

Hold My Hand and Listen: Nurturing Choral Community as Musicianship

Adam Adler
University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Choral singing...is inherently physical and innately personal, one of the most humanly intimate of all musical acts. It requires no mechanical intermediary, but clothes itself directly in our humanity.

– Custer, 2001, p. 25.

What does it mean for a choir to sing “in tune?” A plethora of choral methods, conducting, sight-singing, and ear-training texts provide practical, singing-based strategies for improving choral intonation and gesture-based strategies for improving conducting communication; but apart from aural/vocal and conducting methodology, traditional pedagogy fails to consider the human aspect of the choral singing equation. As a result the solutions presented—while in some cases immediately effective—may actually be only Band-Aid solutions to deeper ensemble problems. If a choir experiences intonation problems, lack of musicality, or ensemble failure, could it be that the singers do not care to sing in tune, musically, or as an ensemble? How can we move singers towards effective ensemble singing in a way that is nurturing, participant-centred, and permanently rooted in their musicianship? Following a consideration of philosophical and practical writings from the fields of choral music and music education, and a reflection on significant choral teaching endeavours and experiences with community and post-secondary ensembles, the author discusses possibilities for improving choral musicianship by nurturing communities of singers.

Introduction

What does it mean for a choir to sing “in tune?” The definition of “singing in tune” may differ depending on the priorities of individual musicians or ensembles, and may be subject to influence from situational cultures, politics, or other non-musical determinants. For example, for a competitive high school choir, “singing in tune” might be defined as the unification of pitches within each part to highlight specific chord tones to *brighten* the chord. For a semi-professional choir specializing in early music, this might mean unified diction and the pitches unified within each part to achieve *ringing* cadential intervals for an authentic musical-historical reproduction. For an Eastern European women’s choir, this might mean a unified, forward, nasal vocal placement that satisfies a culturally appropriate vocal-choral aesthetic.

Since in each of these cases the definition of “in tune” is determined by a desired musical product or acoustical end-effect, a more apt question might be, “Why should a choir sing in tune?” to more accurately reflect the product-oriented nature of the priorities underlying the quest for excellent choral intonation. The most immediate answer would be because we want to bring the sound of our music within the preferred parameters of a socially valued choral aesthetic to be consumed and appreciated by audience or adjudicators: a bright, energetic *high*

school sound, a ringing authentic early music sound, a forward projecting traditional cultural sound.

A plethora of choral methods, conducting, sight-singing, and ear-training texts provide practical, singing-based strategies for improving choral intonation, and gesture-based strategies for improving conducting communication as it relates to intonation. But apart from aural/vocal and conducting methodology, traditional pedagogy fails to consider the human aspect of the choral singing equation. The focus on an *acoustic-musical* effect separates or removes both the music and the intonation from the humanity of the singers producing the sound. While technical solutions are often immediately effective—they may actually be only Band-Aid solutions to deeper ensemble problems. If a choir experiences intonation problems, lack of musicality, or ensemble failure, could it be that the singers do not care to sing in tune, to sing musically, or to sing as an ensemble?

It has been my experience that the intra- and interpersonal aspects of human experience are highly significant in the musical success of choral ensembles. This should come as no surprise—choirs are assemblies of individuals, lead by individuals, each with personal, emotional, social needs and goals that may or may not be mutually compatible with each other or with the needs and goals of the larger ensemble. As discussed in a letter by Shaw (1986) to his symphony chorus, the very fact that any choir can produce music that is in tune is miraculous:

Living in a world wherein musical intonation ranges from the excremental only as far as a tolerable compromise (the well-tempered keyboard), it is a monumental accomplishment for two hundred voices to sing one note in tune—let alone eighty minutes of four- to seven-part harmony. And it takes everybody caring every second...If one recognizes the difficulty of contriving occasional simultaneity physical or psychological, between just two persons, the brashness of proposing it for two hundred persons should scare [the conductor] to death (p. 5).

For me, the key phrase in Shaw's proposition is "it takes everybody caring every second," for before an ensemble can sing in tune each participant must first care that the music should be in tune; even more importantly, they must care to tune themselves to each other (in their pitch, placement, and diction) and to connect musically with their conductor; otherwise, why expend the effort? The problem, then, is how (as the conductor) to facilitate that caring, so that your technical efforts are supported by the will of the singers. How can we move singers towards effective ensemble singing in a way that is nurturing, participant-centred, and permanently rooted in their musicianship? For me, the solution lies in nurturing community.

