

# Inside the Elementary School Chorus

**Instructional Techniques for the  
Non-Select Children's Chorus**

*Patricia Bourne*

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# The General Music Teacher as Children's Choir Director

We music educators tend to identify ourselves by what we do. It's a curious thing. I rarely hear secondary educators refer to themselves as music teachers; rather, they usually describe their occupation more specifically: "I'm a band director." "I teach orchestra." Secondary choral directors are heard saying, "I'm the choir director at the local high school." In contrast, elementary teachers normally respond, "I teach music," when asked by others what they do. Why is this a significant point? We tend to practice what we perceive as significant to our professional identities.

Normally, elementary music teachers see themselves as generalists rather than specialists. They typically see each child in their school and over time bear witness to their growth and maturity as people and as music makers. Elementary general music teachers engage students in moving, singing, playing instruments, and creating and improvising music. They teach children to listen attentively and responsively. They show musical instruments, and share songs and dances of the world.

Within the elementary music classroom, students grow in confidence, skill, and awareness of themselves as music participants. This is where the seeds of expanded, enhanced, and continued music involvement are planted. During general music lessons, students begin to apply those qualities seen, heard, and experienced by members of music-making communities, like choral ensembles.

According to Gregoryk, the general music classroom provides an environment that leads students toward engagement in choral activities. These include:

- Applying the ability and response to conducting gesture
- Developing a mental concept of good choral tone
- Learning to work with others to produce a blended sound
- Attending to diction and uniformity of vowels
- Singing and listening to a wide range of vocal styles and genres
- Developing music reading skills<sup>1</sup>

These facets of choral music are blended into the myriad of other skills generalists include as the norm in general music. (The reader will recognize many of these skills when viewing the first chapter of the DVD.)

Although general music teachers might employ skills akin to choral experiences, we differ from secondary music instructors in our perceptions, patterns, and progress with students. We refer to our students in classroom groups, not ensembles. We organize lessons based on grade levels and developmental preparedness rather than ensemble repertoire and literature. Different from the secondary conductor, our students come to our general music classes as part of a given routine, not by choice. We are their music teachers first and, if offered within the school setting, their ensemble director a distant second.

## **The Public School-Based Chorus**

The school's general music teacher normally directs choral ensembles offered in an elementary school as an extension of her regular position. There are many reasons why chorus is offered at some schools but not available to students at others. The following reasons for the inclusion or additional of chorus into the fabric of one's school setting were consistently revealed in discussions with several elementary music teacher friends:

- The music educator's own desire and intent to establish a choral ensemble that meets beyond the full-time teaching assignment.
- A school's tradition; that is, a pre-existing group is part of the culture and content of the music teacher's job expectations.
- The community surrounding the school strongly suggests the creation of a choral group (e.g., "The school

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Gregoryk, "Choral Music Education Begins in the Classroom," *Choral Journal* 46, no. 10 (April 2006): 32.

three miles from here has a chorus for their older students. Why don't we?"

- A specific event (festival, choral invitational, etc.) promotes the addition of a short-term ensemble to meet outside of the general music classroom.
- The general music position is not full-time and in order to achieve that employment level, the teacher may elect to offer chorus during the day for a specific population of students.

Regardless of which factor applies, elementary music teachers who elect to offer a choral ensemble are accepting a shift in their identity. Coordinating and conducting choral activities alters those routines normally executed by the general music specialist. While "good teaching" is the expectation for both, conducting a choral ensemble of public school students calls for knowledge and skills related to the performing art of choral music above and beyond the multifaceted instructional processes applied in general music.

