

An Alternative Approach to Choral Festivals

by
Andrea Bonamico

Andrea Bonamico is currently the Director of Student Teaching and a full-time doctoral student in the program of music at Teachers College, Columbia University. She taught music in Vermont public schools and community programs to students aged 3-80 for over 16 years and maintained a private voice studio before returning to life as a student in NYC. Andrea's musical training and teaching experience include piano, voice, general music, choir, band, theory and musical theater. This experience, merged with her work with pre-service teachers, continues to inform Andrea's commitment to music's place in daily curriculum, aesthetic education and teacher training.

School music programs have been engaged in competitive and noncompetitive music festivals for over 100 years and we continue to debate the merits of each to this day. (Corey, 1951; Meyer, 1930; MENC, 1944; Milton, 1945). Vermont music students now participate in All-District and All-State festivals and some schools choose to be involved in additional festivals such as the All New England Music Festival or ACDA Honor Choir. All of these festivals require either an audition by individual singers, a submission recording by the ensemble or are adjudicated for ratings in some fashion. Arguments for continued participation in such events have long been considered from the perspective of students, teachers, administrators and the community and have not changed much as of today (Milton, 1945; Wis, 2003). When students and teachers engage in these events outside of the school community, we are often motivated to do our best work, find validation in success among peers, reflect on improvements that can be made, build networks and relationships with other musicians like ourselves and serve the communities who come to see final performances. It would benefit us however to consider and possibly *reconsider* the ways in which a school music festival might be structured.

In 2003, Wis presented a compelling challenge for us to “redefine and redesign” choral festival experiences based on the premises that “tradition” was not a good enough reason to do something; we should support tradition with “sound educational goals” and that we put “people before product”(Wis, 2003). While these are important and valid notions, we have not gone far enough

to actually consider why and how we continue to spend enormous amounts of energy, time and money to participate with our students in such experiences. We can take steps to make sure repertoire, guest conductors, accompanists and venues are chosen wisely. We can make sure the schedule is organized so that all parties have time to rehearse, relax, eat and prepare. We can allow ample time for arranging seating, rehearsing with instrumentalists and moving on and off risers. A strong festival manager will make sure all of these elements are in place. And, although critical to a smoothly run festival, none of them address the purpose of the festival or how the festival might be a vehicle for collaboration, learning, exploration and making meaning of mutually lived, musical experiences among peer groups.

Typically, festivals are one or more days in length; students may be auditioned or nominated or in the case that an entire program ensemble attends; the group is often rated or evaluated by a panel of adjudicators. The majority of the students’ energy is first consumed by “getting in” and then toward the final concert or evaluation. Occasionally schools have the opportunity to see and hear each other’s performances but most often the ensemble enters a space, performs, waits for feedback (otherwise it is mailed) and then, leaves. In competitive ensemble festivals, the students are vying for the opportunity to sing with a celebrated guest conductor, among peers who are theoretically the “cream of the crop” making for what is intended to be a heightened, musical experience. The groups may or may not rehearse repertoire that they could not perform otherwise with their school ensembles and are sometimes accompanied by additional instruments or perform arrangements that are not readily available. What these festivals tend to leave out however, is time for student or conductor collaboration, reflection or student ownership of the experience. Lee Pogonowski and Maxine Greene have challenged music educators over the years to consider “What would happen if...” and the possibility of seeing things “otherwise” in order to form alternative perspectives on why we teach and how we teach. This is the basis for what became a new choral festival experience for students and teachers in Vermont.

In October 2013, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont sponsored a new kind of choral festival. First, he and his office reached out to music educators in central Vermont and asked, if he were to sponsor a choral festival of some sort, what should it be? He was insistent on not wanting to “copy” or “take away” form something that already existed so he solicited educators’ opinions on

what it might look like, who might attend and how it might be organized. The result was the first annual “Senator’s Festival” generously hosted by choral director, Cailin O’Hara and her students at Montpelier High School on Saturday October 26, 2013.

Stefanie Weigand of Harwood Union High School successfully organized nine schools and over two-hundred and fifty students from all over Vermont to participate in what we hoped would become a collaborative, student-driven day of singing, rehearsing, philosophizing and performing. Multiple school ensembles gathered in the auditorium at once where they watched and listened to each other rehearse their selected pieces of repertoire. The student audience then offered suggestions and shared observations with one another, drawing on their own wealth of experience and skills as singers. They commented on a multitude of musical aspects from expressiveness to blend and balance, dynamics, rhythmic accuracy, articulation, diction and tone quality. They were supportive and positive but also critical and specific in their responses. The collaborative effort of their combined knowledge was rich and deeply relevant, reflecting the priorities of their peers.

