

Do You Have A Well-Balanced Choral Music Program?

by

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*Developing a well-rounded choral
music program provides students
with a total music education*

From The Book

Popular Choral Handbook

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It is increasingly understood that the term choir no longer exclusively implies a group of singers whose performances are limited to Classical music. Choruses of today may be made up of any combination and number of voices, and are expected to perform, in the appropriate style, a greater variety of works than ever before. A well-balanced choral program must therefore afford the student-singer the opportunity to perform in both Classical and popular vocal ensembles. Students deserve a *total* music education, and a well-rounded choral program should be the goal of every curriculum.¹

We live in an age of materialism which inevitably affects our general attitude toward the arts. Mass communication brings commercial music into every home, but all too rarely does it provide genuine aesthetic experiences. This is a never-ending problem for the practical choral curriculum, that must educate as well as entertain. The fact is that present-day choral concerts must do both: they must involve the audience as well as the performers.²

Here are two views of the limitation of many school programs:

The first is a small-town gymnasium crowded with parents and townspeople. Members of the audience beam appreciatively as nearly every student in the highschool dances and sings unison and two-part arrangements of current Top-40 hits. Year after year, the same simple arrangements are cheered by the same audience.

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The second picture is a city high school in which a chamber choir of twelve to fifteen students polishes a limited repertoire to within an inch of perfection. They perform twice a year to a nearly empty auditorium. They are the only singers in a school of twelve to fifteen hundred students.

These are two familiar situations: On one hand there is entertainment without art; on the other, art without entertainment. Neither situation is better or worse than the other. Both have mistaken the concept of contemporary choral music education. Choral directors have a responsibility to guide young singers to a balance of musicianship and showmanship.³ When selecting repertoire and deciding upon

programming, the goal of choral music education should be to achieve the maximum musical interest, excitement, emotion, pleasure, and intensity that a group is capable of creating. Although some directors still emphasize only one or two types of music exclusively, there is a growing tendency to present a broader range of musical styles to students so that their musical experience may be as diverse as possible.⁴ A diverse curriculum not only affects a group's musical growth; but the director will also be training the audience to accept and enjoy new styles of music as well.

It takes extra effort to provide a sufficiently varied selection of the literature, and to present it in an appropriate, artistic, entertaining, educational fashion. But, in the long run, singers and their audience will appreciate efforts to broaden their musical horizons.

Experience in pop, jazz, and show choir should not only prepare future performers as musicians, but prepare them to be entertainers as well, through

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training in such areas as stage movement, personality projection, and ease before an audience. Pop, jazz, and show choir music, because it is entertainment oriented, appeals to the widest range of taste, and lay audiences tend to applaud choral performances of this music indiscriminately. Professionals, on the other hand, often criticize such programs for overemphasizing commercialism, exploiting students, promoting poor singing habits and ignoring legitimate repertoire.⁵ All too often, this kind of criticism is warranted.

The most condemning criticism of the pop, jazz, and show choir music is the repertoire. The early years contained a plethora of weak arrangements of mediocre tunes. Much of the published music available then consisted of formula arrangements of Top 40 radio hits. Many of these tunes were trite, repetitious, and of limited lasting quality. Furthermore, the arrangements are executed quickly and perfunctorily, so that they could appear on the music dealers shelves before the popularity of the tune waned. Quality, to say the least, was rarely the publisher's main concern.

Quality should be the main concern of today's pop, jazz, and show choirs. High quality should mark the music, text, and arrangements that groups choose to sing. Quality tone production, authentic stylistic interpretation, and sensitive use of accessory arts such as choreography, staging, lighting, and costumes should also be characteristics of the pop, jazz and show choir. In other words, the best and most significant qualities in pop, jazz, and show choir literature should be presented. If the singers have learned how to produce a beautiful tone through correct technique, then their singing of popular styles should continue with that tone, stylistically

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altered as necessary but not technically altered. The accessory arts should enhance and reinforce but not overpower or overshadow the music. Thus, the end product will be musical, aesthetic, and tasteful as well as entertaining.⁶

In each period of musical history, particular styles, techniques, and ideas have been developed and refined in response to the needs and tastes of the time. Pop, jazz, and show choir music should be no different. They possess as much relevance, and should have as much aesthetic significance, as any other historical style—they are many of the styles of music that are changing as we live.

Innovators of all periods—whether Monteverdi, Wagner, Debussy, Gershwin, Sondheim, or Count Basie—have experienced rejection. Fear of change has motivated people to protect the status quo, and it has always been much easier to reject new ideas than to attempt to understand and add them to one's knowledge base.

During each period, there have been hundreds of composers vying for public acclaim, financial reward, and historical acceptance. Over the course of time, composers such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, have come to be acknowledged, and their music has survived through the centuries. Each era, as is true of our own, undergoes a culling-out process. Many composers whose works are performed today will not stand the test of time; their music will fade into obscurity within a few years. But to compare the art form of pop, jazz, and show choir music, still in its infancy, to earlier music that has stood the test of time, is not fair. Much of Mozart's music was not appreciated during his lifetime; it took years to become popular. Unquestionably, very little of current pop, jazz, and show choir literature

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will prove to be lasting. But, piece by piece, the list of standard repertoire will grow, and it is this time-tested music that can be justly compared with that of other periods.

