Choir as Community:
An Inclusive, Anti-Racist High School Choral Curriculum

Mahima Kumara
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

Abstract:

Choral music education has immense potential to benefit students, both musically and extra-musically. Choirs can create strong, meaningful communities, and especially with their capacity for public performance, can provide unique spaces for pedagogy that promotes social engagement. However, most choral education programs in the United States today do not fulfill this potential. Instead, many school choirs focus primarily on performing the music of white, male composers and Western, Christian traditions. They also tend to rehearse music without discussing in depth the social and historical context of both the repertoire and the ensembles themselves. These practices diminish the power of ensembles to foster truly inclusive community and social engagement, and can lead to the alienation of students of color and students from non-Christian religious traditions. In the following capstone project, I design a novel curriculum for high school choirs, aiming to disrupt this pattern. The proposed curriculum draws on theories of culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy to promote the inclusion of all students and to catalyze social action.

Suggested Citation: Kumara, M. (2020). Choir as Community: An Inclusive, Anti-Racist High School Choral Curriculum (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.

This capstone is a work of Yale student research. The arguments and research in the project are those of the individual student. They are not endorsed by Yale, nor are they official university positions or statements.
Choir as Community:
An Inclusive, Anti-Racist High School Choral Curriculum

Mahima Kumara

A Senior Capstone Project in Education Studies
Yale University
May 1, 2020
Abstract

Choral music education has immense potential to benefit students, both musically and extra-musically. Choirs can create strong, meaningful communities, and especially with their capacity for public performance, can provide unique spaces for pedagogy that promotes social engagement. However, most choral education programs in the United States today do not fulfill this potential. Instead, many school choirs focus primarily on performing the music of white, male composers and Western, Christian traditions. They also tend to rehearse music without discussing in depth the social and historical context of both the repertoire and the ensembles themselves. These practices diminish the power of ensembles to foster truly inclusive community and social engagement, and can lead to the alienation of students of color and students from non-Christian religious traditions. In the following capstone project, I design a novel curriculum for high school choirs, aiming to disrupt this pattern. The proposed curriculum draws on theories of culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy to promote the inclusion of all students and to catalyze social action.
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my primary advisor, Anne Mishkind, for helping to shape this project through a year of insightful suggestions and unbelievably supportive mentorship. I also want to thank Talya Zemach-Bersin for encouraging me to take on this topic last fall and guiding me through the research process; Prof. Richard Hersh, whose Education Studies class taught me so much about clear thinking and writing; and the Education Studies Class of 2020 for their inspiring ideas, invaluable feedback, and shared laughter throughout the year.

I am so grateful to be a part of musical communities that motivate me to pursue this work, and to have had wonderful mentors in music, starting with my own K-12 choir teachers. I especially want to thank Prof. Jeff Douma, for countless incredibly thoughtful discussions on choral music and music education, and for being willing to listen, always. I would also like to thank the Yale Glee Club, Stephanie Tubiolo, and the students of Morse Chorale, for showing me what a beautiful, inclusive community a choir can be. And to the rest of my music teachers, who I am so fortunate to know: Prof. Elizabeth Parisot, Prof. Richard Lalli, and Anush Avetisyan at Yale, and Dea Baba in State College -- thank you for convincing me to believe in my voice.

I am indescribably grateful to my family, who make everything I do possible. I want to thank my parents for their unwavering confidence in me through difficult moments, for their feedback on my ideas for this project, and for always encouraging me to pursue what I love. And finally, to my friends, who inspire me every day with their kindness and dedication: thank you for the pep talks, for being “first to help out, last to complain,” for the late-night writing sessions over Zoom, and for supporting me throughout this capstone process and throughout the last four years.
# Table of Contents

## Calling for a Change: Essay and Rationale  
5  
*Introduction*  
5  
*Current Landscape: An Overview of American Choral Education*  
11  
*Current Landscape: Critiques of Multiculturalism*  
13  
*The Goal: Culturally Responsive, Anti-Racist Pedagogy*  
17  
*A Focus on Choral Education: Benefits and Unique Potential for Social Action*  
20  
*Existing Practices for Social Action: Music Teacher Education vs. Community Ensembles*  
22  
*Conclusion: Designing a Novel High School Curriculum*  
26  

