

CHAPTER

I

# STRANGER IN A NOT-SO- STRANGE LAND

## **A LOOK INSIDE THE CHORAL CLASSROOM AND AT THE MANY SKILLS BAND DIRECTORS ALREADY BRING TO IT**

**W**hile there appear to be differences in the teaching techniques of both disciplines—and okay, let’s be honest, there are actual differences—the good news is that those trained as instrumental conductors are actually in a much better position to direct a choir than the average choir director is to direct a band. At the risk of upsetting my choral colleagues, I would even go so far as to suggest that many choir directors could learn a thing or two from band directors.

### **THE EXTRA-MUSICAL MATTERS**

Instrumental directors generally and by necessity have excellent organizational skills. Why? Band and orchestra directors have to deal with a lot of “stuff”—spit valves, reeds, ligatures, corks, march-

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ing flip folders, tuners, music stands, rosin, bows, school-owned instruments, band uniforms. You can't continually buy that which you do not maintain (e.g., scores, band uniforms, double basses, tubas); without organization, band directors simply cannot survive. These organizational skills will serve you well in teaching choral music.

### **MANAGING THE CHORAL MUSIC LIBRARY**

If one walks into a band or orchestra library, one will usually find the music easily accessible. When one delves further, he or she will more often than not find the music within the library in order; all of the parts will be there and generally in good "working order" regardless of the year the score and parts were purchased. Choral libraries tend to be at the other end of the organizational spectrum.

In one of my choral workshops, I ask choral directors a series of questions ranging from how they manage mainstreaming, curriculum, the first week of school, etc. It is a great opportunity for veteran choral teachers to share their experiences and ideas with younger teachers and vice versa. One of the questions I ask is, "How do you organize your choral library?" Somewhat like the person in church who hears something from the minister that "hits home," I will see guilt-stricken looks come over the directors' faces. I then ask, "Do you organize your library? If I walked into your choral library right now, would I find everything organized, by title, the music still as nice as when you first purchased it?" At that point, in a crowd of 100 or so, there will be only a few who don't look at least a little uncomfortable. I joke that a colleague of mine has every piece of music she has ever done with her choir in the past 30 years *somewhere* in her office!

Music is too expensive to use it just once. Organize your choral library the way you would (or did, or maybe even still do) your band or orchestra library, with music easily accessible, in order, complete, and generally in good “working order,” regardless of the year it was purchased. And just as you wouldn’t photocopy a band score and parts, never photocopy your choral music, no matter how tempting it may be! It is illegal, thereby sending a very poor message to your students, who know it is illegal. Your principal knows too.

### **REHEARSAL MANAGEMENT**

Another area where you will be well served by your organizational abilities is the planning and running of a rehearsal. Think about your 50-minute band rehearsal: As the bell rings, students are in their seats with their instruments ready to play. The order of warm-ups and music is on the board. The students have their music organized before the bell rings. Roll is taken in a non-invasive way, often by a student assistant with no rehearsal time wasted. Announcements are made. The band tunes quickly. Scales, arpeggios and a chorale are played. Immediately, this is followed by the first piece and so on. Final announcements are made and students are given a short amount of time to put their instruments away before the bell rings and they head to the next class. This routine is followed daily and consistently. This is not always the case in the average choral classroom.

Approach your choral rehearsals the same way you approached your band rehearsals: There should be no “down time” in the daily choral rehearsal. The rehearsals should always start on time. Don’t say that it will start on time, do it! Music for the day should be on the board in order.

*Organize your choral library the way you would your band or orchestra library.*

Students should have their choral folders and be seated before the bell rings (or the rehearsal period begins, if that isn't marked by a bell). Roll should be taken unobtrusively. Announcements should be brief. Effective and meaningful warm-ups should be quick and efficient. Pieces should be rehearsed in a logical and sequential order.

In some ways, rehearsal management is even more important in the choral classroom. Why? It is easier to have a disciplined band or orchestra classroom than it is to have a disciplined choral classroom. That's right, easier! It is a behavioral truth that when students are holding and/or playing an instrument either with their hands, embouchure or both, they are naturally less prone to discipline problems than choral students, who produce the music with the same part of the body that produces talking. I've always said that there are fewer discipline problems when a student has a horn in his mouth.

*Teaching the voice requires greater classroom discipline than the teaching of an instrument.*

Because of its personal nature, teaching the choral instrument (the voice) requires greater classroom discipline than the teaching of an external instrument does. Think about it. It takes a certain amount of time after the conductor has given a cutoff in a rehearsal for the horn to come off the lips and onto the lap. That is a grace period for the instrumental conductor. There is no grace period for the choral director.

When you stop or cut off a choir, you must have something important to say immediately or they will talk! If you cut off the ensemble and say something like, "Well, um, uh, when I was listening to that...uh...well..." you've lost them. If you cut off the group and stand there silently, you've lost them. Again, you must say something important and you must say it immediately. When you either wait too long to speak or say unimportant

words, you actually train your students not to listen to you. In this situation, they are saying to themselves, “Why should I listen to the director? Nothing important is being said.” If you do not know exactly what to say upon cutoff, keep conducting for a while until you know in your mind what to say, then cut off.

This is even truer when working with middle school students. Because of their transition from child to adulthood, this group of students becomes bored more easily and more quickly than other age groups. To maintain student interest in rehearsal, you must have a lower threshold for boredom than the students, and know that you have an even shorter grace period after cutoffs.

When conducting middle school choirs (or bands, as some of you may no doubt know), keep things moving, not dwelling on any one section or piece too long. There are times in any rehearsal when you must really dig into a particular section to polish it, but the master teacher knows when you’re experiencing diminishing returns and need to move on. The purpose of rehearsal is to get a little better, not to achieve perfection.

When a class period is over, you and the students should be able to identify one or more specific behaviors that improved as a result of your instruction. If either of you cannot, then you didn’t teach anything that day, regardless of the amount of time you and they spent in the classroom. Try this exercise with your students: At the conclusion of rehearsal, provide each student with a piece of note paper and have them write down one or more specific improvements that were made during that class period.

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