

DIRECTING THE OXFORD CHILDREN'S CHORUS: OBSERVATIONS AND ADVICE  
FOR DIRECTING AN EXTRACURRICULAR CHILDREN'S CHOIR

by  
Kathryn Elizabeth Shuford

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Approved by

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Advisor: Dr. Andrew Paney

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Reader: Dr. Debra Spurgeon

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Reader: Dr. Debra Young

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## ABSTRACT

KATHRYN ELIZABETH SHUFORD: Directing the Oxford Children's Chorus:  
Observations and Advice for Directing an Extracurricular Children's Choir  
(Under the direction of Andrew Paney)

This thesis examines the observations and experiences of a first year choir director in an extracurricular choral program. Observations were taken from the weekly rehearsals of the Oxford Children's Chorus, a community children's chorus for 4-6<sup>th</sup> grade students in Oxford, Mississippi, during the fall 2013 semester.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter provides background information about the Oxford Children's Chorus and the subsequent chapters each deal with a different aspect of directing a community choral ensemble: planning for a rehearsal, running a rehearsal, and growing the organization.

Topics discussed include: choosing repertoire, rehearsal pacing, rehearsal order, rote teaching, rehearsal environment and discipline, modifying plans, the audition process and recruiting for the program.

In addition to observations taken during rehearsals, several secondary texts were consulted to gain the insight of experienced directors and music teachers.

## PREFACE:

During the second semester of my freshman year at the University of Mississippi, I began observing the Oxford Children's Chorus. Eventually I began helping during rehearsal, leading warm-ups or helping with sectionals. A short time later, I began conducting a piece or two every semester until I took over the director responsibilities entirely as the Guest Director for the 2013-2014 season, my senior year. I spent every rehearsal observing the choir and thinking critically about all the things that make a children's choir rehearsal different from a high school or collegiate level rehearsal, the kinds of rehearsals that I have most recently experienced myself.

At the end of my first semester as Guest Director, I sat down and made a list of all the things that working with the OCC has taught me. I now know how to pick repertoire that is appropriate for the singers' age, developmental stage, and musical skill level. I know how to structure the rehearsal and how to enforce a discipline policy without making the rehearsals seem too rigid or strict. I know how to talk to parents, deal with singers (and their attitudes), teach, direct, encourage, and play the role of comic (when the occasion calls for it). I have learned so much this semester. I was forced to re-think several things I thought I already knew, while I was quickly introduced to other ideas that had never before occurred to me.

This paper will explore all of these points, discuss how I came to these realizations during my first semester of directing and describe how I have implemented my findings into the weekly spring Oxford Children's Chorus rehearsals. I will offer suggestions and detail the discoveries that have helped me be successful this year as the OCC director. It is my hope that my findings and observations will be useful to future directors of the Oxford Children's Chorus, as well as to directors of other extracurricular ensembles for children.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

OCC – Oxford Children’s Chorus

## INTRODUCTION

The value of music performance in music education can be found *beyond the concert stage* in the development of musicianship, the experience of enjoyment, and the psychological benefits of self-esteem.<sup>1</sup> – Doreen Rao

Extracurricular children's and youth choirs have long provided a place for children to gather and make music together. Music is essential to producing well-rounded children because it engages the singers in a complex academic subject while simultaneously nurturing their love for music and teaching life skills such as discipline and teamwork.

Though the process of learning music can be very academic, the *experience* of making music, both in rehearsal and in concert, is emotional. By singing in a children's or youth choir, children are exposed to the universal "language" of music. In his *Music Educator's Journal* article "Why Do We Love Music," Carl Seashore says:

...Music has acquired a very great social value. It moves the social group into concerted action and generates a body of common fellowship and feeling. It is a language in which the worshipper speaks to God, the lover pleads with his sweetheart, the friend expresses his sympathy, and the entertainer spreads good cheer. We love music for its social values.<sup>2</sup>

Music is a multicultural pastime and participation in music-making links people of all

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<sup>1</sup> Doreen Rao, "Children's Choirs: a Revolution From Within," *Music Educators Journal* 80, no. 3 (November 1993): 44.

<sup>2</sup> Carl E. Seashore, "Why Do We Love Music?" *Music Educators Journal* 25, no. 1 (September 1938): 28.



nationalities and cultures together. In their book *Educating Young Singers: A Choral Resource for Teacher-Conductors*, authors Mary Goetze, Angela Broecker, and Ruth Boshkoff suggest that exposure to music of other cultures can teach students tolerance of other cultures and people and can help build a less prejudiced global society. They say:

Once you make a friend, the notion of going to war with him or her in the name of religion, culture, power, or territory becomes unimaginable. Similarly, after singing and dancing the happiness, hardship, or humor expressed in music from an unfamiliar culture, the feeling of fear and hatred toward people of that culture becomes implausible.<sup>3</sup>

Choir programs can be a place for children to expand their world-view as well as their musical knowledge.

Choir programs are also ideal environments for children to gain an important set of social skills. In his article in the *Music Educator's Journal*, "Extramusical Skills in the Music Classroom," Alan McClung discusses the two curriculums dealt with in a music classroom: the "cognitive curriculum" and the "hidden curriculum." The "cognitive curriculum" includes the basic musical knowledge to be addressed in class. The "hidden curriculum" includes "all of the social and societal learning that students acquire in their day-to-day school experiences."<sup>4</sup> McClung suggests that teachers should come up with lesson plans that cater to both curricula. In a children's choir setting, directors should be conscious of both types of curricula and be sure to structure their rehearsals in a way that children can experience both.

Bonnie S. Jacobi agrees that the music classroom is a good place for students to develop these types of skills. In her article "Opportunities for Socioemotional Learning in Music

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Goetze, Angela Broecker, and Ruth Boshkoff, *Educating Young Singers: A Choral Resource for Teacher-Conductors* (New Palestine, IN: Mj Publishing, 2011), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Alan C. McClung, "Extramusical Skills in the Music Classroom: This article proposes that extramusical skills can be taught in the music classroom alongside music skills," *Music Educators Journal* 86, no. 5 (March 2000): 38.

Classrooms,” she discusses the ways music classes and rehearsals provide countless opportunities for students to build social skills. She suggests that simple activities like: “switch partners, identify a classmate’s voice, imitate a classmate’s rhythm pattern, hold hands, clap hands with a partner, take turns, move together in time, echo another group,” etc. all provide children with opportunities to learn new social skills.<sup>5</sup>

Thankfully it seems that many Americans have seen the value of children’s choirs. In their book, Goetze, Broeker, and Boshkoff suggest that there has been an exponential increase in the number of young singers who are participating in children’s or youth choirs since the early 1980’s.<sup>6</sup> With the large number of participating children comes the need for qualified musicians to teach and direct these young singers. Though there are countless professional organizations, journals, books, and manuals available as resources for teachers, many young directors will not fully understand many of the points made until they step in front of their first ensemble.

This thesis discusses my first experience in front of an ensemble as the director. In the first chapter I will discuss the Oxford Children’s Chorus (OCC): its mission statement, rehearsal schedule, attendance policy, and other specifics to help readers gain a better understanding of the environment in which I had these experiences.

In the second chapter I will discuss what happens before the actual rehearsal begins. I will examine my experience of choosing repertoire for the Oxford Children’s Chorus fall semester and suggest some qualifications – such as text, range, tempo, and key – that I keep in mind when choosing music for the choir. I will also offer an opinion on what qualifies as “quality music” and offer an opinion on the debate over popular music in the classroom, focusing on the

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<sup>5</sup> Bonnie S. Jacobi, “Opportunities for Socioemotional Learning in Music Classrooms,” *Music Educators Journal* 99, no. 2 (December 2012): 68.

<sup>6</sup> Goetze, Broeker, and Boshkoff, *Educating Young Singers*, 7.

argument that pop music should be used only sparingly and not in a way that hampers the practice time of traditional choral repertoire.

I will compare the merits of unison and multi-part pieces of music and discuss how they can be used to suit the ability level of the ensemble.

The second chapter also deals with how to plan a rehearsal. I suggest that details such as rehearsal pacing and rehearsal order are the key to a successful plan. Because I work with an elementary aged children's choir, I explain how I rehearse pieces for only a few minutes at a time before moving on to something new in order to accommodate the attention spans of the singers. I also discuss how to structure the rehearsal, moving back and forth from new concepts to familiar ones so as not to overwhelm the singers. I also include some tips for planning for the first rehearsal when the music, the concepts, and the group are all new.

The third chapter deals with the running of a rehearsal. The chapter begins with an explanation of the pros and cons of rote teaching. I argue for a mixture of rote teaching and music reading and include a list of the kinds of songs I tend to teach by rote in the OCC rehearsals. I discuss and encourage the use of modeling as a method of rote teaching and argue that the benefits of modeling far outweigh the consequences of not reading from a score.