## Curriculum  
31  
*Overview*  
31  
*Part 1: Unit Frameworks*  
35  
*Unit 1: Introduction to Choral Singing*  
35  
*Unit 2: Community Engagement Through Music*  
38  
*Unit 3: Rethinking the “Masterworks Concert”*  
41  
*Unit 4: Student-Led Composition and Performance*  
43  
*Unit 5: Focus on Social and Historical Contexts*  
46  
*Part 2: Sample Lesson Plans*  
48  
*Unit 1: Introduction to Choral Singing*  
48  
*Unit 2: Community Engagement Through Music*  
51  
*Unit 3: Rethinking the “Masterworks Concert”*  
55  
*Unit 4: Student-Led Composition and Performance*  
60  
*Unit 5: Focus on Social and Historical Contexts*  
64  
*Appendix A: Selecting Repertoire*  
68  
*Appendix B: Additional Resources for Teachers*  
71  

## References  
72
Calling for a Change: Essay and Rationale

Introduction

For as long as I can remember, music has been integral to my life. Growing up in Central Pennsylvania, I joined my public school’s choir in fourth grade, and have not stopped singing in ensembles since. For the last four years, I sang in a university choir in which I observed that individual students’ perspectives were valued and repertoire choices from a variety of musical traditions, with a variety of meaningful messages, were approached with careful thought. In college, this finally allowed choral singing to become even more central to my musical passion and experience, and especially to my sense of community.

In middle and high school, I always looked forward to choir rehearsals – there was so much joy in the experience of singing in a group, and so much about music to be learned. However, I gradually became aware of a disparity between the promise of choral singing to build skills and inclusive communities and the true practices carried out in my classrooms. As an Indian-American, Hindu student in a majority-white, majority-Christian town and school district, I began to feel an uncomfortable dissonance with my school choirs. Even as I enjoyed singing in choirs in my own district and with various conductors in interschool festivals around the state, I registered acutely an almost exclusive focus on the music of white composers and Western classical-derived musical traditions. I had been learning piano and South Indian classical voice since before I started singing in choirs; I kept these dual traditions that I loved, two parts of myself, completely separate, and it was years before I realized that this did not have to be the case.

In school choirs, I also noticed an assumption that all students’ familiarity and comfort with the music being taught was equal. I remember feeling surprised the first time that sacred Christian music was sung in my middle school choirs, in a school environment that was
otherwise supposed to be secular, because there had been no explanation or rationale behind the inclusion of this music in our curriculum. And I remember feeling angry, but silenced, when a conductor at a district choral festival even urged us to believe in, to fearlessly proclaim, the messages of a Christian text we were singing -- implicitly assuming that all students would agree with those beliefs. Later, as I continued to sing and learned more about music history and choral traditions, I came to understand more clearly the role of sacred music in choirs and the musical value of these traditions, even for secular ensembles (and to absolutely love so much of this music). But as a seventh grader, being asked to sing sacred music with no explained context was jarring. Especially in elementary and middle schools where I’d noticed implicit biases and exclusionary comments by some teachers and students on the basis of religion, I didn’t know if choir was a space where I could belong.

In addition, when pieces from traditions outside of Western classical music (or other traditionally white, Western-derived traditions) were taught, teachers sometimes seemed to lack an understanding of demonstrating musical styles accurately. Almost universally, they also did not discuss in much detail the social and historical context of the repertoire (sometimes, not even discussing translations of non-English texts). And they did not usually address the implications -- whether empowering or problematic -- of majority-white groups performing this music. These issues were compounded by the fact that choral music classrooms generally consisted of a teacher standing in front of a group of students, dictating musical instructions, without much if any student input. Though I did not notice it expressly in middle and high school -- not imagining that there could be any other way to lead a choir -- I can now discern that this standard practice stifles discourse and silences students’ individual musical and life experiences, even as other fields have moved toward discussion-based pedagogies.
The approaches taken in my middle and high school choirs caused me to feel alienated -- and my experience is not unique.¹ American music education as a whole has traditionally relied on Eurocentric frameworks, as author Julia Shaw writes, and “since music is one of the most intimate expressions of identity, indeed, ‘the skin that we sing,’ then to reject a person’s music can only feel as though we are rejecting him.”² Whole traditions of singing and bodies of repertoire are often either overlooked or tokenized as different from a norm -- from jazz, spirituals, Native American music and other American traditions to those often separately designated as “world music.”³ Often, this is due to lack of experience with other traditions of music, rather than aversion; music teacher education programs have been slow to incorporate exposure to non-Western-classical repertoire, let alone practices of discussing and contextualizing this repertoire.⁴ Teacher education curricula also often perpetuate narrow ideas of what it means to be musically skilled, centered around Western classical norms, that spill over into K-12 classrooms where teachers alone dictate musical paradigms and guidelines.⁵ In parallel, K-12 education as a whole still tends to construct majoritarian historical and social narratives, that center whiteness and the experience of white students, that discuss racism as individual behavior and a relic of the past rather than as a structural issue requiring contemporary