Invited to guest conduct, my role that day would be better described as “mediator”. I had very little to conduct and even less to “direct”. Using a Socratic method approach, I focused on asking questions that would allow the students generate their own ideas and directions for rehearsing, learning and exploring the music. I did my best to listen to what the students were saying and translate their suggestions to possible rehearsal tactics. Questions such as, “What did you hear or see?”, “Why was that successful?”, “How can they improve...?” and “Why is this important?” filled the conversation. The answers were generous, thoughtful and original. Lee Pogonowski reminds us: “What would happen if...” questions have the potential to result in musical experimentation. Teachers then have the opportunity to help “translate verbal responses into performance demonstrations so students can hear what is meant”(Pogonowski, 1987, p.39). The performers received the feedback intently and seriously and the audience was careful but honest. The students were most excited when one of their suggestions was considered and a noticeable change took place in the performance. This encouraged more students to chime in and offer their ideas. Students were also able to reciprocate for peers making associations and assimilations throughout the day when they would change roles from audience to

performer or performer to audience. While a Socratic method of teaching such as this can be more difficult than simply giving directions, Allsup and Baxter remind us that it sets the stage for a more democratic rehearsal or classroom where students’ talents and skills are recognized. Additionally, by encouraging them to make supported, judicious comments students will develop the skills to think about, listen to and discuss music on a deeper level (Allsup & Baxter, 2004).

Teachers also had a unique experience that day collaborating, observing colleagues’ work and speaking with their state Senator. Vermont choral directors are often times the only person in their building or district who do what they do, making these kinds of professional experiences rare. It was especially exciting to see directors working in this environment with their entire performing ensemble. Typically at festivals, only a few select students are chosen to represent each school and directors are watching as a guest conductor works with their students. Terry Frey of Barre City Elementary and Middle Schools exuberantly remarked, *"What a huge boost for my students! Nothing but smiles all the day long, learning from other conductors and recognizing that our choir deserves a place on the block the same as any other school around. And the time spent with the kind senator was honest and right from the heart. There's no substitute for knowing that someone of such stature is watching, knows what we are up against, listens intently, and gives such kind recognition. This is a very winning event for anyone and everyone!"* (personal communication, October 24, 2014).

Some of the schools took advantage of being in the state capital that day and went on a tour of the Historical Museum while other groups arrived to participate for the afternoon. Later, all of the groups returned and we took time to unpack some tough questions together such as, “Why is singing important?”, “What does it mean to be a musician?” and “What does music mean for you?”. Students age 9 to 19 proceeded to engage in small group conversation and then reconvened with the larger group to share what they had discussed. Although some struggled at moments to answer these difficult questions, they took time to think about what was really important and were eager to make an attempt to contribute to the discussion. They listened to each other’s answers and built on what their peers said to form a collective perspective of why they were there and what it was they were trying to do that day. Reaching beyond the technical, theoretical aspects of music-making

allowed students to find meaning and construct personal experiences that would encompass the skill sets and expressive qualities of each individual singer. Finally, we sang together as a large group, rehearsing the state song, "The Green Mountains" by Diane Martin, which served as the finale for our concert that evening.

Students and teachers ate dinner together in the Montpelier High School cafeteria and then while students were changing into concert attire, teachers had an opportunity to sit and talk with Senator Sanders who said, "Tell me what I need to know about teaching music in Vermont." In response to this meeting the Senator remarked,

"VT's music educators do a tremendously difficult job every day. To be able to hear their innovative techniques and to see first-hand how skilled the teachers are and then to be able to hear the children sing is commendable. I applaud their tireless work."(personal communication, October 23, 2014).

That evening, the Montpelier HS auditorium was full of parents, friends and community members who flocked from all corners of the state to see their children perform. Others had the opportunity to experience the music through an airing on Public Access television. The video of the concert can be seen here:

<http://vp.telvue.com/preview?id=T01221&video=174906>

We have an opportunity now to consider the implications of this type of music festival for our home classroom environment. To challenge our students cognitively means asking questions to help them identify problems, get to the "point" of the issue and recognize assumptions and inconsistencies by wondering "how?" and "why?" (Small, 1987). A student-centered approach will help develop self-regulated learning, the highest form of cognitive engagement, and when students form their own goals they tend to be more invested and motivated, becoming a more independent musician (Abeles, 2014). Can we take the collaborative large group experience of a choral festival and transfer this to our classrooms and rehearsal spaces? Much relies on our willingness to engage in the process. Are we willing to look inward to examine our own teaching styles and consider an alternative approach to strictly theoretical or rote teaching practices? Might we adopt an approach that encourages higher-order critical thinking skills in order to

engage the students and motivate them to create and participate in their own learning experiences? Are we willing to take the time to allow students to "problem solve" in our music classrooms and ensemble rehearsals rather than simply telling them how "we want" the music to sound by dictating every note and rhythm and specifying how each dynamic marking, articulation and phrase structure should be performed? And, by "problem solve" might we also mean "explore", "discover", "struggle" and "engage"?

The next Senator's Choral Festival will take place on Saturday, March 14th at Montpelier High School. I am looking forward to another opportunity to work alongside Vermont's talented and skilled choral directors and observing young singers in action, "doing music" and "doing philosophy", building for themselves a community of singers and making meaning of it all.

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