The third chapter also explores the rehearsal environment and includes a description of the OCC discipline point system. I caution against using a discipline system that is similar to one used in schools and discuss the importance for young singers to feel like that they are not at school during extracurricular choir rehearsals. I suggest that a discipline policy is essential to running a smooth rehearsal but should not make the children feel like the environment is overly strict. Children have the option of participating in an extracurricular choir and too strict a policy will only drive singers away.

I go on to discuss the importance of having good rapport with the singers in the choir while still demanding the respect appropriate for the leader of the ensemble. I argued that though teachers should not be *friends* with their students, they should make a concerted effort to be *friendly* and to build a relationship with each of the singers. This relationship is rewarding for both singer and director and creates a mutual respect, which translates into hard work and good effort in rehearsals.

Chapter three goes on to discuss when and how to modify the rehearsal plan or change the routine entirely. I suggest that, no matter how well planned a rehearsal, a director almost always has to modify the plan in some fashion. Since extracurricular ensembles often meet only once a week, every minute of rehearsal time is valuable. When it is clear that the plan is not making the best use of time, a director should feel comfortable modifying it to maximize the available rehearsal time.

The fourth chapter deals with the process of growing and developing the organization. I broadly discuss the audition process and explain several ways in which an audition can be used. As a part of this discussion, I explain the concept of graded choir programs and the conflict felt by many choir directors about what kind of choral program they want to provide, one that is inclusive or exclusive. I contend that, if the option of a graded choir program is not available, a director should choose to offer a quality musical experience to all interested children and not turn away those who really want to learn and be involved.

In this thesis, I will strive to offer my experiences with the Oxford Children's Chorus as a tool for future directors of this program and for directors of other programs. I will discuss the ideas and insights that have shaped the way I go about planning and teaching, offer opinions of seasoned directors and include my own thoughts as a resource for others.

CHAPTER 1:  
The Oxford Children's Chorus

The Oxford Children's Chorus (OCC) is a community children's choir housed at the University of Mississippi. Dr. Andrew Paney, Assistant Professor of Music Education at the University of Mississippi, founded the current OCC in January 2010. This performing ensemble serves as a creative environment for children in grades 4-6 in the Oxford, MS community.

The organization's mission statement is given on its website:

The Oxford Children's Chorus (OCC) aims to build musicians through collaborative music making. The select singers in grades 4-6 build music literacy skills that will last throughout their lifetimes. Each rehearsal includes time developing music reading and writing skills. Concerts highlight singers' musical development and their production of beautiful, expressive singing.<sup>7</sup>

The OCC meets once a week, for an hour and fifteen minutes. In that period of time, we prepare concert repertoire, work on musical skills such as rhythm and solfège, play musical games, build community and interpersonal skills, and work on music reading. Singers come from all around the Oxford/Lafayette area and attend several different local elementary and middle schools. We also have several homeschooled children.

Rehearsals take place in the Music Building and concerts are held in Paris-Yates Chapel, both on the campus of the University of Mississippi. Singers pay \$35 per semester and the organization is funded entirely by the singers' tuition. Because Dr. Paney is associated with the

University of Mississippi, the OCC does not have to pay to use the music building as rehearsal space or Paris-Yates Chapel as a performance venue.

Though the choir is advertised for children in grades 4-6, special consideration is given to third graders who show an interest in joining the choir and are mature enough to handle a one hour, fifteen minute rehearsal. The OCC also welcomes current singers to continue as long as they want to sing. Choir members do not “age out” and may return for as many seasons as they wish.

In its beginning stages, the OCC had a strict attendance policy:

Since rehearsal times were few and limited, an absence policy was put into place. Students missing three (3) rehearsals were asked to sit out for the rest of the season. Three (3) tardies also equaled one (1) absence. After the first two absences, reminder emails were sent.<sup>8</sup>

Currently, the OCC strongly encourages singers to attend every rehearsal, but there is no formal attendance policy. Though the number of absences per singer is sometimes high, asking the singers to sit out the remainder of the season because of unsatisfactory attendance would potentially make the choir unsustainable due to a low number of singers. The lack of a strict attendance policy has not yet affected the musical level of the group in a way significant enough to merit change.

The OCC staff is supervised by Dr. Andrew Paney and includes graduate and undergraduate music education majors at the University of Mississippi. The staff designations and descriptions have changed since the 2011 season, as seen in **Appendix 1** (Staff Duty Descriptions 2011 v. 2014.)

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<sup>8</sup> Scott Sexton, “Starting a Children’s Chorus: Practicum involving working with the newly-formed Oxford Children’s Chorus” (Graduate Practicum, University of Mississippi, 2011), 55.

## CHAPTER 2: Selecting Music and Planning for Rehearsals

### Selecting Music

The first task for any performing ensemble director is to choose the literature that the choir will sing (in the case of OCC, for the entire semester). This was a daunting task for me, considering the high turnover rate of students in the choir every term. I did not know how many singers from the previous year would return. In her book *Sound Advice: Becoming a Better Children's Choir Conductor*, Jean Ashworth Bartle, the founder of the Toronto Children's Chorus, begins the appendix "Criteria for Choosing Repertoire Appropriate for Children" by saying:

Clearly one of the most important and time-consuming jobs that a conductor of a children's choir must do is choose appropriate repertoire. With worthy repertoire, your choir has the potential of reaching great artistic heights. With poor or modest repertoire, those heights will never be realized. Children's choir repertoire must always have aesthetic value...A worthwhile piece will always help the child grow musically and help to develop the beauty of the child's voice. Ideally, it will benefit other areas of growth as well—aesthetic, social, historical, educational, and political.<sup>9</sup>

I began selecting music over the summer, before the choir met for the first time. Because I did not yet know the ensemble's collective musical ability level, I tried my best to pick a variety of pieces with a range of difficulty levels and varying numbers of parts. My goal was to select pieces that would be both attainable, even for a choir with limited musical ability level, and challenging for a more skilled group.

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Ashworth Bartle. *Sound Advice: Becoming a Better Children's Choir Conductor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 182.

The director should aim for a well-rounded program with several different genres and moods represented. It is important, though, not to sacrifice quality in order to achieve a diverse program.

### *Defining “Quality Music”*

Each director must define the word “quality” for herself when picking music for his singers. I evaluate the following qualifications when picking repertoire:

- Composer/arranger
  - Is this a known composer/arranger? Has the composer written/arranged other pieces for children?
- Vocal line
  - Are all of the parts interesting?
  - Jean Ashworth Bartle – “Choral music needs notes that a singer should be able to ‘get into’ his or her voice.”<sup>10</sup>
- Vocal range
  - Is it too high or too low for a young or developing voice?
- Instrument use
  - Are the instruments culturally or historically appropriate? Is the instrumental part adding to or detracting from the piece as a whole?
- Age appropriate
  - Jean Ashworth Bartle - “Repertoire for children can be child-centered without being childish.”<sup>11</sup>
- Major/Minor
- Language
  - Is there a pronunciation guide? Is there someone in the community who can help?
- Tempo
  - Is the tempo attainable?
- Theme, text
  - Is the subject matter appropriate?

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<sup>10</sup> Bartle, *Sound Advice*, 183.

<sup>11</sup> Bartle, *Sound Advice*, 185.



### *Thoughts on the Use of Pop Music in the Choral Setting*

I also consider whether or not a piece of music is going to be enriching for a child's musical education. There is a great debate in the world of music educators about the use of popular music in the classroom or in choral settings like the OCC. Some believe that popular music is what attracts children and makes them excited about participating in a music program. Robert A. Cutietta wrote an article in the *Music Educators Journal* entitled, "Popular Music: An Ongoing Challenge," in which he defended the use of pop music in the classroom. He acknowledges that it often does not work in the choral setting and urged teachers to find ways to incorporate it into the music curriculum.<sup>12</sup> Others believe that popular music is not suitable for their singers. Zoltán Kodály, the pedagogue behind the widely used Kodály approach to music education, warns that bad music can "poison the soul" of a child and warns music educators not to introduce it to them.<sup>13</sup>

While I understand and appreciate popular music, I believe it has its own time and place. Popular music is a wonderful pastime—whether it be listening to the radio in the car or enjoying recordings at home. The choral setting, however, should be a time spent learning *choral music*. While there are arrangements of popular songs into choral settings, these arrangements are not the true versions of the song. The artist who recorded them likely never intended for the song to be performed in such a setting.

If a director does decide to program popular music, he should do so sparingly and only in addition to other serious pieces of choral music. He should also have a discussion with his

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<sup>12</sup> Robert A. Cutietta, "Popular Music, An Ongoing Challenge," *Music Educators Journal* 77, no. 8 (April 1991): 28.