Swears indicated that effective elementary school choral directors exhibit the following skills and qualities:

- An understanding and ability to interpret music notation accurately and expressively
- An understanding of vocal production and techniques
- Has specific knowledge of the qualities and limitations of the child voice
- Conducts with clarity and expressiveness
- Possesses adequate organizational skill for planning and implementing a choral program<sup>2</sup>

Swears continued, indicating that the musical knowledge and skills are most effectively shared with children when the choral director "likes children" and believes the additional time with them is worthwhile and important. Possessing a healthy sense of humor and confidence in one's own musicianship is also a plus. Finally, Swears indicated that effective children's choir directors "exhibit warmth and acceptance" toward students and recognize both the limitations and possibilities of the ensemble.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Swears, *Teaching the Elementary School Chorus* (West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing, 1985) 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

McRae wrote that directors should “expect the best of children, as it bestows a dignity upon them that other generations have not always done.”<sup>4</sup> Expecting the best of students accompanies high expectations for their teachers and directors. Children tend to rise to the standard held before them; it’s the teacher/director’s job to not shortchange the choral experience by giving it the same status as a “group of kids who get together and sing.”

## Defining the Public School Children’s Chorus

Describing oneself as a children’s choir director goes beyond putting large groups of children together for a one-time singing engagement. That reflects the identity of a general music teacher who is preparing for a school assembly or program performance with multiple classrooms involved.

For the purpose of clarification, in this text, the elementary school children’s chorus is described as an ensemble of singers who attend consistent and scheduled rehearsals comprised of members who choose to be a part of an ensemble that rehearses music varied in genre. The repertoire selected is carefully chosen by an informed director and is appropriate for the vocal development of young musicians meeting beyond the general music classroom. The chorus, as defined in this text, includes a director who brings vocal and musical skills to the group and selects material that has the capacity to ignite both enjoyment and educational value to her students.

The successful children’s choir director within a public school knows how to invite children into a different kind of learning environment—an environment of high-stakes self-management, anticipated vocal involvement, and improved acuity, along with a sense of belonging to and connecting with peers in a unique and positive setting. The children’s choir director in an elementary school spends personal and professional time investigating repertoire, selecting venues for performance, communicating with a wide array of constituents, structuring rehearsals, and promoting the ensemble as an artistic extension of the overall music program in her school.

In addition, the leader of an elementary school chorus seeks to provide an environment that is both enriching and

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<sup>4</sup> Shirley W. McRae, *Directing the Children’s Choir: A Comprehensive Resource* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1991) 11.

# About the Author



Patricia Bourne teaches K–6 general music, 5th/6th-grade chorus, and a 6th-grade marimba ensemble at Canyon Creek Elementary in Bothell, Washington. Prior to this, she was Coordinator of Music Education at Central Washington University, in Ellensburg, WA. A veteran music educator of 28 years, Patty is active as a workshop presenter, guest conductor, and secondary vocal adjudicator. This is Patty's second book published with Heritage Music Press.

Patty received the Bachelor of Music Education from Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky, followed four years later with a Master of Music Education degree from the University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK. In 1990, she completed the Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) from Arizona State University, in Tempe, AZ.

Beyond her fulltime teaching position, Patty contributes editorials, articles, and lessons for *Activate!*, a general music education magazine published by Heritage Music Press. She is a featured clinician with JW Pepper, presenting workshops and leading choral reading sessions at conferences throughout the country. During the summer, Patty maintains an active schedule as presenter and teacher for the World Music Drumming workshops.

Patty, her husband, Tom, and daughters Katherine and Julie reside in Bothell, Washington.

# DVD Contents

## ***Classroom Techniques***

Active Engagement  
Posture/Breath Support  
Pitch Matching  
Music Reading Skills  
Articulation, Resonance, Clarity of Text  
Conducting Gesture, Expressive Singing  
Interpretation of Repertoire

## ***Choral Rehearsal***

Establish Routines & Warm-ups  
Articulation, Intonation, Tone  
Rhythm, Meter, Form, Pitch, Style

## ***Performance***

Pre-Concert Warm Up  
*Hava Na Shira*  
*Ayelevi*  
*The Journey*, by Joseph M. Martin  
*Watu Wote (All the People)*, by Sally Albrecht and  
Jay Althouse  
*Gloria*, by David Giardinieri  
*Children, Go Where I Send Thee*, arr. by Ruth Elaine Schram  
*Christmas Is Coming and We Are Getting Fat*,  
by Dave and Jean Perry