

**Building Culture and Community in Gender-Specific Choral Ensembles: A
Comparison of Pedagogy, Language, Musical and Personal Development**

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Abstract

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Conductors agree that each choral ensemble has a unique “personality,” that is, an energy and atmosphere in the rehearsal room, which affects greatly the rehearsal process, and methodology used. This is especially true in gender-specific choirs. Gender-specific choirs have long been an important building block in any choral curriculum. Working with gender-specific choirs, while often a challenge for teachers, offers a unique opportunity to explore pedagogy and allows the teacher to develop a variety of teaching styles and techniques best suited for each type of ensemble.

How the public-school music educator approaches these gender-specific choirs, chooses repertoire, creates team building activities, and fosters relationships between these students, can make a significant difference in the musical and personal development of the students. As such, this study will venture beyond study of specific rehearsal pedagogy into the areas of nurturing and development of student attitudes.

By far the majority of choral resources dedicated to rehearsal technique are focused toward a mixed choir ensemble, that is, SATB. Given compelling anecdotal evidence that indeed rehearsal pedagogy varies distinctly between mixed and gender-specific ensembles, this study will add much needed research and methodology in the area of teaching for gender-specific choirs in public schools. To be fair, there are numerous writings which focus on various types of choirs in private youth choral organizations. Given that private organizations tend to reflect a different demographic than public schools, the challenges of teaching in that situation are quite different for numerous reasons. Therefore, I decided to focus this study on public-school settings.

This study will focus on four master teachers who excel in teaching both mixed and gender-specific choirs. Through interview and video observation of the teacher, (and choir in the case of rehearsal footage), I will compile lists of teaching methodology, music skills acquisition, and interpersonal development. More importantly, I will define foundational pillars that clearly earmark differences between the ensemble that can lead to the development of future resources.

Introduction

In the spring of 2015, I spent a weekend at the University of North Texas attending the Cambiata Institute for Middle School Junior High. What drew me to this conference was the emphasis on gender-specific choirs. Along with hearing performances of outstanding single-gender middle school and junior high choirs, I attended sessions with administrators chosen to speak as they value strong choral music programs in their schools. In Texas, it became clear that it was commonplace to separate boys and girls in middle school and junior high choral classes. These separate choirs would join together

to perform mixed choir pieces at concerts. When asked how many of these students were going to continue singing in high school programs, the answer was 100% affirmative.

The students received such positive and exceptional learning experiences that they didn't want to miss out on what was to come in the high school. The students also shared that it didn't matter to them whether or not they were in a mixed choir or single gender choir once they got into the high school. Lastly, there were also presentations on sight-singing methods and materials and choral music specifically geared for this age group. It was clear that the separation of gender at this age was a successful recipe for developing positive attitudes toward singing, development of musicianship, and self-esteem.

Upon returning to my school, I began to search for resources that discuss rehearsal methods, musicianship training, team building, and self-esteem for gender-specific choirs. I found generous resources for vocal pedagogy of this age, but precious little regarding the other topics. It became clear at that time that I wanted to pursue a study that would provide a clear platform as to specific pedagogical differences, that is, pedagogy beyond vocal technique, but involving teaching methods, music skill-building, as well as intra and interpersonal development.

Conductors agree that each choral ensemble has a unique "personality," that is, an energy and atmosphere in the rehearsal room, which affects greatly the rehearsal process, and methodology used. This is especially true in gender-specific choirs. Gender-specific choirs have long been an important building block in any choral curriculum. These choirs are traditionally labeled as Men's or Women's Glee Club, Women's Chorus, Men's Chorus and the like. Today, gender-specific choirs reflect the changing culture of sensitivity to gender, in particular, transgender individuals. It is not uncommon now to

find a fluid representation of gender presentation in every ensemble. This has resulted in re-naming of these choirs toward more gender-neutral names such as Treble Choir, referring to high voices; or Bass Choir, referring to low voices, or merely Glee Club. Interestingly, regardless of name, gender distribution, and other variables, the general spirit and atmosphere of these ensembles. Thus, for the purposes of this document I have chosen to use the traditional idea of gender-specific, (treble vs. bass), definitions of these ensembles. Much of the research, even recent studies utilize language that in today's culture might be seen as insensitive or narrow. Any specific reference to "girls" and "boys," can be interpreted as both gender as well as voice type.

Working with gender-specific choirs, while often a challenge for teachers, offers a unique opportunity to explore pedagogy and allows the teacher to develop a variety of teaching styles and techniques best suited for each type. "Girls and boys behave differently because their brains are wired differently." (Sax, 2005) In this study, Sax encourages teachers to take advantage of those differences and discover ways that will enhance the learning of the students. "I suggest that the solution is first, to recognize the differences in how girls and boys develop, and second, to embrace gender-separate educational and sports activities for both." (Sax, 2005) This study will further research and address areas of pedagogy that have yet to be explored fully.

How the music educator approaches these gender-specific choirs, chooses repertoire, creates team building activities, and fosters relationships between these students, can make a significant difference in the musical and personal development of the students. It is well-understood in music education that music teachers are responsible not only for creating excellent performing ensembles and teaching musical and vocal

skills, but also, personal and interpersonal skills. We often talk at conventions that we are in the “people building business.” As such, this study will venture beyond study of specific rehearsal pedagogy into the areas of nurturing and development of student attitudes.

A study by Gleason (Gleason 1992-1993) investigated high school students’ attitudes toward their choral experience and the relationship of performance and singer attitudes scores. The study showed that the performance ratings of choirs (as related by three judges) was strongly related to the size of the choirs. The majority of these choirs are mixed ensembles, further leading to the argument of maintaining developmental, gender-specific choirs into high school.

Research on motivation in music has focused primarily on three areas of investigation: the relationship between attitudes about music and self-esteem, the self-concept of ability, and attributions to success and failure (Thomas, 1992). This study will demonstrate how gender-specific choirs can encourage positive outcomes in these areas.

Process of Study

This study will combine interviews with music educators, data collection in the form of an online survey, and detailed review of rehearsals recordings. I have selected four music educators who have demonstrated success at teaching gender-specific choirs as well as mixed choirs. Two music educators are high school level, and two are middle school/junior high. “Demonstrated success” is defined as: consistently achieving high ratings at contests and festivals; having performed and/or presented sessions at choral conferences; show significant success with retention and creating lifelong singers,

demonstrated by the numbers of students who have continued singing in their programs and beyond; and finally having demonstrated leadership in the choral community, and are well-respected by their peers.

These educators will be sent a questionnaire detailing their experiences germane to the study. Questions will collect information as to how each teacher views their teaching model, how gender-specific ensembles differ from mixed ensembles, and how all three types (treble, bass, and mixed) differ and are similar as to teaching method, mood and language used, motivational techniques, team building methods, and personal development.

Next, each teacher will be asked to video each of their choirs. Human Subjects protocol will be followed and FERPA permissions requested for all video. Each rehearsal will have two cameras present, one focused on the teacher, and the other focused on the choir to monitor group behavior and reaction.

Based on the information gathered, the teachers will be asked to fill out a second questionnaire, reflecting on the rehearsal, and responding to prompts based on the gathered information.

The concluding chapter will be a discussion comparing similarities and differences of themes observed in mixed and gender-specific choirs. Basic lists of specific methodologies for teaching music, creating classroom environment, interpersonal relationships, and language will be created. With specific differences identified, the paper will make strong recommendations for further study, primarily to encourage detailed methodology studies for gender-specific choirs which address the found differences.