<sup>13</sup> Zoltán Kodály, *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály* (London: Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd., 1964), 141.

students about the difference between the styles of music and the importance of performing significant choral music in addition to the pop arrangements. While performing pop music will not hamper a student's music education, a lack of understanding about the importance of other genres will.

In the chapter of *Sound Advice* devoted to picking repertoire, Bartle takes on this debate by providing a metaphor for popular music. She says:

Conductors must not select music with the main criterion being that the children like it! Parents would not dream of giving their children nothing but candy and chips to eat all day but insist that they eat fruits and vegetables. Why do some conductors give their choirs the equivalent of junk food? Surely one of the most important aspects of our job is to develop taste and a passion for great music. Once the members of your choir are "hooked," they will never look back. Candy and chips are fine occasionally, but they certainly do not constitute a healthy diet.<sup>14</sup>

I very much agree with Bartle. Children often do not "like" historically important literature on the first hearing.<sup>15</sup> It is unrealistic to think that they will have an appreciation for it without first being exposed to it over a period of time. This exposure is the job of the director. If parents wanted to expose their children to nothing but popular music, they would turn the radio on in the car and not make the effort to be involved in a choral organization.

### *Singing in Unison*

When choosing repertoire for the 2013 fall semester, I chose several unison selections. Because these songs are only one part, they are fairly easily taught and learned. More importantly, though, these songs are all high quality literature. Even though the choir proved advanced enough to handle multi-part literature, the unison music was still valuable to them. Because we spent less time learning the unison music, we were able to take the time to discuss

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<sup>14</sup> Bartle, *Sound Advice*, 185.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

nuances of the music. We discussed musicality, mood, and historical significance, and we had opportunities to learn through theory and solfège.

While there is an endless supply of two-part choral music for children, I chose these 4 pieces as a good starting place for the OCC. All of these songs could have been performed in unison if need be. While it is not ideal to perform a multi-part piece in unison, it is sometimes necessary. "English Song of Joy," as I stated above, is a two-part piece. Because time was limited, I chose not to teach the harmony line. If it is clear that a multi-part piece requires more work than the ensemble has time for, singing in unison is an option. While it is generally best to perform a piece the way the composer or arranger wrote it, performing only the unison line is preferable to trying to perform multiple parts that the children do not have prepared.

### *Teaching Two-part Music*

I taught all four two-part pieces in the same way. Though the children had the scores and were able to see that there was more than one part, all the singers learned the melody line first. There were several reasons for this. If the ability level of the ensemble was going to force us to sing only in unison, the children would already know the melody. Because all the children learned the same part initially, the children who eventually learned the harmony part were better able to understand how their part fit into the song as a whole.

### **Planning for Rehearsals**

Reese Norris, who directs both the Hernando Singers at Hernando Middle School in Hernando, MS, and also CoroRio, a graded community ensemble in Desoto County, MS,

discusses the importance of a rehearsal plan in his article in *The Choral Advocate*, the Newsletter of the Mississippi Chapter of the American Choral Directors Association in 2012. He says:

It is imperative, if we are to be truly our most effective as teachers, that we start each rehearsal with a plan in hand. All of our creative energy and brainpower can be focused on running an energetic and engaging rehearsal, if we are not also trying to try to ‘figure out what to do next’ in the presence of 50 needy young people.<sup>16</sup>

Norris goes on to stress that the most important consideration when planning a rehearsal is the question, “What do our students deserve from us?”

In the Oxford Children’s Chorus, I believe our singers deserve to come to a well-organized rehearsal, planned with an understanding of the singers’ developmental and musical ability levels. OCC rehearsals run for an hour and fifteen minutes, a very long time for elementary school children, especially those who have been sitting still at school all day. It is important to set up the rehearsal so that the children will not get overly frustrated or fatigued and will enjoy their time spent with us. The main goal is to set them up for success, which careful, strategic planning will help to do.

Planning for weekly rehearsals can be a daunting task. After observing experienced teachers and observing the OCC children, I have concluded that the two most important factors in a children’s choir rehearsal are pacing and rehearsal order. The next two sections further explain these factors.

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<sup>16</sup> Norris, Reese. “Keeping it Alive and giving them what they need.” (article published for the Mississippi ACDA & MMEA In-Service Conference and State Convention, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, April 4-6, 2013).

## *Rehearsal Pacing*

Part of setting the singers up for success is recognizing the limitations of their attention spans. With only one rehearsal a week, the task of learning an entire concert of music seems daunting. It is often tempting to want to work for long stretches of time on a particular piece or section with which you know the singers struggle. While this may be a suitable practice for older singers, elementary aged children simply do not have the attention spans to support such intense, focused work.

In her *Music Educators Journal* article “Tuning Up for a Great Elementary Chorus: Good organization, a long-range plan, and creative rehearsal techniques can help your elementary choir achieve success,” Amy D. Chivington discusses how to deal with an elementary choir’s lack of focus. She says, “The need to focus and refocus choristers' attention throughout a rehearsal is a reality that all choral teachers experience. Visual, physical-kinesthetic, and aural cues can be used and varied to help singers remain on task.”<sup>17</sup> Chivington says that using visual or physical-kinesthetic cues instead of aural cues to begin a rehearsal can help direct the singers’ energy and ready them to focus on the rehearsal ahead. She suggests that the entire warm-up process should be done without verbal instructions, with the only aural cues being pitches sung by the director for the students to match.<sup>18</sup>

In the OCC, we often use verbal instructions during the warm-up time, though we do employ many visual and physical-kinesthetic cues to help decrease talking at the start of rehearsal. Once the singers are in their positions, I begin to stretch, offering verbal feedback

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<sup>17</sup> Amy D. Chivington, “Tuning Up for a Great Elementary Chorus: Good organization, a long-range plan, and creative rehearsal techniques can help your elementary choir achieve success,” *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 4 (January 1998): 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

only when necessary. Because of the routine established early last semester, the children immediately join in and begin to stretch. Though the rest of the warm-up may include spoken words from me or the children, this moment of focus at the beginning of our time together really benefits the focus of the group as a whole.

Directors of children's choirs also need to be well aware of the short attention spans of the singers in their ensembles. Myrtle D. Millares addresses this issue in her article "Attention Span in the 5- To 7-Year-Old Music Student." While her research was focused on children a few years younger than those in the OCC, I believe many of her observations still apply to middle to upper elementary students.<sup>19</sup>

In the article, Millares points out that children rarely *mean* to be inattentive and almost always want to do well at the task at hand. As a child advances in the developmental process, their ability to focus on one particular task increases.<sup>20</sup> Millares suggests that there are techniques teachers and directors can use that will help sustain their students' attention. She advises using questions and games to keep the students engaged, stating that children "enjoyed the tension created when they had to overcome a challenge."<sup>21</sup>

Millares explains that the students' developing feeling of self-esteem pushes them to seek personal progress and to relish the opportunity to overcome a challenge. She also stresses the importance of self-discovery in the singers and of allowing them time to realize and correct their own mistakes. She says:

...It is important not to interrupt children's playing [singing], even allowing them to make mistakes to see if they can solve the musical problem instead of offering guiding words right away. Immediate interjection has, in fact, been found to be

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<sup>19</sup> Myrtle D. Millares, "Attention Span in the 5- to 7-Year Old Music Student," *American Music Teacher* 61, no. 5 (April/May 2012): 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

disruptive rather than helpful, interrupting the student's immersion in music making.<sup>22</sup>

The OCC, like many other extracurricular ensembles is, in the end, a performing ensemble. With such limited rehearsal time, it can be extremely difficult to allow the students the time Millares recommends. When we as directors hear a mistake, we generally know how to fix it and are eager to jump in and correct our singers. It is important to remember, though, that the singers' time in children's choir is preparing them for more than the final concert—it is preparing them to advance in school and in their everyday lives. Allowing them time for self-correction can greatly benefit them both in and out of the choir setting.

As previously mentioned, the OCC is a performing ensemble and one of the main goals of each rehearsal is to prepare the singers for that concert at the end of the semester. Because the OCC only meets once a week, we have to cover an incredible amount of things in these one hour, fifteen minute rehearsals. We work on rhythm reading, learn and practice choral music, play games, and discuss performance and rehearsal etiquette. With so much to do, the pacing of each rehearsal is very important. To an untrained eye, it might look like we never actually accomplish anything significant, never spending more than 5 to 7 minutes per activity before moving on to something completely different. This kind of fast-paced rehearsal is necessary with young singers. It is important to know exactly what needs to be covered in the music, work on it, and move on to something else. This ensures that the singers do not mentally disengage. Once their focus is lost, it is hard to regain it.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 23.