Following a consideration of writing from the fields of choral music, music education, religious, and humanist philosophy, and I will present two short stories and one longer story that have emerged from a reflection on my significant choral teaching endeavours and experiences with community and post-secondary ensembles. The first, Glenhaven, highlights the role of community in generating a safe and inclusive environment for singers and their parents; the second, Just Singers, describes the emergence of community out of the musical and personal needs of a group of community singers; in the third, Crane, I describe my attempt to use my past experiences with community and singing to improve the collective musicianship and musical experience of a university men's chorus.

Community, Caring, Storying, and Re-storying

The term “community” is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a unified body of individuals; the people with common interests living in a particular area; joint ownership or participation (<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/community>).” As a fundamental human need (O’Murchu, 2004; Moore, 2001) that underlies all corporate interaction, our pull towards forming community accompanies and supports our present common interests (prosperity) and our unconscious (but increasingly conscious) social evolution.

At the centre of the idea of community is our tendency to care about each other. The roots of community lie in the pack- or tribe-forming instincts that supported our past physical interests (survival). At first glance, community is an oxymoron; caring about others’ survival should be counter-productive to individual prosperity, that is, if I care about your survival, then I may at some point have to sacrifice opportunities to promote my own. Looking deeper, however, we can see that the accidental result of this counter productivity has actually been our improved survival, prosperity, and development; community is not an oxymoron. Rather, our formation of community is evidence of our awareness of the greater mystery of life: That all life is connected, that is, what happens to you happens to me, and since I care about myself I, therefore, care about you. As this awareness grows, we can expect not only a greater pull to social unity, but also the more frequent occurrence of altruistic endeavours that go beyond the immediate cause-effect of personal benefit through mutual benefit, to a more universal contribution to the greater good of the interconnected universe.

We know each other through the stories we tell about ourselves and about each other.

(Blyden-Tayler, personal communication, 1998)¹

The idea of community and caring in choral ensembles—both as task recognition and prioritizing (caring about musical things) and as intra- and interpersonal connection (caring about each other)—is a relatively recent consideration in the field of choral music and education. Harris (2001, citing Battisti & Massey) describes ensembles as venues where we connect as “bodies corporate” to achieve unified musical goals. Several authors discuss the importance of “storying”—the open and honest communication between individuals within a dedicated or purposeful context for which community is desired, which is particularly important between conductor and singers (Harris, 2001; Jordan, 2002; Randall, 2004). In order to be honest in our communication with others, we must first acknowledge the self-truths of our own past experiences by “re-storying,” (Randall, 1995; Jordan, 2002), that is, by processing our experiences through language and emotion in order to integrate them into healthy identities. Only then can we quiet our egos to listen deeply and compassionately to each others’ stories (Moore, 2001; Thich Nhat Hahn, 2001; Jordan, 2002).

Glenhaven

My last school teaching position was at Glenhaven Senior Public School in Mississauga (the suburbs of Toronto, Ontario), where I taught music to all of the students in grades 7 and 8. The school’s student population was largely new immigrant, refugee, and lower socio-economic status, with about a 10% white, middle-class student population. Many of our students were

what I would call “needy,” either of structured life patterns or of caring involvement of significant individuals in their lives, or just of a good breakfast. And among our greatest challenges was just getting the immigrant parents, who often felt unwelcome in English-speaking, government institutions, to visit the school. What both the students and the parents needed was a sense of community, and while I would not claim to have endeavoured to that as my focus, I know that the building of community in my classes and ensembles contributed to the success of the music program, which played a significant role in the building of community for the larger population.

I implemented a comprehensive vocal music program for 90% of our classes with 10% (the middle class group) receiving a comprehensive instrumental program.² The highlight of my program, however—the aspect that I think demonstrated my greatest teaching and curricular success, was in the number of students engaged in voluntary co-curricular ensembles, in response to their enjoyment and success in my curricular program. By the end of my four years in the school, we had built our girls’ choir to 110, and a boys’ choir to 45, in a school with 550 students—that’s 28% of the school singing in voluntary choirs.

Excerpt from *The Practice*

7:45 a.m., and I sit behind the piano, scrawling out a rehearsal plan. Forty-five boys sit half-awake on risers, chomping donuts and cereal and nuts and oranges. A mysterious trickle of chocolate milk runs down from the topmost riser towards my desk. “Five minutes to downbeat!” I bellow, not even looking up. A scruffy grade 7 boy jumps a little, slightly choking on his breakfast. He smiles in embarrassment, and I get a full view of his half-chewed donuts. Well wasn’t that just splendid (Adler, 2002).

In Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 1), higher-order personal-social processes cannot occur until preceding lower order needs are met; this was surely the case for my boys. As many of my students did not eat breakfast before coming to school, either because of a lack of parental supervision and adequate scheduling, or because there simply was no food in the home to eat, very little higher-order anything could occur throughout the day. We began each rehearsal with breakfast—nothing fancy: cereals that could be eaten dry, fresh and dried fruit, nuts, juice, and milk. Students whose families were more secure contributed food, as did a local food bank. While not all of the students needed to have breakfast at school, most came in time to at least sit with their friends while they ate, and maybe share a little “second breakfast.” This met their primary need of food, in a physically safe and comfortable environment, while also proving to be the beginnings of belonging. With just one simple pre-rehearsal activity, we had already met the first three levels of need on Maslow’s Hierarchy.

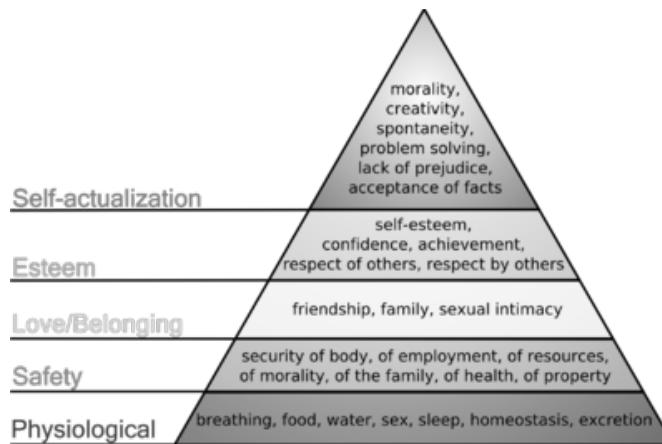


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow_pyramid)
Who cares?

So, like, today I really got messed up [on] *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. I just couldn't get the notes on the second part. I hope people didn't notice, but I know they did.

When we finished a section, I put my hand up for Mr. A: "We're...I'm not getting the notes on the second part. I had it last week; I just got stupider this week or something."

Then Aingkaran, a guy in grade 8, like, "Yeah that was me last year. It's stupid. It'll pass." but I didn't feel much better about not getting it right now.

Then Mr. A. [was] like "What *can* you do right now?"

And then I [was] like, "I think I can get the chorus, and I know the high guys' melody for the verse—I just can't sing it that high."

So Mr. A. [was] like, "So sing the melody in your octave, and then go to part two just for the chorus."

But I'm still pretty worried, though, and [was] like, "But what if I keep messing up?"

But then Aingkaran's friend Srinikanth like pats me on the back and [was] like, "Who cares?"

And he laughs, and so does everyone; and then I do too.

Next was the challenge of opening up their singing so that we would have a supported sound from which to work on musicality. We achieved this through a no-fault, success-first approach whereby (for us) any reasonably attempt at singing the assigned parts garnered recognition as a basic level of success. Since they knew that they could and would be successful in rehearsal (Edwards, 2004), they set aside their inhibitions (Harris, 2001) and sang out. While no doubt they sounded terrible some of the time, I taught them to realize *why* they sometimes had difficulty matching pitch, accessing registers, or navigating some passages, and therefore to identify and appreciate any improvements as even greater success. We benefited from the apprenticeship model of a multigrade, multi-age group, such that they did not just have to take my "word for it" that improvement was possible. They listened to each other for any sign of improvement, which was immediately recognized and celebrated.

By mid-year, after spending considerable time together in shared activity, the ensemble entered a “comfort zone” with each other. We had achieved Maslow’s fourth level of need—self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others, and respect by others. The students themselves described how the intimacy of the choral venue allowed the normal social rules for behaviour on the playground and in the hallway, and the social hierarchy of age, size and maturity were suspended, freeing some of them to interact more authentically and honestly, to share their true self-stories (Jordan, 2002; Moore, 2001) and in so doing to know each other more fully. It is at this point that their listening began to evolve from a simply analytical towards further-reaching compassion; they were listening and singing as a form of expression and connection through shared activity.

“Cool!”

8:35 a.m. and we are immersed in the lyrical *Brigg Fair*. Having vied for the opportunity to sing the opening duet this time, several boys sing as a small group to bring us in for the three-part open harmony second stanza. Tentative at first, the boys relax more when I remind them of the first notes in the alto part; once they’re in, they’re fine. They’re really getting the text, now, and... Hey, nice ‘v’ on ‘love,’ guys! A couple of the grade 6 boys chuckle when we sing “lily white hand;” I can’t get them out of that, ever since one of them asked if the romantic subject in the song was actually a corpse. Sigh. At least the grade sevens and eights recognize the romance. Here we go into the last stanza...Awesome accent there, altos! And now the final ritardando...And hey, they’re all watching!