students’ awareness and action. And this issue is made more pressing by the fact that almost 90% of music educators in the U.S. are white.

These structural challenges and educational approaches deny students agency in their own music-making. They prevent K-12 choirs from being truly inclusive communities, allowing for the alienation of students marginalized on racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and other lines. And they represent a missed opportunity to harness music education’s power to foster growth in student perspectives, and to enact social change.

We must reform the choral education system because it shapes students’ senses of belonging in musical spaces. It cyclically influences which students choose to pursue careers in music, furthering the lack of diversity in the music education field. In addition, choral music has the potential to build community, to foster strong peer and mentor relationships, and to develop skills for all students, regardless of their goals in music. But currently, many students are not being fully invited into this community, and are not able to fully engage with its benefits. And finally, K-12 education can and should help students gain a sociocultural knowledge about race and racism. It should guide students to an awareness of their own role and ability in disrupting the power structures they engage with on a daily basis, to enact social change. Because of the necessarily participatory and community-building nature of singing in a choir, choral education is a particularly productive field in which to apply such an anti-racist education. Choral music can be used to teach students, especially in majority-white schools, to decenter white narratives,

---

6 Shaw, “The Skin That We Sing.”
to understand structures of race and power as contemporary phenomena; but choral education as it stands today does not realize this potential.

In this capstone, I propose a high school choral curriculum that incorporates theories of anti-racist education and culturally responsive education to promote the inclusion of all students and to catalyze social action.

While many of the principles and methods of this curriculum can be adapted for most schools, it is most urgently needed in majority-white schools. By focusing on majority-white schools here, I counter the misconception that only schools with large populations of students of color require attention to race, culture, or racism within the classroom. In majority-white schools, as noted by Julia Bennett and Geraldine Lee-Treweek, an often prevailing sense is that “there is nothing to be racist about,” and that teacher training does not need to include much about race or anti-racism, resulting in race being addressed “only tangentially” in curricula. However, this can mask tensions. In one school, Bennett and Lee-Treweek observed overtly racist language used by students, perpetuated without challenge. At the same time, two black students who were interviewed revealed feeling put on the spot in discussions in which teachers seemed unequipped to discuss issues of race. In addition, while teachers at all schools tend to be mostly white, teachers at majority-white schools are even more likely to be white. Researchers have noted as well that an overwhelming majority of white school leaders are unaware of the

---

9 Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia G. Ramsey, “What if All the Children in My Class Are White? Anti-Bias/Multicultural Education with White Children,” *Young Children* 60, no. 6 (November 2005): 20-26.
manifestations of racism within their schools. Majority-white schools can more easily rely on silent, inaccurate notions of colorblindness, falsely assuming a homogeneous student body, in ways that schools with majority students of color cannot.

These worrying dynamics can be similarly perpetuated through music education in majority-white schools. Discourses of music as a “universal language” allow educators to avoid addressing cultural contexts of repertoire or the experiences of the few students of color in the classroom, or to avoid selecting repertoire outside a Western norm. If songs from other musical traditions are rehearsed, students may be singled out as representatives for a culture, or stereotypes and inaccuracies about those musical traditions may be perpetuated. These realities further the dangerous perception that in majority-white schools, educators can afford to ignore deeply discussing race, language, ethnicity, or culture simply because such questions seem less obvious. However, white students in majority-white schools must learn to understand their positionality in systems of power and must, all the more, learn to identify and counter racism.

