

Teaching Philosophy

It has always been my belief that the primary goal of any educator is to prepare students for what comes next – whatever that may be. At the university level, the students who are a part of the choral ensembles are widely varied in their academic pursuits and career plans. As such, the job requires that one presents choral music in a way that inspires students to achieve at the highest level, and to provide them with skills which will translate well beyond the choral rehearsal.

Those students who are not pursuing music as a career, but who enroll in choral music ensembles, generally do so as a result of passion for music in addition to a previous positive experience in a choir. It has become common, in my estimation - and particularly at the secondary level, for conductors to assume that these non-music majors are primarily looking for “fun.” This is sometimes achieved by creating a looser atmosphere, or selecting repertoire that is believed to hold the broadest appeal. It is my humble opinion that this approach is a mistake. Instead, I believe that these students are looking for excellence, as is true in most areas of our life. Recently HBO produced a documentary about sports in America – asking why our culture was so passionate about sports. One of the major points was that, in sports, we can point to excellence and sometimes even to perfection (say, a perfect game in baseball). I believe that in music, just as in sports, it is the pursuit of perfection that drives people’s motivation. As such I believe the path to recruiting and retaining non-music majors is built on striving for success at the highest level possible.

Students who do not major in music therefore have are taught in the same manner as those music majors whom I would interact with on a more regular basis, both in the classroom as well as the rehearsal. One of my major areas of research at the University of Washington is the development of an andragogy for choral conducting. Whereas pedagogy refers to a dissemination of information in a teacher-directed learning situation, andragogy is a term which reflects a student-oriented approach which allows the learner to move from dependency to independency. The development of individual skills and empowerment of singers through one-to-one teaching allows students to develop not only as musicians, but as people. A pedagogy centered approach too often points out deficiencies in the product; e.g. correcting a choir by pointing out faults in technique or mistakes. Rather than pointing out what is wrong, a student-centered andragogy asks the question: “What is now possible?”

Thus, my teaching philosophy is focused on the individual students with whom I have the opportunity to work. I hope to create an atmosphere whereby providing the individual student the tools necessary to achieve success, we create ensembles who also achieve at the highest level. Those students who pursue conducting or music education as a career will then have an opportunity to disseminate these skills to future students and ensembles.