

Music Education Philosophy

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The power of music is something that is innate to all living creatures. Yet, in today's world, that power is often overlooked or truly underestimated. Similarly, the power of music education in our society is often underestimated. It takes a very special type of person to be drawn to the teaching of music. I believe very strongly that there are certain attributes that make an ideal music educator, conductor, leader, facilitator, or explorer. Likewise to this statement, if these attributes are present within the teacher, their students and classroom will be a direct reflection of them. My teaching philosophy will delve into my personal beliefs about music education, more specifically choral music education, as well as my thoughts on what the implementations and outcomes are of a successful school music program.

Some people may feel that the purpose of education on a general level is to simply "teach" students information, test them on their "knowledge" of said information and to prepare them to be citizens in our society. I simply do not agree, especially when it comes to music education being a critical part of a student's learning process. I thoroughly believe in the idea of student-centered learning. I view teaching and education in the classroom as a wonderful collaboration between the teacher and the students, and amongst the students with each other. With that being said, I will outline here what that general teaching approach will look like in my choral classroom.

Through my lived experience of music education, a music teacher holds many different "roles" for their students. These roles can be changing constantly depending on the context or the content being taught. Or these "roles" can occur simultaneously. Each student in the music classroom is going to have different needs at different times. A successful choral director needs to know their students. This is a big phrase and one of my first and foremost practices that I believe a music educator needs to employ. With this co-understanding and transparency between

the teacher and the students, comes the ability to trust each other. Until this happens, there can be no meaningful music making in the classroom. Well-known choral conductor and pedagogue Dr. James Jordan states in his book on empathy in the choral classroom:

“ But it is *empathy* toward others that opens wide the door of generative musical expression that touches people because it comes from the individual empathies of all who sound the notes on a page of music”

This idea of music empathy is something that I strongly believe needs to be present in the choral classroom from the teacher and from the students. This puts the exploration and presentation of the music into perspective of the people that are taking part in the music learning process. Then, the real music-making will occur.

Moving away from my general idea of the emotional intent that needs to come from a music educator in the classroom, I will put that intent towards now explaining and outlining my personal pedagogical and teaching techniques that I feel should occur in any choral music program. One of the most important things that needs to be at the forefront of a choral directors mind is: what goals do I have for this program, what musical ideas do I want to expose my students to, and what they want the students to take away from the experience and hold with them for the rest of their life? These are all very big questions and the answers can vary depending on who is being asked them. For myself, the goals of my choral program are to create a safe and collaborative space for students to express their musicality, expose students to all types of choral music from various time periods and cultures, and instill confidence both musical and personal within each student which they will take with them wherever and whenever.

In order for my teaching goals to come to fruition, there are many things that have to occur in my classroom. With student-centered learning at the forefront of all of my educational

decisions, I believe that choices of repertoire are pivotal to the success of a choral program. Students need to be exposed to an extremely wide array of choral literature. This means that a teacher must not stick to teaching one type of music, or limit their students to singing music that only they like. A teacher needs to be able to be a facilitator for all types of music. This will broaden students' musical horizons and always keep them eager and engaged because they are bound to find something that they resonate with. Renowned American choral conductor Eph Ehly said when asked about his views on the objectives of his choral program that:

“The singers should not become familiar with music of various styles just because this is an academic requirement. They should see all music from the past and present as being necessary to us at this time.”

More often than not, choral directors do not thoroughly introduce all types of choral music to their students. This brings into another belief of mine which is the fact that students need to see themselves represented in the music classroom, especially in the music that is selected. This means that a director should program music that reflects the spirit and cultural makeup of the students in their ensembles. This will lead to a greater appreciation for the music and for each other. Ben Allaway commented on his personal philosophy on teaching and performing ethnic choral music in the book *The School Choral Program*(2008) by saying that:

“High-quality ethnic and multicultural choral music has significant worth for its musical merits alone and should be a part of a balanced repertoire program that reflects what is happening in the global choral community.”

This is again where student-centered learning comes into play. When selecting repertoire for a choir, a director first and foremost needs to have an idea of the vocal ability and level of the students. Once this is understood, the director can then get a sense for what types of music are

attainable but will slightly advance the ensemble as a whole. The last, and most important step is asking the students what kinds of music they want to sing. At the end of the day, it's the students who will be performing this music. Then, once repertoire is selected, the director can begin to craft an idea of their concert program, goals for the school year, methods of teaching, etc.