A major concern in music education today is the development of programs that will allow students to discover and use their creative powers. Students often find a vocal and intellectual freedom when they are no longer restrained by the established harmonic and melodic traditions. The performance of popular styles contributes to the unfettering process while offering the opportunity to improve skills such as sight-reading and rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic interpretation.

Pop, jazz, and show choir music comprises an art form that requires special musical skills, knowledge, and an awareness of stylistic authenticity that many legitimate choral directors have not considered.⁷ Popular choral music is here to stay. The accepted establishment of a jazz band in the school instrumental curriculum is now enjoyed by the vocal curriculum as well, and there is little that blind conservatism can do to halt its acceptance.

The inclusion of pop, jazz and show choir music in choral programs affords teacher and student the opportunity to explore techniques inherent in this style; when these techniques, in turn, are applied to the conventional choral literature, they can give it new excitement.

Both the vocal jazz ensemble and the show choir movement are rooted in valid educational concepts.⁸ A good choir should be able to do pop and jazz, as well as other kinds of secular and sacred music. Choral directors must descend from the Olympian heights of the podium and confront the fact that even if they believe that

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composers such as Palestrina and Brahms are the giants of the art form, our students may not necessarily agree.⁹

The older masters cannot be replaced, and the introduction of popular music into choral programs is not intended to do so. The fears of those who are concerned that pop, jazz, and show choir will phase traditional choirs out of the curriculum must be calmed. In a recent study seventy-eight percent of the choral directors questioned indicated that there was no negative effect on enrollment in concert choir when popular music was introduced. Over fifty percent of the directors said they had an increase in membership. This positive response seems to support the views of those who regard the pop ensemble as a means of revitalizing choral programs.¹⁰

Good choral singing should need no defense, whatever its musical style. Unfortunately, we are bombarded with pop-style singing, and too many people have come to accept it as the only way to sing. When the worst aspects of this vocal concept are brought to the choral setting, the sound of the choir degenerates into raucous gutsy wailing, often manifested by heavy chest tone, considerable vocal tension, poor breathing technique, twangy vowels, manufactured vibrato, poor intonation, or lack of expression.¹¹ This makes our goal of bringing quality singing to all of our groups paramount.

A commitment toward broader variety can help breathe new life into stagnant programs. Studies have found that successful choral programs tend to stress a greater variety of styles than do average ones.¹² For example, the use of elements of jazz in contemporary music does not make it unacceptable, as some choral

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conductors presumably believe. Such music should never be given the status of an unwanted child. Rather, in view of the respectability given this idiom by numerous serious and highly regarded contemporary composers, it seems fitting and proper to urge that choral musicians endeavor to better understand the jazz idiom.¹³

No choral singer should be encouraged to spend even a single year developing only one style. If students are permitted to perform only popular music—or only madrigal, or only masterworks—their musical development is being impaired.¹⁴ Concomitantly, it is a mistake to offer the public only popular music. The practicing choral conductor should remain open to new and exciting musical expression.¹⁵ Such expression can serve as a challenge for both chorus and conductor to develop new vocal, rehearsal, and performance techniques. Such exploration cannot but eventually enrich all choral performance—not just that of the new forms.

A commitment to excellence requires freedom from narrowness in the type of music to be studied and performed. Unfortunately there will be directors who will opt for the safe sound. They will be ones who always do things in the same way. Their procedures, pedagogy, philosophy of choral music education, terminology, choice of repertoire, and lesson plans will show little change from day to day and year to year. They will have suspicion of anything that is contemporary or new, whether this be a Declaration from Tanglewood or the performance of a rock group.¹⁶

In most schools, the pop, jazz, and show choir consists of the best voices in the school, and it often provides services to both the school and community. It can also be an efficacious recruitment device for the entire choral music program, as many

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students will be drawn to it by the professional, show biz aspects of the popular music offered. As long as pop, jazz, and show choirs are not the only styles of music the students are taught in the curriculum, these types of groups could be a good investment for a choral program in terms of audience support and enthusiasm as well as in terms of student enthusiasm, increased vitality in singing, increased poise and stage presence, and possible career preparation.¹⁷ By resisting this kind of music, the director is denying students exposure to an exciting new style that can revitalize a moribund program.

One final area of concern for the pop, jazz, and show choir director is the use of choreography. For some, it is the reason to avoid the art form altogether. The same music educators who applaud Emile Jaques-Dalcroze for introducing the use of movement in music instruction and enthusiastically advocate various forms in the elementary grades often shy away from it in the high school chorus, citing excuses such as “I’ve never studied dance.”¹⁸ If a group uses choreography, it should be as a further enrichment to a performance of high musical quality. But for many groups it becomes the primary concern. Such groups turn into dancers who sing, rather than singers who move; too much effort is directed towards the visual, and the music is sacrificed.

Pop, jazz, and show choir are just the latest in a series of choral styles, and they will eventually take their place with the other historical styles of choral music. It is through our awareness of legitimate criticism and concerns that efforts can be made to strengthen the quality and scope of the new styles of music and their performance.

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