## *Rehearsal Order*

The placement of new material in the rehearsal plan is critical to avoid frustrating the singers. Too much new material can be overwhelming. My goal for OCC rehearsals is to move constantly between something familiar and something new, so students do not have time to become frustrated or overwhelmed before we move on to something they know how to do. All rehearsals begin with material the singers know well and with which they will be successful. This establishes a positive atmosphere and builds the singers' confidence to attempt less familiar or more difficult repertoire.

The rehearsal plan commentary from November 12, 2013 is a good example of the practical application of this type of order:

1. We began rehearsal with *Sit Down, Lord*, which they knew well. Though they were still holding scores, many of the children could sing this from memory. I started with this piece so the children could immediately be successful. If I had chosen to start rehearsal with something they did not know as well, many of the children would have been more quickly frustrated. It is important to remind students of this age and maturity level why they love to sing and that they are capable of successfully making music. This cannot be done by talking to the singers; they must make beautiful music together. Being successful at the beginning of rehearsal establishes a positive attitude and an enthusiasm for making music together.
2. From there, we moved into "I Heard a Bird Sing," which, while not as well known as the opening piece, the students could accomplish successfully with help from the directors. This song, like "Sit Down, Lord," gave the students the opportunity to accomplish



something and hear the beauty of the music instead of getting immediately bogged down in the amount of the work left to accomplish.

3. Then we moved to *Al Shlosha*, a song that was relatively new and needed lots of work. Our goal for that piece during that particular rehearsal was simply to keep learning the main melody. We were not fine-tuning or rehearsing nuances—instead, we spent a short amount of time reviewing the melody and the Hebrew text. Because this song was still unfamiliar and difficult, we kept the rehearsal time on it relatively short. Shorter, repeated exposures to the music are much more effective than one exposure for a long period of time. This helps avoid singer frustration and loss of focus due to short attention spans.
4. Next we sang “Bring Me a Rose in the Wintertime,” the song with which we began the first rehearsal of the semester. In the plan, I noted that we should sing this all the way through with no stops, which indicates to me that this piece was placed into the rehearsal order as a musical “palate cleanser.” Singing a song that the singers knew very well gave them a mental break, while still accomplishing something useful: The more times they sing the song, the more comfortable they are and the more we can incorporate musical and stylistic elements into the performance. This kind of mental break is preferable in a rehearsal situation because it keeps the students actively involved in music making instead of losing rehearsal time to chatter or another non-musical activity.
5. We then moved to working on a new harmony part in “Tue, Tue,” a section that had been introduced the week before.
6. Because the end of the rehearsal was drawing near and the children were starting to get tired, we moved into a circle to sing “Landlord,” “Coffee,” and “Cooroo, Cooroo,” the

three songs that the singers looked forward to and knew well. Moving the singers from their seated formation to a standing circle in a different part of the room helped to sharpen their focus by changing their immediate surroundings. Additionally, “Landlord” is a singing game, which includes a clapping pattern to be done with a partner. Singers can move around and interact with their peers.

7. After returning to the seats, we closed the rehearsal by singing “English Song of Joy” and “Wind on the Hill” for the purpose of memorization and retention.

We end every OCC rehearsal with an informal performance of something we have worked on in rehearsal that day. This performance is not always polished or perfect, but it allows the parents to observe their children’s joy for music making. It also enables them to see growth in the ensemble from week to week. This increases their appreciation for the final concert as a product for weeks of hard work.

### *Planning for the First Rehearsal*

Planning for the first rehearsal of the semester is a different matter. In this case, all of the music that they will see during that rehearsal is new. Because of this, it is impossible to structure a lesson in the way I previously suggested. In a first rehearsal, it is imperative to remember and understand the singers’ attention spans. Because it is necessary to introduce them to a variety of different music, working toward a complete understanding or large-scale mastery (more than a section or a phrase or two) is detrimental to the cause. Later there will be plenty of time to work with this music. The goal for the first two or three rehearsals is just to introduce the music so the children will feel somewhat familiar with it for the next rehearsal.

My lesson plan for the first rehearsal of the Oxford Children's Chorus spring semester demonstrates my effort to teach a number of new things while still keeping the singers' attention. The lesson plan can be viewed in **Appendix 2**. We started rehearsal by reading through rhythm cards and warming up in a similar way to last semester. Though we had several new singers who joined only for the spring semester, many of our singers know this progression well and already feel like they are getting back to their routine. In addition to warming up the voice and the body for healthy singing, this time helps to reacquaint those returning students with the choir rehearsal routine.

I chose to start with the Benjamin Britten "Old Abram Brown." I chose this piece as the one to begin with for several reasons. The melody is fairly easy to learn (so it is easily taught by rote), singing the melody in a round creates harmonies (which are easily attainable), and the words are dark and mysterious (*Old Abram Brown is dead and gone...*), which intrigue the singers. The students are learning a legitimate piece of choral music, relatively quickly, which helps them feel confident and successful in choir right from the start.

Immediately following was a game that was easily learned and executed. Though the singers were unfamiliar with almost everything in the rehearsal, the alternation of pieces and games that were easily attainable with pieces that needed more intense focus helped the rehearsal run smoothly.

## CHAPTER 3: Running a Rehearsal

### **Rote Teaching: Friend or Foe?**

Teachers all have their own opinions on rote teaching—the teaching of a concept or a piece of music by modeling and not with a printed score—and how much or how little should be used when teaching music to children. Some teachers argue that too much rote teaching can become a crutch for the children, removing the need for them to learn to read music at all.<sup>23</sup> They believe that too much rote teaching diminishes the students’ ability to read and understand a piece of music on their own.

The opposite argument—in favor of teaching by rote—is that music is more easily learned and is more accessible to a variety of different students. Many teachers believe that much of the music written for children is too difficult for the beginning singer to read from the page. There is a wide range of musical ability levels in any ensemble. While many children can read music well, many cannot. Additionally, a choral octavo looks different from a piece of piano music, which some children read. It is important that they get some exposure to printed music, but expecting a choir with beginners to learn a full program using a printed score is unrealistic.

We use a mixture of rote teaching and score reading to teach music in OCC. It is important that children get experience holding and reading octavos. Much coaching from the

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<sup>23</sup> Warren Haston, “Teacher Modeling as an Effective Teaching Strategy,” *Music Educators Journal* 93, no. 4 (March 2007): 27.

director is involved in this process—children do not intuitively know how to read a score. With that in mind, directors should take much care in choosing exactly which octavos to hand their singers. This is further discussed in the bullet points below.

Though it is important for the singers to experience singing from a physical piece of music, learning a song by rote—the aural transmission of the song from the director to the singers—is equally as valuable. Rote teaching allows for modeling from the director. In *Teacher Modeling as Effective Teaching Strategy*, Haston defines modeling as “whenever a teacher demonstrates a concept for a student.”<sup>24</sup> Modeling is one of the most useful tools a director can employ, allowing for the demonstration of the correct tone, mood, tempo, vowel shape, et cetera, in addition to the correct notes. Modeling can assist with the “polishing process,” even if the singers are still learning notes. Goetze, Boshkoff, and Broeker suggest that modeling “makes for more interesting and efficient rehearsals and allows choristers to experience the beauty of a piece early in the learning process.”<sup>25</sup>

My personal philosophy leads me to use both physical music and rote teaching in OCC rehearsals. I typically teach by rote when a song falls into one of these categories:

- **Folksongs**
  - Folk music is passed down aurally from generation to generation. Even if we are performing an arrangement of a folk song, the basic melody is one that has been taught aurally for decades. By continuing this tradition, the songs can continue to live and move in the same way they always have.
    - Example from OCC: all the singing games (“Zinyama Redu,” “Ida Red, Ida Blue,” “Big Fat Biscuit,” “Landlord”)
- **Simple Canons**
  - Often canons of this nature are only a line or two long and are not printed in octavo form. They can be found in books for teachers but are hard to distribute to children. Although teachers can lift the notation from these collections and

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<sup>24</sup> Haston, “Teacher Modeling as an Effective Teaching Strategy,” 27.

<sup>25</sup> Goetze, Broeker, and Boshkoff, *Educating Young Singers*, 190.

write on the board or project on the screen, I often just teach the canon by rote at first, then use its rhythmic elements for teaching tools later on.

- Examples from OCC:
  - “Coffee,” “I Heard a Bird Sing”

- **Difficult Layout**

- It is important to consider layout of the music on the paper. If there are multiple lines for extra instruments, voices, and piano, the singers can easily become overwhelmed at the sheer amount of ink on the page. The extraneous markings distract their eyes, which can derail the lesson and diminish their will to keep reading. It is important to remember that though a score might appear simple to the advanced musician, often the only musical markings the children have come into contact with are simple rhythms and stick notation. To jump from that to an octavo with a full set of standard notation is a difficult move.