When delving into the actual teaching and pedagogical practices in a choral classroom, many people will believe many different things are the “right” answer. What I have realized in my educational and musical studies are the methods and practices that I personally resonate with and will put into practice in my classroom. As far as pedagogy goes, I very much feel that music learning is rooted in imitation and adaptation. What I mean by this is the “sharing” and exploration of musical ideas and practices and letting students feel out what works and what doesn't work for them and their voice. This includes giving students vocal or choral models to give context and a “big picture” view of what they are learning and striving for in the choral classroom. I am a big believer in a “just do it” outlook when it comes to music making. A teacher can teach concepts and musical ideas all they want, but until students have something to give context to what they are learning, the level of passion and reach for excellence has gone down in the students minds. One very important way to make sure that students always have context to what they are practicing, is playing various types of choral music for the students all the time. This will first and foremost expose them to all different kinds of choral music that might strike their curiosity, but it also allows for musical conversations between all involved in the class, which will inevitably raise the learning bar even higher. Melissa Arasi speaks about the writings of Bennett Reimer in his book *A Philosophy of Music Education* and that:

“Reimer’s belief at the time was that listening to music was of primary importance in the development of aesthetic sensitivity and that a wide range of high-quality works should be studied.”

To clarify, what I mean by music learning based on “imitation,” I do not mean a student or a choir trying to copy the sound of another singer or choir. I simply mean exposing students to the possibility and other interpretation of that same material and then creating musical independence and exploration from that. Think of it as constant musical inspiration and exposition. This ideal can also be a form of musical critical pedagogy, in which the music teaching and student learning process is viewed as a conversation and collaboration as opposed to just a teacher giving information and saying “this is the only way to do etc.” Frank Abrahams, a pillar of critical pedagogy in music education, stated in a *Music Educators Journal*(2005) that:

“ [Music] Teachers engage children in meaningful conversations that encourage children to not only solve problems, but to pose them as well.”

This idea of musical conversation and collaboration is something that I believe is the center of a successful choral classroom.

Within the music setting, there are many things occurring at one time. Students are learning skills and exploring ideas from many different angles and much more unconsciously than in any other subject area. Along with student-centered learning, music learning based in imitation and adaptation, and critical pedagogy, I always keep at the forefront of my mind the students' experiences within my classroom. With music education, there is so much that is learned, and some things are hard to put into words, and they are more so feelings. First and foremost, students are able to express themselves, they learn teamwork through rehearsals and performance, they gain a greater understanding of choral literature, and they learn how to

connect with each other on an emotional level. I am not a big fan of teachers that feel that students or a choir are “not ready for that type of music” or that “they are too young to process music of that level.” I believe in exposing students to as much musical diversity, sounds, and styles as possible so that they can then take what they want and resonate with, and create their own musical identity with it. This is similar to early childhood development theorist Lev Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development, which theorizes that children, and people alike learn and grow more from their environment and their surroundings than anything else. Sean McLeod stated in his article on Lev Vygotsky’s theory that:

“Tools of intellectual adaptation is Vygotsky’s term for methods and thinking and problem-solving strategies that children internalize through social interactions with the more knowledgeable members of society.”

While Lev Vygotsky’s theory is based off of early childhood development, its ideals and projections can be applied to the music classroom in which the choral director is the facilitator of musical exploration for the students and the students then distinguish what they resonate with more or less of. This is a great basis for collaboration and conversation as well.

As stated in the beginning of my philosophy, one of the most important things that a music educator should keep at the forefront of their minds is what goals they have for the program and what the student outcome will be. My biggest goal in my choral classroom is to instill confidence, appreciation for music and the choral art, and to give students the feeling of being proud to present something to the community that they all have been working hard at.

Melissa Arasi says perfectly in *The School Choral Program*(2008) that:

“The strongest shared aspect of personal growth was the development of self-confidence. The participants built their confidence during their choral experiences from auditioning,

valuing the difficulty of their music, knowing and meeting the teachers high expectations, and feeling pride in their performance.”

This idea is the core of my teaching philosophy and all of the other pedagogies, rehearsal techniques etc. stem from this viewpoint. This is what I will always be trying to instill in my classroom, and my students will hopefully take the memories of their journey with myself and their peers with them, and apply it to all aspects of their life. That, is music education.

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