“The lass that loves me well_____.”

The open chord hangs
Unwavering in mid-air, ringing
Beyond time
Eyes widen
We cut off.
Silence, motionless, jaws agape
Nodding slowly, Rik says “Cool!”

After the Concert

Return the music stands to the carts;
Music to boxes—we’ll sort it tomorrow.
Gift for custodian, \$25; help with tear-down, priceless.
Great job, kids!
You’re welcome. Now.
Go home. GO home. Go HOME!
Mrs. Ji approaches. No English.
Bows, eyes smiling.

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The phenomenon of compassionate listening happened inconsistently and usually when they knew a particular piece very well—when they experienced “flow” as the result of technique-matching-challenge. In accordance with Harris (2001), I found that they listened most deeply when they were connected to a memorable melody, an appealing harmonic structure, or a substantive and meaningful text. It was at such times that the technical problems “disappeared” (Jordan, 2002)—not such that they did not happen, but rather that as we moved past them and remained “in the musical moment” they did not become obstacles to our musical connection (Harris, 2001, citing Rowell). This allowed them to maintain a consistently supported, dynamic sound that “clicked” into tune at key listenable moments. While we did not achieve anywhere near this level of musical success in performance, what remains important for me is that the boys learned to connect with others and with the music, and had a crystallizing musical experience that will remain with them for their lifetimes.

A Song Sweeter than Honey

Hey Mr. Adler...Professor Adler...Srini and I were talking about you earlier today and how we should get in contact with you. I'm at U of T Scarborough now, and Srini is at York. I still have memories of all the good times we had. *“The candle flickers towards its last, our time together ending...”*—my solo piece (lol). *“Every time, I hear of music...of the rivers that freely flow...and it sings a song sweeter than honey...”* I was hoping we could get together and like old times, just have one more go at it.

Memories will forever stay.

...always...Aingkaran

Just Singers

Once upon a time not very long ago, I had the great privilege of being invited to direct a member-founded community choir. I had previously been conducting a large university “community” choir at the University of Toronto, when a group of singers—unhappy with the choir management board’s lack of care and respect for its membership—broke away and said to me “If we start a choir, will you work with us?”; and so *Just Singers* was born. From our inception we had purpose and direction; a collective identity by choice and consensus, collective ownership, and voice. The name of the choir was generated by the members themselves, and was chosen particularly for its double entendre: *Just SINGERS* was to be a consensually run ensemble without the self-serving politics of a choir board or committee, while *JUST Singers* would operate with principles of social justice that included open membership and community service. Our programme self-description read as follows:

Just Singers formed in May 2003 as a member-driven community choir, where each voice is valued and respected; where we could grow musically and sing varied and interesting repertoire as a group of friends. Our membership includes university students and community professionals with a diverse wealth of experiences, knowledge and interests. Membership is non-auditioned and is open to anyone with a desire to sing and grow with us.

As a small group with little program funds, we needed a place where we could rehearse and perform for free. Through my contacts, we were brought to All Saints Anglican Church and Community Centre, a historic inner-city Toronto church. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, All Saints had been the pinnacle of High Anglican worship for the “upper crust” of Toronto society. Now dilapidated, and with the Toronto upper crust moved north, All Saints now ministers only to the poor, homeless, and disadvantaged residents of the inner city. As such, All Saints has no choir for its irregularly offered services, and very little budget for a music program. We needed a home in which to rehearse and perform, and they wanted to be able to offer some choral music to the needy residents in their area; and so we became a community as Choir-in-Residence.

The once-proud building remained beautiful, with its ornately carved woodwork, original brass fixtures, and stained glass windows that were themselves the envy of the Toronto historical societies. The long-neglected organ—with its rare 32' pedal stop and pipes that extended down to the cellar—also held great historic value, and had enough stops functioning to serve our purposes. But times had not been good to All Saints. The original fixed pews were long gone; flea-infested carpets covered much of the once glimmering hardwood floors, now abused and rotting. The daytime clientele of homeless and mentally ill locals found security by sleeping there, and their olfactory residue remained to greet us as we arrived for rehearsals. But despite everything, All Saints was home to us, and we came to care for it a great deal.