## **Discipline and Creating a Positive Environment**

1. Be their friend, sort of.
2. Take the time to be interested in their lives.
3. Demand respect.

These three points were all on the long list of things I realized after my first semester working as director of the Oxford Children’s Chorus. I grouped them all together because they often only apply when in conjunction with one another. In every education class, we have learned that it is not a teacher’s job to be friends with her students, and I agree. It is my job, however, to be *friendly*, interested in their days, happy to see them, and willing to sacrifice a few seconds of my rehearsal to make them laugh when necessary. This is important. It is easy to tell when the children are getting overwhelmed or tired, and it is important to be able to recognize this and work to fix it quickly.

The Oxford Children’s Chorus is an after-school performing ensemble. Because this is an extracurricular activity, we have to be careful not to make the singers feel like they are still at school. These children have spent the whole day being expected to sit up, pay attention,

participate, and behave. While we expect the same things, it is important for the children's chorus staff to approach these expectations in a different way than do teachers at school. The director's job is to help the singers view music as something they like to do and not as something that is stressful for them. It is also important to remember that without some fun, the singers can opt not to come back next week.

Good behavior from the singers comes primarily from the strong relationship between singers and director. Finding the balance between my own personality and my persona as a director in an extracurricular choir has been a challenge for me. It is important that I assert an air of authority when in front of the ensemble and that I do not seem too relaxed and casual. Children need to see someone who is confident and comfortable leading the group. Otherwise, the singers will feel like the director is not in control of the ensemble, which gives allows them to act however they wish. When this happens, the students become confused about the role of the director and the director's authority lessens. In their book, *Making Children's Choirs Work*, Barbara J. Mitchell and Cheryl M. Staats describe this as the distinction between "being one of the gang and being the leader of the gang." They remind teachers that "looking the part" by dressing appropriately is also an essential part of being a successful children's choir director.<sup>26</sup>

In *Sound Advice*, Bartle discusses the issue of discipline in a children's choir setting. She says:

Discipline in a chorus means mutual respect—between the choristers and the director and among the choristers themselves. A conductor's presence, manner, and deportment can enhance this respect or detract from it. To create the correct ambience for an effective, productive, and polished rehearsal, a conductor needs to have a presence that is not only an extension of his or her own personality but also polished enough to command respect.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Barbara J. Mitchell and Cheryl M. Staats, *Making Children's Choirs Work* (Cincinnati, Standard Publishing, 1986), 36.

<sup>27</sup> Bartle, *Sound Advice*, 63.

This balance is extremely important. It not only allows for a productive rehearsal environment but also for a warm atmosphere where the singers feel welcome and at ease. One of the best ways I have found to achieve this goal is by taking the time before rehearsals to talk to each of the singers and find out what is going on in their lives. Mitchell and Staats again echo this idea in their book. They discuss the importance of arriving at rehearsal early to have conversations such as these. They also point out that having these conversations before rehearsal cuts down on unrelated interruptions once the rehearsal has started.<sup>28</sup>

Conversations before rehearsal are mutually beneficial; I genuinely want to know how school is going, what book they are reading this week, what cool thing happened to them at school today, or if they have scored a goal in soccer yet. The children, in turn, are glad to have someone with whom to share their accomplishments, trials, concerns, and thoughts. In his book *Pathways: A Guide for Energizing & Enriching Band, Orchestra, & Choral Programs*, Joseph Alsobrook reminds teachers to make eye contact when having these discussions with singers. He says:

We have become quite proficient at carrying on a conversation while doing multiple tasks. And if you're anything like me, there are even times in which you "pretend" to be listening when in reality you are thinking about something completely different... Taking a moment to sincerely listen to what they have to say is the simplest way on earth of saying, "You are important to me."<sup>29</sup>

By taking the time to listen to the children, the director is building important relationships that translate well into the rehearsal time. Because the students feel like they are important to you and know that you care about their success, they will, in turn, work harder for you, the director. Because they want to be successful and they want to maintain the good relationship

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<sup>28</sup> Mitchell and Staats, *Making Children's Choirs Work*, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Alsobrook, *Pathways: A guide for energizing & enriching band, orchestra, & choral programs* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2002), 33.



that they have with me, they sit up, participate, try their best, and generally behave well without much prompting or reminding.

Although the relationship and atmosphere in the rehearsal often are enough to encourage good behavior, we use discipline system to help rehearsals run smoothly.

Discipline can be a tricky thing. In their book *Teaching/Discipline: A Positive Approach for Educational Development*, Charles H. Madsen, Jr. and Clifford K. Madsen spend the entire first chapter discussing “the Art of Discipline.”<sup>30</sup>

Discipline, according to the Madsens, “is a process whereby certain relationships (cause-and-effect associations) are established.”<sup>31</sup> Contingent relationships are “if, then,” relationships in which students understand that if they behave badly, bad things will happen, and if they behave well, good things will happen. These are relationships that the students must understand in order for there to be control in the rehearsal.<sup>32</sup>

The way to establish good discipline in the rehearsal is through consistency; being reliable in your reactions to things singers do. If the children know what kind of reaction to expect out of bad behavior, they will be less likely to behave poorly. By keeping consistency in the discipline policy, directors can more easily motivate certain behaviors.<sup>33</sup>

Good behavior and good discipline cannot happen immediately. Students must learn how to change their behavior based on the discipline policies in place in the classroom. Sometimes they might not even know that their behavior is bad in the first place. Part of the learning process

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<sup>30</sup> Clifford K. Madsen and Charles H. Madsen Jr., *Teaching/Discipline: A Positive Approach for Educational Development* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1981), 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Madsen and Madsen Jr., *Teaching/Discipline*, 6.

includes association what is good behavior and what is not. This process takes time and consistency by the director in order for it to become truly effective in the rehearsal.

While discipline is a tool for directors to maintain order and calm in the rehearsal, it is also crucial to the students' overall success. Children learn in different ways and a general understanding of the director's behavioral expectations from the very beginning of the semester will aid in helping them succeed academically and socially in the children's chorus setting.

In the Oxford Children's Chorus, we have implemented a point-based discipline system. I have observed several music classrooms where the teachers employ point-based systems. My mother, an elementary school music teacher, uses a team point system, which I used as an inspiration for the creation of the system for the OCC. In her classroom, the students are divided into groups and the teams compete against each other. In the OCC, the competition is between "Us (OCC staff) v. You (singers)." The children can earn points for a variety of things: sitting up tall, not talking, working hard, correct answers when answering questions, an overall successful performance of a section of music...really any positive attribute that we see. Students can earn points collectively for the group, or individually to add to the group total. They never lose points. What they earn, they get to keep.

The OCC staff also has an opportunity to earn points. If we have to wait for talking to die down, if a child is rude to us or to fellow singers, if the overall posture is bad—basically any negative behaviors that we would like to eliminate—we give ourselves points for having to wait for them or deal with the behavior.

By keeping a point tally, each rehearsal turns into a competition. If the singers beat the staff, they get to add a smiley face magnet to their "Reward Board" (a magnetic board, sectioned off into blocks). If they beat us by more than five points, they get to add 2 smiley faces to their

board. Every week, the singers work towards a pre-set number of smiley faces on the board. Once they get there, they get a treat. The larger the number of smiley faces they had to achieve to hit the reward goal, the bigger the treat.

We begin the first few rehearsals every semester with a discussion about the things that earn the singers points and the things that earn the directors points. It is then that the children get their first exposure to the “if, then,” relationships. For example: If I talk while the director is talking, I help the director earn a point. If the director earns more points than we do, then we do not get a treat. The farther into the semester we go, the easier these relationships are for the children to comprehend and their behavior reflects their understanding of the outcomes of these statements.

The singers’ desire to please me and the other staff, coupled with the opportunity to work towards a “victory” and a surprise, helps us keep a handle on the rehearsal fundamentals (posture, breathing, etc.) and the overall behavior in the room.

### **Modifying Plans**

No matter how much work goes into planning for a rehearsal, the director must always be willing to make changes if necessary. It is important for a director to be flexible and open to rearranging the rehearsal order or modifying the teaching strategy on site, especially if the existing plan is no longer working as effectively as possible. Because extracurricular groups have such little time to prepare music (often only once a week), it is crucial to make the most of the available time.

## **When to Break the Routine**

I have discussed the importance of a structured rehearsal and a routine that the singers can come to expect and grow comfortable following. While these are of the utmost importance, there are some days that the monotony of the routine can get the best of the director and the singers. Knowing when to break the routine while still making the most of the rehearsal time is an important key to maintaining a successful relationship between the director and the singers.