The experience of these students, as well as the often alienating experience for students of color in majority-white schools and choral music contexts, must be addressed specifically. Majority-white schools require a targeted approach to anti-racist education and to culturally responsive education that is not often considered.

In the remainder of this essay, I will argue for the incorporation of culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy in choral education to promote inclusion and social action. I will first describe the current landscape of choral music education in the United States, including current, detrimental implementations of what is termed “multicultural” education. Then, I will discuss

---


13 Bradley, “Hidden in Plain Sight.”

theories of culturally responsive pedagogy and anti-racist pedagogy, and the applications of those theories to choral education. I will outline the benefits of choral music and the consequent unique abilities of a choral space to utilize anti-racist education to promote social action. I will analyze existing culturally responsive and anti-racist practices in choral education and examine a few model programs. Finally, I will outline goals for an ideal inclusive, social action-oriented high school choral curriculum.

Current Landscape: An Overview of American Choral Education

Choral programs are among the most commonly available music courses in U.S. high schools, with 65 percent of all high schools and 69 percent of public high schools offering choral music courses in the 2009-2010 school year. A 2017 report found as well that 89 percent of high schools that employed at least one music teacher had choirs. The availability of choral instruction does not significantly vary depending on the racial makeup of a school’s population or between rural and urban schools. Most schools do not align or synthesize choral education, or music education more broadly, with any other academic subjects, and only about half of high schools follow written curricula for music education at all.

Most high school choral music programs today focus heavily on standards of performance. As choral education developed in the United States throughout the 20th century, and an emphasis on standards and assessment emerged in the broader educational sphere, musical performance standards grew to hold even greater importance over pedagogical methods.

---

17 Elpus, “Understanding the Availability of Arts Education.”
18 “The Status of Music Education.”
Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the prominence of music exhibitions and competitions grew as well, leading high school choir standards to change to reflect the performance ideals of non-educational, professional ensembles.\(^{19}\) Today, such performance standards remain. In many schools, choral classroom time consists of teachers conducting and offering suggestions to prepare music for public performance, with little student discussion.

As a consequence, music education “has trailed behind the humanities in its curricular revisions.”\(^{20}\) Even as disciplines in the humanities have transitioned to more discussion-based approaches, music education and choral ensembles have remained entrenched in what Paulo Freire termed the banking concept of education. In the banking model, a teacher relates supposed truths about “reality as if it is motionless,” and “expounds on a topic alien to the experiences of the students.”\(^{21}\) The students listen and comply, receive and repeat facts and directions, and exercise little creative power. Freire suggests instead a “problem-posing education,” based on discussion, where teachers and students all learn from one another.\(^{22}\)

On the surface, it may not seem that the banking model is used in choral music classrooms. After all, students necessarily participate, sing, and produce something together (which has perhaps made it easier to deny that a change is necessary). But in the standard practice of school choir settings, teachers state directions for musical performance -- crescendo, _bring out the text here, slow down, watch me_ -- and students follow. This is a necessary part of successfully leading a musical ensemble; but in school choirs, which should also be educational,
there often is not much else. A lack of incorporation of student voices allows for a top-down dictation of a “restrictive idea of what constitutes musical competence.” Students are rarely asked to consider how the music they sing fits into their own lives or into societal structures, to contribute their own opinions or experiences, or to discuss at all.

**Current Landscape: Critiques of Multiculturalism**

These developments have progressed alongside a rise in ideas of multiculturalism and colorblindness that emerged in the second half of the 20th century. Multicultural and colorblind frameworks allow for a nonspecific attention to a broad definition of “culture” that often upholds the centrality of whiteness. As described by Sarah Song, the discussion on multiculturalism “tends to draw on a wide range of examples involving religion, language, ethnicity, nationality, and race.” Multiculturalism and colorblindness thus allow for aggregated references to diversity, justifying imprecise language. They rely on conceptions of racism as a relic of the past that does not challenge student worldviews, and on the idea that all students have the same experiences and do not need to be understood differently.