At first, while operating decisions such as performance schedules, tours, and social activities were made by the whole group, the singers initially deferred musical judgment to me. I quickly determined that this process was not in keeping with the mandate of the group, and that moving to a collaborative and consensual process (Edwards, 2004; Harris, 2001) in our rehearsals was required. While I could remain a resource for pedagogical and musical guidance, I wanted to utilize the singers’ own musicianship as the primary determinant of our musical outcomes. At first, this was challenging; the singers-teachers, graduate students, and university faculty—were all well-spoken, confident individuals, but were not used to contributing to an ongoing, explicit process of critical participation in rehearsals. Most challenging was the temptation for me to “jump in” with either critical suggestions or solutions to fill the silence, and I found myself having at first to facilitate with open-ended and sometimes directed questions to solicit opinions and suggestions. Eventually, however, the singers “took ownership” of their rehearsals and filled that silence with their own voices, and we established a “rhythm” for effective critical rehearsing.

Through both the acts of choral singing and of sharing food we manipulate our experience of time, slowing it for a period of reflection and connection. There is something primeval, at once entirely physical and yet ethereal and mystical, in the act of breaking bread. From its roots in the bonding of communities of animals through cooperative attainment and sharing of food, to its transformation to the abstract ritual of organized religion, the sharing of food is inseparably linked to our human evolution, and to our fundamental need for community (O’Murchu, 2004; Moore, 2001). Social time and the sharing of food and drink became an important component of Just Singers’ collective identity. Post-rehearsal pub outings were frequent, where we could just share stories from our personal and professional lives and experience each other not just as musicians but as whole people. Seasonal retreats also became a significant part of our culture—an opportunity to change venues, to get out of the city and focus on ensemble building while extending our community even further.

We often programmed one or two selections each concert where the audience was invited to join us in song. Once particular piece—*The Piece of the Earth* by Ian Bell—was sung with and

around the audience at the end of each concert and became our signature communal benediction. In so doing, the line between performer and audience, producer and consumer, were made fuzzy as another layer was added to our community. The audience, too, felt pleasure and ownership of their musical experience, and were encouraged (or so they said) to return. We also found this to be our most effective recruiting tool, as following each concert we would accept new members who had been in our audience. Following one concert in which we collaborated with instrumentalists musicians from the local community (friends of choir members), a number of the instrumentalists were so taken by our collegiality, and by our consensual and intimate music making, they changed their horns for choir folders and joined us as singers. Over a number of continuous semesters of singing³ the ensemble grew and shrank, as people came to us to share part of their journeys and then left for other shores.⁴ A settled core of singers sustained the group, serving both to recruit and to apprentice new members into our unique culture.

I endeavoured to select a broad and interesting selection of repertoire with which the singers could connect both musically and textually (Harris, 2001). The size of this group and the nature of the specific voices lent themselves particularly well to sixteenth century sacred music and traditional a cappella choral folk—the latter becoming the choir’s “specialty.” The thinner, more open textures of choral folk and the independent lines and constantly shifting horizontal harmonies of early music encourage listening within sections as well as across the ensemble. The modal nature of both genres, combined with the subtleties of just intonation in an a cappella setting make them less harmonically intuitive than traditional major or minor composition, that is, the singers cannot just assume in advance how any given note will be tuned, but rather they must listen and respond to each other and to the melodic and harmonic needs of the music in the moment. Our focus on early music and folk music also facilitated singing un-conducted. In this new role as facilitator and singing co-performer, I listened differently, heard differently, shared my story differently, and with the addition of my voice to the group—so did the other singers.

By our last semester, all of the best possible factors were in play for us: a group of people who genuinely enjoyed each others’ musical company, a trusting relationship between singers and director, a body of repertoire which the singers enjoyed, and from which resulted an open and honest sound (Jordan, 2002), and a venue that was home. This was the pinnacle of our experience as an ensemble—the coming together of factors that made music making easy, natural, and intimate. While neither the individual technique of the singers nor of the ensemble were perfect (Harris, 2001), far more important was the honest expression and compassionate listening that resulted in a cohesive, “in-tune” sound that connected us to each other and to our audiences.

Of course, many of our most musically successful moments happened in rehearsal. As our singing fell in tune, the constant sirens of fire and police faded, the lingering smell of sad and unwashed bodies disappeared; we suspended time as our sound connected in the rafters with the ghosts of the once burgeoning chancel choirs of old.

The Crane Men’s Ensemble

My first full-time academic job was a one-year appointment was as Visiting Assistant Professor of Music at the Crane School of Music, SUNY Potsdam, where I taught choral methods, conducting, and Men’s Ensemble. The Crane Men’s Ensemble was the entry-ensemble for male first year students at both Crane and from the liberal arts areas on campus.

Approximately a third of the singers were returning students from second through fourth years, some of whom maintained it as their primary ensemble, while others who had been “promoted” to one of the select choirs continued their participation voluntarily.

