhere else, for that matter!), challenges and skills are not always matched. When youngsters are presented with challenges that exceed their skill levels, they experience frustration or anxiety. This results because the music is too difficult, the students haven't been properly taught a particular skill, the director doesn't provide feedback, or the pace of a rehearsal is too fast.¹⁷ Students can experience boredom simply because the challenges presented to them are too low in relation to their skill levels. This often occurs in choirs of young adolescents when directors choose music that is too easy for the students. The stereotypically adolescent characteristic of apathy follows from challenges and skill levels that are uniformly low. In these situations, directors do not demand much of their singers,

¹⁵ Dennis Schrock, "An Interview with Sally Herman," 9.

¹⁶ Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

¹⁷ Freer, Rehearsal Discourse of Choral Directors, 155-156.

p.53

and students' low self-concept regarding their abilities creates a downward spiral of apathy.

Finding the match between challenge and skill is critically important for young adolescents. While these youngsters are at an age when they are beginning to develop higher cognitive and decisionmaking skills, some middle school choral directors provide low-level challenges without acknowledging that the result might be boredom or apathy.¹⁸ Similarly, research has repeatedly shown that high school freshmen wish their middle school teachers had better prepared them for high school, specifically citing the need for higher challenge levels in middle school course work.¹⁹

The challenges presented to students need to be authentically musical and developmentally appropriate. In an effort to provide repertoire that immediately appeals to young adolescents, some publishers present texts that lack sophistication, musical content that is predictable or trite, and suggested choreography that is too complex for the developing adolescent brain to handle while concurrently dealing with pitch, rhythm, notation, and the countless adjustments necessary for ensemble singing.²⁰ Young adolescents certainly benefit from the addition of movement that enhances singing and artistry. However, adding high-challenge choreography to low-challenge texts and music sends confusing messages to students about the skills necessary for sustained success in choral singing.

Effective middle-level choir directors constantly seek to balance the challenges they present with the skills of their students. Again, the words of Sally Herman: "We choose the literature *apropos* to the group, with challenges that are within that group's capabilities. We want to make them successful, but they are never going to feel successful if there's no challenge. Success is only felt with challenge. We don't make them successful by picking something that is so easy they have an 'instant success.'"²¹

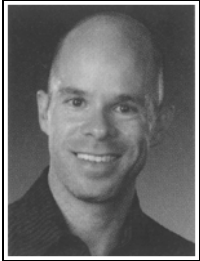
Impacting the Future of Choral Music

The ways in which effective middle-level choral directors adapt their rehearsals and build on students' existing abilities assists in matching challenges to skills. Young adolescent singers report that they experience music learning most powerfully when they are actively engaged with other students in activities that develop and challenge their skills. These activities often occur in rehearsals where students are invited to make music both individually and collectively, interact personally with the teacher, and experience several changes in grouping and activity.²² Indeed, effective choral music directors at the middle level continually provide opportunities for individual students to understand their vocal mechanisms, make personal meaning of music, and become agents in their own learning.

This focus on meeting the needs of individual students is essential to the future of choral music. A recent study by the RAND Corporation confirms that the sustainability of the performing arts in America is directly linked to the experiences of youngsters in today's school performing ensembles.²³ Music education philosopher Estelle Jorgensen writes that music education, "comes alive when learners view knowledge as relevant to their lives; within their powers to grasp; challenging, inspiring, and encouraging them to move beyond past attitudes, abilities, and attainments. And it comes alive as it impacts the lived experience of its public in ways that are humanizing and civilizing."²⁴

Choral music in America's schools has a rich history and a lengthy list of traditions and practices. Effective

middle-level choral educators see their work as preparing students to take part in those traditions and practices as they move through high school and adulthood. This preparatory work requires adapting rehearsal strategies, building on student abilities, and challenging students with high quality repertoire that matches their skills. Those of us who devote our lives to working with young adolescent singers know that this work is constantly evolving, immensely rewarding, a great deal of fun, and musically satisfying like no other endeavor.



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¹⁸ Nancy B. Mizelle and Emmett Mullins, "Transition Into and Out of Middle School." *What Current Research Says to the Middle-Level Practitioner*, ed. Judith L. Irvin, 303-313. (Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association, 1997).

¹⁹ Kathleen Cushman, "Help Us Make the 9th Grade Transition," *Educational Leadership*, 63, no. 7 (April 2006): 47-52.

²⁰ Wallis, "What Makes Teens Tick," 56-65.

²¹ Dennis Schrock, "An Interview with Sally Herman," 8.

²² Freer, *Rehearsal Discourse of Choral Directors*, 154.

²³ Kevin F. McCarthy, et al. *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004).

²⁴ Estelle R. Jorgensen, *Transforming Music Education* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 125.

p.55

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[Top of Page](#)

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