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This article is the first in a year-long series by Elizabeth Jensen Shepley which will concentrate on the musical training of children in the upper elementary and middle school grades.

En route to Musical Excellence

Part I

by Elizabeth Jensen Shepley

Young people need high quality musical experiences. They have been born with the capacity not only to respond to but to produce music expressively. Moreover, they derive tremendous emotional and intellectual benefit from opportunities to sing and to become musically literate.

This series is designed to help you enhance the excitement and quality of upper elementary and middle school choirs. The concepts set forth in these articles are readily adaptable for use with choristers of varying experience and ability, regardless of the uniqueness or constraints of individual programs, age groupings or length of rehearsal time.

It is best to focus on particular elements

and specific skills. Only introduce that material which can be taught sensitively and well. Avoid the teacher's typical dilemma of too many commitments, too many concepts, and too little time.

Orff-Schulwerk and the Kodály Concept provide convenient methodologies for your work; however, vary this material as needed or desired. As you teach musical concepts, remember that the human voice is the primary instrument and deserves careful thought and attention. Its uniqueness is soon outgrown, for at no other time will it possess such compelling warmth and clarity of tone. It is capable of tremendous versatility unlike any other instrument.

The following pieces represent a variety of musical experiences and challenge the developing vocal instrument. They will be used as resources during the course of the year. All are worthy to consider for your choir's repertory.

Jubilate Deo. Michael Praetorius. B & H OCUB6350

I Sing a Song of the Saints of God. David Herman. CGA-446

Let All Things Now Living. arr. K. K. Davis. E.C. Schirmer 1819

Creator of the Stars of Night. arr. John Ferguson. CGA-474

Then Will I Jehovah's Praise. George F. Handel. CGA-220

A Prayer of St. Richard of Chichester. L. J. White. Oxford E43

We Know That Christ Is Raised. Ronald A. Nelson. Augsburg 11-0318

Rejoice Oh My Spirit. J. S. Bach. G. Schirmer 10319

For the Beauty of the Earth. Hopson. Augsburg 11-2062

In approaching the new choir year, thorough organization is a prime requisite. When the initial

groundwork is laid, including selecting music, setting a schedule, advertising the program and enlisting people to help with attendance, snacks, music library and the like, focus all your thoughts and energies on preparing for the children's total learning experience.

The total learning experience will include providing an emotionally safe environment in which students are free to exchange ideas, are free to be curious, and are free to take on the responsibility of their own discoveries.

Hermann Regner summarizes Carl Orff's idea of an effective teacher as "an artistic being with good taste; sensitive, spontaneous and responsive. As a teacher one must pay

close attention to observing children. [She/he] has both the quick and vocal children in mind as well as the slower and quieter ones. [She/he] is protective, can stay in the background when necessary and lead the children to warm associations with partners, with instruments, and with music itself."¹

Create opportunities for students to take part in the learning process. When tempted to dictate to students what they should do and how to do it, you place them in the role of vessels to fill and do not allow them to take an active role in their own education. Blend your own expertise and experience with the talents and energies of the students, thereby accelerating the learning process. Students deserve respect for their intelligence and their innate desire to be proud of individual discoveries and accomplishments.

Young people are eager to relate their own ideas about music. Let them, and quickly learn that they have worthwhile things to say. As you listen, something important happens: they take genuine ownership in the music they create. They *want* the music to carry their own sense of beauty and you have only to help them with it. The result is that you make musical decisions together, based on your past successes.

Observe the language you typically use with students. Which words and phrases evoke the most productive response from the choir members? Leon Thurman elaborates, "Many times words which have the opposite meaning, such as 'good' (vs. 'bad') will elicit a fear that the next time the verdict will be 'bad,' or an obsession with avoiding the judgement 'bad.' So even the word 'good' will elicit unpleasant kinesthesia in some people. Related expressions are 'right/wrong,' 'worse/better,' 'correct/incorrect,' and 'proper/improper.'"²

Rather than using language such as "try . . .," "work harder . . .," employ alternative language which might encourage a healthy, positive response: "let's experiment . . .," "notice whether or not . . .," "I wonder how soon you will . . .," "observe/focus on . . .," "imagine . . .". Develop and extend your own list of stimulating, encouraging, thought-provoking phrases which will be invaluable as you proceed through the year.

This sets the stage for your exploration. Take this month to establish your organization as outlined above. Look toward discovering next how to provide an atmosphere in which children will be nurtured and empowered. Beginning in the next issue of the LETTERS, we will examine how to create solid concepts in the development of musical artistry.

¹ Frazee, Jane. *Discovering Orff*. New York: Schott Music Corporation 1987.

² Thurman, Leon. *Body, Mind and Voice: Foundation of Voice Education*. The VoiceCare Network: Riverside Park Plaza, Suite 7; 701 25th Avenue South, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55454.

Recommended additional reading:

Bartle, Jean Ashworth. *Lifeline for Children's Choir Directors*. Toronto, Canada: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1988.

Chosky, Lois. *The Kodály Context*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1981.

Kemp, Helen. *Of Primary Importance*. Garland, Texas: Choristers Guild, 1989.

Rao, Doreen. *The Young Singing Voice*. Choral Music Experience . . . Education through Artistry, vol. 5. Farmingdale, New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1987.

COMING NEXT MONTH

**The Rehearsal
Warm Up:
Essential Basics
for Building a
Successful Choir**