While I arrived excited about beginning this new position, the assumption of my role as conductor of the Men’s Ensemble was problematic. A previously arranged lecture tour of Australia delayed my arrival until the third week of classes. In my absence, the ensemble was conducted by John, a senior and protégé to the previous conductor who also remained on faculty but who had stepped down as conductor in order to complete her doctoral dissertation. John, as well as some of the other seniors, continued to look to Sue for leadership, and at times I felt like they blamed me for Sue’s stepping down as conductor. Additionally, in the time between the commencement of the school year and my arrival, John entrenched himself personally and socially in the role of conductor and “protector” of the ensemble’s traditions, and my arrival sparked a tug-of-war over who was in charge, or who “owned” this ensemble.

For the first month of the semester, I tried to make as few changes as possible in order to familiarize myself with the singers and with the resident “culture” of the choir, as suggested by Battisti (in Harris, 2001). What I found was a complicated and challenging; disparate groups of students with a wide range of experience and mutually exclusive aspirations. The undergraduate singers were a mixture of majors; most were vocal students who had years of solo and choral experience. However, at least a third of the students were general arts or instrumental students, some of whom had not sung in choir since elementary school, and as a result found sight-singing choral music never-tried changed voices to be difficult and stressful experience. The vocal/choral students aspired to be professional vocalists and choral educators, and were looking for an ensemble experience that would challenge their musicianship. The general arts students were looking to continue the choral experience that they’d had in high school, but were at times concerned by the level and amount of repertoire that the Crane ensembles performed. The instrumental students—and the guitar majors in particular—generally demonstrated a stressed ambivalence towards singing, but had to fulfill their ensemble credit through this ensemble.

What if a teacher’s lessons run counter to those taught by other significant figures in the lives of students and by powerful forces in the larger culture (Barone, 2001, p. 1)?

One group of students was a deliberate thorn in my side and a certain obstacle to the ensemble’s success. These upper-year students considered themselves better than their peers and better singers than my conducting deserved; they garnered themselves the label “Vocal Princesses” from some of their peers. Because of their advanced experience in choirs, their aspiration was to bring the Men’s Ensemble to the same level of technique and musical challenge as the select choruses that were their primary ensembles, regardless of the aspirations or ability levels of the other singers. Their diva-esque displays of defiance: chronic lateness, talking during rehearsal, “tutting” and clicking of tongues, and rolling of eyes, were significant sources of negative energy in our rehearsals. The Vocal Princesses often sat with arms crossed as an outward sign of their rejection-of new teaching (Jordan, 2002) from me, while exuding negative energy towards me as well as towards any of their peers who they considered vocally inadequate. While the negativity in the ensemble was not limited to this small group, it was from them that active, rather than passive negativity was coming, and this served as fuel for the rest.

At first I had thought this the overactive imagination of a stressed and overly sensitive conductor, until guilt and the need to connect brought one of these problem students to see me in quiet confession.

Greg stood nervously in my office doorway. "Dr. Adler, can I speak with you?" he said.

"Um, sure" I replied, not really wanting to speak with him. No... wait... breath and listen; everyone has a story. He entered my office and shut the door behind him.

"This must be important," I said.

"Yeah," he replied. "I don't want anyone to hear us talking. I wanted to apologize to you. A bunch of us have been really awful to you since you got here, and it's not right, and I wanted to apologize."

I was floored. I breathed deeply, looking at Greg as I silently pondered the implications of what I was hearing.

"Why now?" I asked quietly. "Why apologize now, or at all?"

"Because I'm tired," he replied. "Everybody's doing that because John said we should...He said that you were an inadequate conductor compared to Sue, and that we shouldn't follow you. But I'm tired, and I just want to sing, and I'm not enjoying the choir this way. I knew it was wrong, and I only did it to keep John and the other guys off my case but it's not right. I guess you're mad now...."

"I'll admit that I have had a really rough time," I said. "Do you know there have been times when I've returned to my office in tears after rehearsal? Such was the dark energy you guys have brought to rehearsals."

Greg averted his eyes, lowered his head; he was afraid. "I'll understand if you want me out of the choir," he said.

"Why would I want that?" I replied.

"I'd want people out if they made things crappy for me," he said.

"No, I want you in my choir...in our choir," I said, smiling. "You reached out and shared, and now I understand, and I know that you do too."

Greg smiled and asked, "But what about John and the other guys?"

I breathed pensively and sighed. "They are hurting, and striking out. Life is short, and yet they enrage themselves and darken their limited time here. They have no community, no self-love, and no caring. Kicking them out won't stop that. We'll leave them in and see if we can't show them what they're missing."