This concept was one I stumbled upon accidentally. During the middle of the fall semester 2013, I prepared my plan for OCC as I always do, structuring everything in the normal way. The day had been rainy and cold and the singers and I were all being pulled down by the general fatigue of the school semester. When the children arrived for choir that afternoon, it was obvious that my planned rehearsal was not going to be productive or fun that day.

In a typical structured rehearsal, I try to give the children an opportunity to play at least two games. So far that semester we had learned several singing games, partner games, and music theory-based games. The children enjoy the opportunity to play and look forward to the game portion of rehearsal every week.

On that particular day, when it seemed to me almost counterproductive to rehearse their concert music like normal, I decided on the spot to have a completely different kind of rehearsal. I wrote out all of the games they knew how to play and secretly assigned each one a number. I then chose children based on good behavior and participation and asked them to pick a number. We played the game corresponding to the chosen number. We spent the rehearsal laughing, singing, playing, and making the most of the fatiguing rainy afternoon.

While some may argue that we wasted a perfectly good rehearsal day, taking the time to stop and find the joy in music was probably the most productive thing we could have done. It is

important to remember that the main goal for almost any musical ensemble is to foster a love for music in its participants. The OCC is no exception. Hungarian philosopher and music pedagogue Zoltán Kodály stated:

Teach music and singing at school in such a way that it is not a torture but a joy for the pupil; instill a thirst for finer music in him...Music must not be approached from its intellectual, rational side, nor should it be conveyed to the child as a system of algebraic symbols, or as the secret writing of a language with which he has no connection...Often a single experience will open the young soul to music for a whole lifetime.<sup>34</sup>

When it became clear to me that the typical structured schedule was only going to elicit eye rolls and tired sighs, there was no question at all that this was the right move for my choir that afternoon. By having a rehearsal like this, we were still singing, working on musical skills (such as rhythm and solfège), and interacting with each other. More importantly, though, the singers were experiencing music for music's sake by having fun and interacting with each other solely for the joy of doing so.

I again strayed from the typical structure later on in the semester when the children had learned and become familiar with all of their concert music. The goal for each song that day was memory and retention, and extensive time spent on each selection was neither necessary nor productive. Because we needed to sing so much, there would not be sufficient time to add variety for the sake of the children's attention spans. I decided to use the number "game" again, secretly assigning each song a number. As I had done previously with the "game day," I selected students based on behavior and good participation to pick which song we sang next.

The uncertainty of what was coming next and the thrill of possibly getting to direct the destiny of the entire group by being chosen to pick the next song to sing kept the singers engaged

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<sup>34</sup> Kodály, *The Selected Writings*, 120.

throughout the entire rehearsal. By the end of the session, we had covered all the songs on my list. Although the same results could have been achieved through the typical rehearsal plan, allowing the children to choose and to feel in control of that part of the rehearsal yielded the same result, accompanied by an overall excited, jovial attitude from the singers.

## CHAPTER 4: Growing and Developing the Organization

### **The Audition: the Purpose and the Process**

The audition process for any extracurricular musical ensemble is of the utmost importance. During this time, children are typically asked to perform by themselves and in a group and the director is able to assess their musicality, ability, vocal range, tone, expressivity, confidence, and a variety of other factors.

In some community choirs, the audition determines whether or not a child will participate in the group at all. In some graded choir programs, which I will discuss later in this section, a child's audition determines which level choir they will be placed in. In other choirs (like the OCC), all children who audition are admitted to the ensemble; the audition is merely to assess the singers' strengths and needs.<sup>35</sup>

The debate about exclusive v. all-inclusive children's choirs is widespread and affects directors of any kind of after-school ensemble. In her article *Elementary Choral Music: Who Should Sing? A Model of Inclusion* published in the *Choral Journal* in 2006, Cheryl Dupont discusses this very debate. Dupont, the artistic director of the New Orleans Children's Choirs, begins by acknowledging the conflicting desires of all choral directors: the desire for their ensemble to sing well and the desire to offer a quality musical experience for children.

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<sup>35</sup> Sexton, "Starting a Children's Chorus: Practicum involving working with the newly-formed Oxford Children's Chorus" 5.

Dupont goes on to suggest a graded choir system as the best possible compromise to the debate. In a graded choir organization, there are several ensembles that operate under the same name but with different distinctions within the organization. Dupont discusses an unnamed community children's choir director's view that "an organization such as theirs should be available to all children who had a strong desire to sing and an ability to commit to the rehearsal and performance schedule." The graded choral system allowed this director to include these children, while also offering a level-appropriate choir for the more experienced singers. Dupont says:

This director maintained, and still does, that a community music education organization should have a place for talented and experienced children, but not exclusively those children. In order to accomplish this mission, the organization began adding choirs and extending the age range so that there was an appropriate choir for children of any age from 5-18 and sometimes beyond.<sup>36</sup>

Sometimes a graded choir program is not an option due to insufficient funds, rehearsal space, staff, and number of participating children. When this is the case, the director must decide whether the audition will determine if a child will participate in the program or not. When making that decision, it is necessary to consider the area in which the program is located. Are there other opportunities for children to participate in quality music programs? Will the community encourage children to try again if they do not initially get into the ensemble? Above all, the director must consider what is ultimately important to them: the ability level of the choir or the opportunity for all children to participate.

In *Educating Young Singers*, Goetze, Boshkoff, and Broeker explain why they prefer the term "teacher-conductor" to "director," saying: "directing young choristers requires a sustained

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<sup>36</sup> Cheryl Dupont, "Elementary Choral Music: Who Should Sing? A Model of Inclusion," *Choral Journal* 47, no. 6 (December 2006): 89.



focus on both pedagogy and music making...” They go on to suggest that an inclusive, pedagogy-based program is ideal. They say:

It is our responsibility as teacher-conductors to offer a comprehensive music education within the choral setting, always keeping in mind the nature of our young choristers – their social development, learning styles, interests and capabilities.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the OCC does not turn away interested singers and the audition merely serves as a way to assess the singers’ ability levels and needs. While it is likely that the overall musical level would be more advanced if the audition served as a way to “weed out” unqualified or inexperienced singers, it is important for the children of the Oxford/Lafayette community to have the opportunity to make music outside of school. As stated in the OCC mission statement, one of the goals of the organization is to “build musicians through collaborative music making.” The word “build” implies that these children are not perfect musicians upon arrival. It is the job of the organization to involve interested children in collaborative music making and teach them so that they have the opportunity to become musicians. The opportunity to make music should not be reserved only for experienced singers.

### **Sustaining the Program: Recruiting Future Singers**

The most important part of any music program is the children who participate in it. In an extracurricular ensemble, these children elect to spend their time in rehearsals, giving up their free afternoons to sing in the ensemble. The director must always keep the future of the organization in his mind and recruiting new singers is a never-ending job.

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<sup>37</sup> Goetze, Broeker, and Boshkoff, *Educating Young Singers*, 8.

In his book *Directing the Choral Music Program*, Kenneth H. Phillips suggests, “a quality program sells itself and attracts students to it.”<sup>38</sup> Although advertisements for the organization are always a good idea, they are crucial during the beginning years, or “building years.” Because the community is unfamiliar with the organization, it is up to the director and the staff to advertise in schools, churches, and other places in the community where children and families frequent.

Asking current singers to bring their friends to rehearsal is another great way to recruit. The children in the program are the organization’s best supporters. They can provide first-hand perspectives that appeal to other children their age. Asking the singers’ parents for help with the recruiting process is also wise. They can be valuable assets when trying to get the word out about the organization and its benefits.

At the end of every OCC rehearsal, we invite all the parents into the choir room and sing something for them. It is important for the parents to see what their children have been working on. With only two concerts a year, it is easy for parents to lose sight of the values of bringing their child to choir practice. By hearing their children perform a section of a piece at the end of rehearsal every week, the parents are able to see progress as it is made. This can be a wonderful recruiting time as well. Encourage parents to bring along siblings or friends when picking up their singers from rehearsal. These visiting children will have a chance to see the choir in action.

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<sup>38</sup> Kenneth H. Phillips, *Directing the Choral Music Program* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2004) 41.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have discussed my experience working with the Oxford Children's Chorus in Oxford, Mississippi. After serving as Guest Director for the 2013-2014 season, I compiled a list of the most important points I learned while directing. I have reflected on my experiences and explained some of the ways I found success this year.

After an explanation of the Oxford Children's Chorus's structure in the first chapter, each subsequent chapter explains a different aspect of directing an extracurricular children's chorus: planning a rehearsal, running a rehearsal, and growing the program.

While there is no prescribed way to structure a program similar to the Oxford Children's Chorus, I believe that these considerations can benefit any like program. Many of these points are already widely known by music directors, yet I had to experience them myself in order to fully understand them.

