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BUILDING COMMUNITY, A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

BY ROBYN LANA

Every pack has a leader. That leader must be strong, focused, and nurturing, while setting clear expectations, since members of the pack will follow their leader and rely on them for teaching, finding nourishment, and safety. A safe environment is paramount. In a choir, the conductor is the leader and the singers are the pack. Because of this pack mentality, conductors often witness a fear in new singers entering an ensemble. It can be even more apparent when many members of the group have returned from the previous year and are already comfortable with each other. The new singer wonders, will the pack accept me? Will I ever become a part of them? Will they help me catch up?

Recently, a video appeared on social media showing a large herd of elk running. As they reached a well-traveled, straight, and open road, they met a barbed wire fence, which offered little challenge to the herd. The leader flew over the fence while cars stopped, one driver holding a video to capture the procession. Hundreds of elk cleared the fence with no resistance. One by one, sometimes several at a time, they leapt the barrier, moving toward pastures over the horizon. As the camera focused on this massive herd moving together, videographer and viewer alike began to notice a single animal—a bit smaller than many but not the smallest in the herd—unable to jump the barrier. The observers became fixated on the single elk. As more crossed, the animal began a frantic pace up and down the fence line, searching for a break in the wire. But there was none in sight. Fear and doubt were visible in the back and forth path.

Finally, the camera revealed success. With a decisive attempt, this last member of the herd cleared the hurdle. But focused solely on the fence, the camera had yet to document what met the elk on the other side of the road. The video was quite long and chronicled hundreds of animals. By the end of the video, the front of the herd must have been well over the next ridge, and it was impossible that the leader knew a member of his herd had almost been left behind. As the camera followed the final elk across the road, it was revealed that those bringing up the rear, though well off in the distance, were standing and waiting for this smaller, weaker member. Even when those in the lead could not see, members of the herd continued to look out for each other. Those bringing up the end of the impressive parade of elk refused to abandon even one member.

How can we, as educators, develop an atmosphere and culture in our programs in which the weak are not left behind, but instead encouraged, nurtured, and gathered into the fold? The atmosphere of the rehearsal classroom may be the single most important aspect of success for a choir. Without it, artistry and passion for text, harmonic structure, melody, and form cannot develop.

CREATING A CULTURE OF SAFETY

Youth thrive when goals and expectations are high, clear, and attainable. In *Mentoring in the Ensemble Arts*,¹ Tim Sharp discusses leadership qualities from James Collins. “Leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into a larger goal of building a great organization.” Taking this idea a step further within the classroom, setting the conductor’s ego aside enables the focus to be properly placed on fostering a positive environment and realizing the needs of the singers while demonstrating an accepting, encouraging, and nurturing culture. Such an environment will enable a future of excellence and artistry.

In early years with a choir, the goals and expectations are the vision of the founder of the program. To achieve such a vision, it must become an integral part of the entire program, that which drives all projects and programming. (See CINCINNATI CHILDREN’S CHOIR CORE VALUES in APPENDIX B.) Humans strive for excellence and acceptance. Therefore, when

WARM-UPS

BY JOSHUA PEDDE

Warm-ups: the beginning of your rehearsal and the first sounds produced by your choir. When you think about how important these moments are, warm-ups become a very important part of the rehearsal in which directors and teachers set the mood of the rest of the rehearsal, work on tone, introduce new concepts, and so much more. When I was still a student and working with the Indianapolis Children's Choir, I was told by one of the directors that doing warm-ups was one of the most important parts of the rehearsal. Wow! Many people would not view the first minutes of rehearsal as the most exciting or influential, but hearing that made me stop and think. It changed my outlook on warm-ups and the attention that I needed to give to them.

So, why put so much time into warm-ups? First, the time devoted to warm-ups helps our singers to find focus and their "inner singer," as James Jordan said, or the "singer's spirit," as Weston Noble refers to it. It helps them leave behind the baggage of the day and prepare to create beautiful music. Second, it prepares the body/instrument for singing. Just as any athlete stretches and warms up before undertaking significant training or playing a game, we need to prepare our bodies for what is about to happen. Third, we teach healthy vocal technique during this time. Yes, we also teach through the music we rehearse and perform. However, here is a place in which to specifically focus on a technique your singers will use later. You are preparing the ensemble for what is about to happen! Fourth, you can build skills as an ensemble, including listening, tone, improvisation, and theory. And finally,

you use this time to set the tone of the rehearsal. It allows you to build a safe environment in which your singers will feel comfortable singing and receiving feedback.

Before the choir ever sings a note, you must know what sound you are expecting them to create. I relate this to going on a road trip. Before you set out on the trip, you normally know your destination and how to get there. The same can be said for warm-ups. I am often asked about the sound of the choirs I work with and how it can be recreated. I tell them to do a lot of listening. Listen to groups that you respect and then practice how to recreate that sound in a healthy manner for yourself. In this digital age of Facebook and YouTube, you can easily listen to choirs from around the world and find vocal models to share, both good and bad. By listening, you will begin to refine the sound you want and how it can be recreated.

AREAS OF FOCUS

We have established why it is important to devote time to warm-ups. Now it is time to talk about *what* to do during warm-ups. I am not going to give you specific exercises, but instead look at how to use warm-ups to create the best choral tone and an engaging, safe, and inclusive rehearsal environment.

First, no matter what tone you are trying to achieve, there are certain elements that must be present in everything you do. They are the following:

- Breath support
- Placement
- Intonation
- Resonance
- Vowel shapes
- Rhythmic unity
- Vocal expression
- Facial expression

Using a puppet with arms and hands that can be controlled by the adult, a melody can be introduced by the teacher. While the teacher sings, the puppet demonstrates the following movements:



1

"The wise old owl sat in an oak"



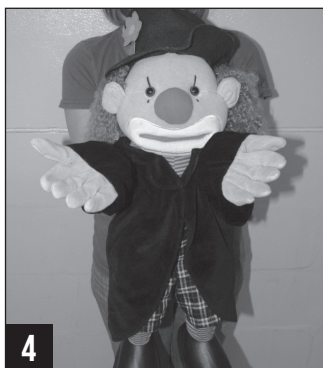
2

"The more he heard"



3

"The less he spoke."



4

"Why aren't we all like that wise old bird?
Why aren't we more like the bird?"

The children then imitate the movements while the teacher sings again. Having heard the tune twice and mirrored motions that reflect the poetry, most elementary children will be able to sing the melody correctly. Younger children or children not accustomed to such activities may benefit from practice echoing phrases and movements beforehand.