Greg looked at me, confused, tears welling.

Greg's emotional response was the outward sign of an inward change, of psychological dissonance finally resolved with the modeling of my own personal values of compassion and understanding (Moore, 2001). Unlike his peers, Greg had experienced an identity crisis of sorts; his false ego-story had collapsed, unable to sustain the pull of his need to connect musically with those around him. While in a way commendable, the Vocal Princesses' absolute dedication to their previous conductor had blinded them to anyone else's teaching (Randall, 1995). Because of their self-gratifying musical egos and suppressed self-doubt (Green, in Jordan, 2002), their unresolved anger (Thich Nhat Hahn, 2001) became a self-censoring weapon and obstacle to

their fully achieving their own musical goals (O'Donahue, in Jordan, 2002; O'Murchu, 2004; Moore, 2001).

Our first semester ended unmusically, with a performance bland, out of tune, poorly blended, and temporally sloppy. However, with several weeks left before winter break, we had the opportunity to initiate some changes towards improvement. Our final rehearsal was used to debrief the semester and to generate goals for improvement. I asked the choir to identify our weak points and their possible causes, and to help generate solutions; this gave them ownership of their music-making, and in particular to their individual roles in our success and/or failure. Through their discussion, a number of singers articulated their stress as the result of the damaging efforts of "some choristers." This was a healing moment for the choir, because in that moment the "Vocal Princesses" realized that their actions had ultimately cost the group what they had wanted all along.

Harris (2001, p. 49) suggests timing the introduction of key sections of repertoire for maximum effect. In also using the final rehearsal of the semester to introduce some of our new repertoire that was linked to our developmental needs and goals, I hoped to convince my singers to let go of their dependence on the music as a means only to achieving concrete, materialistic goals, and instead to begin to see it as the means to our inward and outward journeys. Since my primary goal was to bring a sense of ensemble and community to the group, I looked to the early introduction of a specific section of one piece that I hoped would inspire awe: the "*Creo en Dios*" movement of *Misa Pequeña Para Niños* by Fransciso Nuñez—a slow, lyrical movement with interweaving and interdependent themes that are so exquisitely crafted as to become entrenched in aural memory. The men were hooked.

You've got to keep track of every person in your ensemble: Where they are intellectually, and where they are with their hearts—it's a one-on-one relationship with every person in the ensemble (Harris, 2001, p. 69).

As we began the semester, a notable change of personnel occurred in the ensemble. The "Vocal Princesses" all left the ensemble. While I was sad that they chose to cut themselves off from an experience simply to satisfy their ego issues, it did please me that this may have been influenced by shift from the dominant culture that they had brought to the group, towards a more democratic, ensemble culture based on our collective musical goals. Several new members also joined; among them, a sophomore named Michael who had been away on exchange during the first semester; I was particularly worried about Michael, who I understood was unhappy at not having been placed in the more select Touring Choir.

As learned with my community choir, a retreat can have a profound effect on a choir's sense of community. A few weeks into the new semester, I planned a much-needed retreat for the Men's Ensemble. I had originally planned to take the choir by bus to an historic nineteenth century Methodist Meeting House, however due to a lack of financial commitment and a blizzard forced us to hold the retreat in our regular rehearsal space at the university. This change of venue was a disappointment and clearly to some of the singers, who had looked to our away trip as making them (as with the select "Touring Choir") more special. However, while singing at the Meeting House would have lent inspiration to our art, the move back to campus forced us to focus on our primary need—to learn how to be with each other differently in the same space.

Throughout the day, we alternated intensive rehearsing with team-building activities lead by me and three new student conductors. The team-building activities ranged from serious to

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ridiculous, and included physical as well as social interaction; it forced a number of singers to come out of their “shells,” and literally forced the singers into situations of physical dependency and contact with each other. A midday catered lunch brought the opportunity to commune over food, and I noticed that following our morning activities, the singers were sitting in different groupings from their usual lunchtime social groups. As we ate, we got to know each other through the sharing of life stories, thereby increasing mutual understanding and trust.

From Time before Time the arts have been accounted evidences of the Ultimate Creative Mystery—however it be named. Those who have served that Mystery, from the beginnings of Time have been rightly recognized as “priests” and “priestesses”...In any age there have been priest-artists who have used the art rather than served it...As amateurs, we at least begin with the idea of service rather than use. The question is still open as to how far love can and will take us (Shaw, 1986, p. 10).