All of the considerations I addressed in this thesis can seem daunting to young, inexperienced directors. Becoming comfortable and confident in front of the ensemble becomes easier in time; only practice in front of the singers can really help a nervous director improve.

It is my hope that my experiences, combined with the insight of seasoned directors and "teacher-conductors" can help guide the thinking of young directors. Programs like the Oxford Children's Chorus are extremely important and directors must do everything possible to make these organizations successful. Above all, the most important thing to remember is that these

singers deserve to be a part of an ensemble where they can be themselves, interact with their peers, and be exposed to new ideas and music.

## APPENDIX 1

### **2011 Staff Duty Descriptions**

Director: Oversees all staff positions. Has ultimate decision-making authority. Plans all rehearsals, events, and concert dates. Serves as liason between the chorus and the community.

Assistant Director(s): Must be a graduate student or music professional. Assists with all director duties. Responsible for conducting 1-3 pieces on concert and submitting rehearsal plans to Director in a timely manner. Expected to be present at ALL events.

Teaching Staff Member: Assists with all aspects of rehearsals. May be asked to teach sectionals or extra rehearsals for small groups of students. Preferred—Undergraduate Music Education major or higher.

Artistic Manager/Director's Assistant: takes attendance, communicates attendance issues with parents, in charge of medical release information, prepares venues for rehearsal and performances, updates necessary documentation online, phone contact person, works directly with director to take care of all administration duties.

Choir Manager/Parent Liaison: Works closely with directors to ensure a successful rehearsal, in charge of attendance sheets and controlling the door for late members and parents, takes and distributes receipt information upon payment of tuition, heads fundraising committees, orders t-shirts and uniforms.

Treasurer: Collects dues, writes checks, establish a bank account.<sup>1</sup>

### **2014 Staff Duty Descriptions**

Director: Oversees staff positions. Has final say over repertoire and programming. Acts as teacher and advisor for Guest Director (if applicable). Oversees all the financial dealings (writes checks, orders music, etc.), books concert and rehearsal spaces, and communicates with parents. Must be the faculty member who is in charge of the children's choir.

Guest Director: Not a permanent position (only serves in the position on a temporary basis).

Picks concert repertoire, plans and runs rehearsals, directs concerts, obtains "treats," and manages other student helpers. Also communicates with parents. Can be an undergraduate or graduate student.

Assistant Director(s): Assists the director. Helps lead sectionals, teaches and directs 1-3 pieces on the final concert. Does not have to submit written plans to Director or Guest Director.

Student Helpers: Assists in any way during rehearsals. Pass out music, monitor behavior, play games, help with warm-ups, etc. May be an undergraduate, graduate or general music student.

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<sup>1</sup> Sexton, "Starting a Children's Chorus: Practicum involving working with the newly-formed Oxford Children's Chorus" 19.

**Focus:**

*concepts and skills to emphasize*

Articulation  
 Beat  
 Dynamics  
 Form (Repetition, Variation, Contrast)  
 Genre/Style  
 Harmony  
 Key  
 Composing  
 Melody  
 Describing  
 Meter  
 Improvising  
 Phrase  
 Listening  
 Pitch  
 Moving  
 Rhythm  
 Playing  
 Texture  
 Reading Music  
 Timbre  
 Singing

**National Music****Standard(s) Achieved:**

- Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music
- Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music
- Improvising melodies, variations and accompaniments
- Composing and arranging music within specific guidelines
- Reading and notating music
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## APPENDIX 2

OCC Plan – 9/3/13

- **Rhythm cards**
- **Review reward board/points/rewards**
- **Warmups**
- **Body echoing**
  - Move from body percussion to voiced
  - Words to Tue, Tue, several times (spoken)
- **Tue, Tue (pass out copies)**
  - Sing until first split
  - Look at p. 5, last system (go over musical vocabulary) m. 22
    - You listen while I sing
    - Same or different as beginning?
  - Teach “come and sing” (group of 7’s part) (have everyone sing it.) (Katie sing other part underneath if possible)
- **Cooroo, Cooroo**
  - Sing through part they know
  - Add second verse
    - Sing through until the goodnights
  - Teach harmony on p. 5
    - Stop before getting to refrain
    - Phrase by phrase
    - How many beats are we holding this note...? (Count with your fingers)
- **Wind on the Hill**
  - I’m going to sing a song to you
    - How many times did I say the word “goes”? sing again.
    - Did they have the same melody? Sing again.
    - Which one is the hardest one to sing (first, second, third)
    - Sing it with me.
    - You sing A, I sing B, you sing A
- **Bring me a Rose**
  - solfege random till we get to the pattern
  - attach words (like last time)
  - if you think you know my part, sing with me
- **My Landlord – play**
- **Al Shlosha**
  - I sing line, you sing exactly what I just sang
  - Go over words, repeat after me
  - What is the meaning of this song?
- **So la mi**
- **I Heard a Bird Sing**

**Focus:**

*concepts and skills to emphasize*

Articulation  
Beat  
Dynamics  
Form (Repetition, Variation, Contrast)  
Genre/Style  
Harmony  
Key  
Composing  
Melody  
Describing  
Meter  
Improvising  
Phrase  
Listening  
Pitch  
Moving  
Rhythm  
Playing  
Texture  
Reading Music  
Timbre  
Singing

**National Music**

**Standard(s) Achieved:**

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OCC Plan – 9/10/13

- Rhythm cards
- **Warmups**
  - Stretch, roller coaster, doo doo doo, mah
- **Sit Down, Lord!**
  - Get out music
  - Divide in half
  - Let's see how much you remember
    - Accompaniment and help with parts/words
    - Sing until key change
  - Ok part 2, you have something hard to do. Can you handle it?
    - Katie sing and demonstrate how the second *I can't sit down* is different
    - Repeat after me *I can't sit down* until right.
      - Do the first and second back to back.
    - Add other part back in
  - Ok everyone. I know part 2 has their brains on today because they just did something hard. See if you can sing what I sing.
    - Sing the end, repeat after me.
  - Can you do it from the beginning???
- **Al Shlosha – Allison**
- **Bring me a Rose**
  - Solfege opening line – what did I just solfege?
    - Your turn
  - Sing from the beginning
  - Guess what?! There are more verses
    - Smile words (board)
- **Wind on the Hill**
  - Katie start singing, stop before the first goes.
    - Can you remember what comes next? Sing the “goes” with me.
  - Do you remember the words to this first part? Sing the whole section with me.
  - What about the B section.... Do you remember the words?
    - Help if needed (repeat after me)
  - Sing all the way through, ABA, repeat.
    - Dudes. That was an entire song. Score!
- **GAME - Landlord**
- **Heaven Bell-A-Ring**
  - Solfege random patterns



- End up with the first line
  - *S l s f m r d d*
  - *D s d d m r m d*
- Split group into two.
  - One side remember all of the first pattern
  - One side remember all of the second.
  - Sing back to back.
- This is a new song. You know what's funny?? It's a Christmas song! It's only September!
- Here are the words – stay with sides. One side remember one part, the other side, the other part.
- We sing the same set of words twice, right? Are the notes the same? No. But they're not hard. Solfege them with me.
- Put it together with words until the end of first phrase.
- **Cooroo, Cooroo**
  - Sing through, Allison on second part.
- **Zinyama Redu**

**Focus:**

*concepts and skills to emphasize*

Articulation  
Beat  
Dynamics  
Form (Repetition, Variation, Contrast)  
Genre/Style  
Harmony  
Key  
Composing  
Melody  
Describing  
Meter  
Improvising  
Phrase  
Listening  
Pitch  
Moving  
Rhythm  
Playing  
Texture  
Reading Music  
Timbre  
Singing

**National Music**

**Standard(s) Achieved:**

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OCC Plan – 10/21/13

- Rhythm Cards - stations
- **Warmups**
  - Stretch
  - Doo (C5)
- **America the Beautiful – Erin**
- **I Heard A Bird Sing – NEW—Allison**
- **Sit Down, Lord**
  - Run it from beginning to end
  - Incorporate gestures to suggest beautiful sound
- **English Song of Joy**
  - Sing through once with music
  - Put music away
  - Sing through from memory
  - You sing, I sing harmony on p. 9
  - Can you sing harmony? (What I sang?)
- **Big Fat Biscuit \*\*NEW**
  - 3 beanie babies
  - hallway?
  - Outside front walkway?
- **Heaven Bell-A-Ring**
  - Katie sing “Oh Christmas....”
    - What comes next? “and a heaven bell-a ring”
    - Practice children’s refrain
- **Wind on the Hill**
  - Sing through – beautiful sound
- **Al Shlosa – Allison**
- **Tue, Tue**
  - Sing through
  - Page 6 – harmony
- **Zinyama Redu**