A cap to the day was our exploration of an arrangement of the American traditional song Bright Morning Stars Are Rising. While the singers clearly enjoyed the melody and the openness of the folk harmonies, their singing of it was superficial, and lacked the musical commitment that would have signalled that they had absorbed the meaning. I took a few minutes to share MY interpretation of the text; that is was a reflection on the procession of generations, each building its story on that of its ancestors, interdependent with family and community, and ultimately leading to our being here in this place connecting with each other in song. The singers’ reaction to my story was amazing—absolute focus and lingering silence, followed by spontaneous applause. While I did not quite understand the applause, clearly I had met a collective need. Perhaps it was a need to connect soulfully with their art, and that I had provided illumination in language that spoke to them and allowed them to form that connection; or perhaps it was just a lingering childhood need to be told a good story. Regardless of the root need, our subsequent singing of the song was incredibly sensitive, interactive, better in-tune and musical.

Following the retreat, while the ensemble was not immediately transformed, there was evidence of a shift in engagement around our rehearsals: rehearsal attendance improved, and while some there were some sporadic eruptions of negativity from individual members, these were not tolerated by the general membership and usually resulted in chastisement during or following our rehearsals. More of the singers, and particularly the freshmen, contributed more frequently and with greater resolve to discussions in rehearsal, and—following each rehearsal—I could expect several emails with additional comments and requests for specific musical issues to be addressed. Listening and watching improved dramatically, and I found that as a conductor I was able to depend upon gesture, rather than verbal instructions, to achieve musical changes in real time. A further unexpected and sometimes inconvenient effect was that a number of the singers began using my office as a social venue; while this demonstrated their increased desire for community with me and with each other, and while it certainly provided useful insights into their personal-social worlds, it also meant that I got a lot less work accomplished.

Our final concert was a significant improvement from our mediocre first one. Not every piece could be described as “magical,” but there was a greater incidence of “flow” moments, as described later by both singers and audience; most commented upon were the choir’s unified diction, entrances and cutoffs, breathing, and in most regards—intonation. While most of the

members had suspended their individual issues to commune with the group in the musical moment, one singer—the sophomore David—chose to remain apart from the group, deliberately manipulating his diction so as to stand out from the ensemble blend; fortunately, this was only really apparent in once piece. I was disappointed that we were not able to bring him “into the fold” of the ensemble, but I also realize that you cannot make everyone happy all of the time, and that—in David’s case—his focus on his own ego story, and his to listen to the stories (musical or otherwise) of those around him, signal issues that are likely than could be dealt with in this context. Ultimately, we had achieved the goal of forming a singing community within the immediate rehearsing and performing context, that enabled us to achieve greater musicality and a more fulfilling concert experience for both singers and audience.

Lessons Learned: Key strategies to building choral community

Dr. Adler made the ensemble much more of a group and just took the musicality up quite a few notches (personal communication).

This has been an amazing journey of discovery and invention, of storying and listening. And, while all choirs strive to achieve positive musical outcomes through a variety of means, it has become clear to me that as choral musicians, our best musical intentions may go unfulfilled unless we first commit to working as caring communities of singers. To that end, I will leave you with my recommendations for teacher-conductors who want to nurture choral community in their ensembles and programs, followed by the personal philosophy on which I strive to base my teaching.

- Generate a common purpose and shared goals
- Establish shared ownership of the ensemble by encouraging active participation in musical decision-making and problem-solving
- Respond to individual issues and concerns with compassion while maintaining as centre the needs of the group
- Acknowledge the value of individual contributions to the group, as well as the value of individual differences
- Remove interpersonal barriers through community-building activities
- Encourage active engagement through risk-reduction
- Choose repertoire that can bond singers through shared aesthetic engagement and awe

As music educators, it is our passion that connects us to our art, but it our compassion that connects us to our students and allows us to nurture communities of learners. Of all the aspects of our profession, this is the easiest to teach, but the most difficult to learn. We teach compassion by simply living it.

Endnotes

1. Brainerd Blyden-Tayler is the Artistic Director and founding conductor of the Nathaniel Dett Chorale, Canada’s first Afro-Centric Professional Choir.
2. In order to receive instrumental tuition in our school district, students had to provide their own band instruments through a fee-based rental system. This limited engagement to those

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students/families that had sufficient disposable income. This was certainly not my preferred program structure, and was a significant motivator for me to build a comprehensive vocal program that provided our remaining 90% of students with the opportunity to develop musicianship equivalent to that of the instrumental students.

3. Unlike many community choirs, we sang through the summer, which made for much better rural retreats and barbeques.
4. Literally other shores; two of our singers were foreign exchange/work study students from Germany.

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