**Focus:**

*concepts and skills to emphasize*

Articulation  
Beat  
Dynamics  
Form (Repetition, Variation, Contrast)  
Genre/Style  
Harmony  
Key  
Composing  
Melody  
Describing  
Meter  
Improvising  
Phrase  
Listening  
Pitch  
Moving  
Rhythm  
Playing  
Texture  
Reading Music  
Timbre  
Singing

**National Music**

**Standard(s) Achieved:**

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OCC Plan – 11/12/13

- **Warmups** -quickly
- **Sit Down, Lord**
  - Sing through, no stops
- **I Heard a Bird Sing** – Allison
  - Katie lead one section during round
  - Sing through each section and discuss how we’re putting it together
    - Unision, round, unison “loo”
- **Al Shlosa** – Allison
  - Work main melody – put text with opening melody
- **Bring Me a Rose**
  - Sing through, no stops
- **Tue, Tue**
  - Allison help with harmony (stand in circle)
  - Review harmony from last week
    - (p.5 – p.7)
  - new harmony for both parts
    - (p.8-end)
- **Landlord**
  - Double circle
  - Outside move to the right, find new partner
- **Coffee** (in circle)
- **Cooroo** (in circle)
  - listen for blend – can you hear other parts?
- **Zinyama Redu** – (if there’s time)
- **English Song of Joy** (back in seats)
  - Sing through – no music
- **Heaven Bell-A-Ring**
  - Assign groups (write groups on board while kids are in the circle)
  - See if they can sing through without stopping
  - \*\*2 groups per verse, just those 2 sing the whole verse\*\*
- **Wind on the Hill**
  - Sing through
- **SoLaMi (ext)**
  - experiment

**Focus:**

*concepts and skills to emphasize*

Articulation  
Beat  
Dynamics  
Form (Repetition, Variation, Contrast)  
Genre/Style  
Harmony  
Key  
Composing  
Melody  
Describing  
Meter  
Improvising  
Phrase  
Listening  
Pitch  
Moving  
Rhythm  
Playing  
Texture  
Reading Music  
Timbre  
Singing

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OCC Plan – 1/27/14 (rehearsal 1, Spring semester)

- **Rhythm cards**
  - By rows, by individuals, by group (depending on new students)
- **Warm-ups**
  - stretch
  - “doo” on C5, descending 5 tone scale
  - roller coaster
- **Old Abram Brown**
  - I’m going to sing you something (first phrase only) – can you raise your hand the first time I change notes?
    - What word is that?
    - Check yourself
      - Is it a step or a skip away?
  - What part is going to be hardest?
    - Octave jump from *him* to *more*
  - I sing next phrase
    - What color coat?
    - Can you sing it with me?
- **Fudge – NEW GAME – Allison**
- **Boats Sail on the Rivers - \*with score\* - explain staff and draw on board**
  - Stop/start part 1 (p. 3-4)
    - Can you sing that with me?
  - Stop/start part 1 (p. 4-5)
    - Can you sing that with me?
- **I Can Make the Difference (Dr. Paney)**
- **Zinyama Redu – game**
- **Solfege practice (Allison?)**
  - Repeat after me
    - Use pentatonic scale
  - Solfege first phrase of Sally Gardens
- **Sally Gardens – Allison**
- **SoLaMi**

Ext:

- **I'm Goin' Home on a Cloud**
  - I sing
  - You sing with me

## APPENDIX 3

The following is a list of the repertoire for the 2013 Oxford Children's Chorus's Winter Concert (divided by voicing) and the singing games used during the 2013 fall semester.

### **Rounds**

*Coffee*

*I Heard a Bird Sing*

### **Unison**

*America the Beautiful*

*Bring Me a Rose in the Wintertime*

*Wind on the Hill*

*English Song of Joy* (written 2 part, performed unison)\*

### **Two-part**

*Tue, Tue\**

*Cooroo, Cooroo\**

*Al Shlosa D'varim\**

*Sit Down, Lord!\**

### **Singing Games**

*Zinyama Redu*

*Landlord*

*Big Fat Biscuit*

*Ida Red, Ida Blue*

The selections in the list above marked with an asterisk (\*) denotes that the children had a physical copy of music.

APPENDIX 4



**Winter Concert**  
**Tuesday, December 10, 2013**

America the Beautiful

Samuel A. Ward

Zinyama Redu

African folk song

Tue, Tue

arr. Sonja and Berta Poorman

English Song of Joy

King Henry VIII, arr. Patrick M. Liebergen

Coffee

Karl Gottlieb Herring

Wind on the Hill

Victoria Ebel-Sabo

Cooroo, Cooroo

Steven Kuperschmid

I Heard a Bird Sing

Cyndee Giebler

Bring Me a Rose

Ernie Sheldon

Al Shlosa D'Varim

Allan E. Naplan

*Charlie Hetzer, Cecile Roberts, Janelle Minor, soloists*

Sit Down, Lord!

Spiritual, arr. Douglas E. Wagner

Oxford Children's Chorus Director: Dr. Andy Paney

2013-2014 Guest Director: Katie Shuford

Assistant Directors: Allison Stewart and Erin Saunders

Instrumentalists:

Thomas Ardrey, percussion

Donnie Mcgee, flute

Addison Murphree, oboe

### **The Singers:**

Jalyn Barr

Janelle Minor

Haley Caulder

Riley Mullen

Kylie Caver

Cecile Roberts

Reagan Davis

Jenna Rowland

Lynlee Ewing

Michael Scruggs

Benjamin Hale

Collin Surbeck

Charlie Hetzer

Kathleen Thigpen

Hannah Ivey

Sarah Williams

Andie McMillan

Mhari Wilson



APPENDIX 5

# Oxford Children's Chorus

## Audition Form 2011<sup>1</sup>

Name \_\_\_\_\_ M\_ F\_ Age \_\_\_

Birthday \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_ Shirt size (adult sizes) \_S \_M \_L \_XL \_XXL

Parents or Guardian \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

**IMPORTANT: Most communication will be by email.**

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Alternate phone \_\_\_\_\_  
                          \_\_cell \_\_home \_\_work                            \_\_cell \_\_home \_\_work

School this year \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Are you in choir at school?           Y or N

Are you in choir at church?        Y or N

Are you in band or orchestra?       Y or N Instrument: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you taken private voice or instrument lessons?    Y or N

Private voice teacher's name \_\_\_\_\_ years of lessons \_\_\_

Private instrumental teacher's name \_\_\_\_\_ years of lessons \_\_\_

What other major activities are you involved in? (school, church, sports, clubs)

---

How did you learn about the OCC?

As a member of the Oxford Children's Chorus, I agree to make singing in the choir a high priority and to remain a member for the entire season (January through May):

\_\_\_\_\_  
Singer's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

<sup>1</sup> Courtesy of Dr. Andrew Paney, OCC Director

**(For directors' use only)** Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: 2

Audition date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Range:** f g a b c d e f g a b **mc** d' e' f' g' a' b' **c''** d'' e'' f'' g'' a'' b'' c'''

**Are you sleeping (in F)**

Unison: 1 2 3 4 5

Canon: 1 2 3 4 5

Quality:	Fl.	Tr	In tonation:	pr	gd	Volume:	soft	loud
	1 2 3 4 5			1 2 3 4 5			1 2 3 4 5	

**Solfège echo (in F)**

GROUP (Kant)

1. L H  
1 2 3 4 5  
  
s m s s m

2. L H  
1 2 3 4 5  
  
s l s s m

3. L H  
1 2 3 4 5  
  
s s m r r d

INDIVIDUAL

4. L H  
1 2 3 4 5  
  
s s m d r d

5. L H  
1 2 3 4 5  
  
s d s f m

6. L H  
1 2 3 4 5  
  
d m s m d

INDIVIDUAL

7. L H  
1 2 3 4 5  
  
l d m d l

8. L H  
1 2 3 4 5  
  
s d f r

9. L H  
1 2 3 4 5  
  
Bb Eb F Eb Bb

**Sight reading**

- Pattern 1 1 2 3 4 5
- Pattern 2 1 2 3 4 5
- Pattern 3 1 2 3 4 5
- Pattern 4 1 2 3 4 5

**Part singing 1 2 3 4 5**

Clear	Throaty	Heavy	Dark	Chest	Light
Bright	Soloist	Changing	Wide	Resonant	Relaxed upper
Strong	Breathy	Nasal	Weak	Hoarse	range

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Boys only:

Unchanged voice

Changing

Settled

Can adjust vocal register on request 1 2 3 4 5

Auditioner's Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>2</sup> From <http://smile.amazon.com/Creating-Artistry-Through-Choral-Excellence/dp/142343711X>

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