This is not an accident: it has its roots in the historical development of social movements and legal decisions regarding race in the United States. The term “colorblindness” was first popularized in Justice John Marshall Harlan’s dissent to the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, in which he challenged railroad car segregation by stating that “our Constitution is color-blind.” In the mid-20th century, this quote was publicized widely in the early days of the Civil Rights

---

23 Koza, “Listening for Whiteness.”
25 Brown, “Race, Racial Cultural Memory, and Multicultural Curriculum.”
Movement to challenge segregationist laws. However, the once-progressive term was soon co-opted by those meaning to limit all governmental uses of race, with federal courts in the 1960s claiming colorblindness implied that race-conscious integration measures were also unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{27} Today, the idea of race with no connection to past or present social structures still pervades our education system, with a dominant representation of racism as discrete, individual behavior and of colorblindness as the solution.\textsuperscript{28}

Education researchers have described several examples of how these multiculturalist and colorblind ideas manifest in the classroom. In a study of teachers in Utah’s Zion School District, Angelina Castagno argues that teachers upheld notions of “powerblind sameness,” or that students are all the same without different experiences that must be understood.\textsuperscript{29} Educators also revealed beliefs of “colorblind difference,” with discourses often centering on socioeconomics or language differences without regard to race. One teacher Castagno interviewed mentioned the language of “learning styles,” asserting that “multicultural education to me means reaching a diverse audience as far as it comes to learning and teaching. There are so many different learning styles, so I just try to use a lot of visuals and check in with students and make sure they are getting it.”\textsuperscript{30}

Other teachers interviewed by Castagno used the language of “human relations.” This was often used to purport that the goal of multicultural education is to foster a respectful, accepting climate within the classroom, isolated from broader societal themes. Activities used for this approach were often disconnected from students’ lived experiences, interests, or the rest of class material -- for example, one such activity required students to write something kind about

\textsuperscript{27} Lopez, \textit{Dog Whistle Politics}.
\textsuperscript{28} DiAngelo, “White Fragility.”
\textsuperscript{29} Castagno, “Multicultural Education.”
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
every classmate.\textsuperscript{31} These processes centered around references to a vague diversity or individualization, with little practical, societal meaning. When race was discussed at all, it was often conflated with nationality or language to promote the goal of helping English language learners, and with an assumption that all students have the same access to opportunities. Brown also concurs that schools often overlook structural racism, singling out racism as aberrant individual behavior and thus not providing students with an idea of their own agency and failing to promote social change.\textsuperscript{32}

In choral education specifically, these ideas of multiculturalism are often upheld in pedagogy, repertoire selection, and the contextualization and discussion (or lack thereof) of this repertoire. Curricula often reinforce the centrality of white composers and Western-classical-derived music in ways that can be particularly harmful to students. The National Association for Music Education, the most prominent organization for U.S. music educators, advocates for “inclusivity and diversity in music education.” But it does not provide concrete suggestions beyond the inclusion of “music-making traditions from around the world,”\textsuperscript{33}-- something that can be done without sensitivity or attention to student experiences. As argued by Deborah Bradley, bias is often hidden under “common-sense narratives such as ‘music is a universal language,’”\textsuperscript{34} overlooking the need for an understanding of cultural context for both performers and listeners to successfully comprehend repertoire.\textsuperscript{34}

Curricula continue to center on Western classical music, with other musical styles sometimes “denigrated through language suggesting that they are ‘primitive’ and ‘simple.’”\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{31} Castagno, “Multicultural Education.”
\textsuperscript{32} Brown, “Race, Racial Cultural Memory, and Multicultural Curriculum.”
\textsuperscript{33} “Inclusivity and Diversity in Music Education,” \textit{NAfME} (blog), accessed April 21, 2020, https://nafme.org/about/position-statements/inclusivity-diversity/.
\textsuperscript{34} Bradley, “Hidden in Plain Sight.”
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
Even without such intentional or unintentional derogatory language, pieces from non-Western-classical musical traditions or non-Christian religious traditions are often aggregated into umbrella categories of “world music,” without much discussion of specific traditions. For example, one piece with a non-Christian religious text may be added to a program, without discussing meaning, performance context, or purpose, or giving space for students to discuss their own identity and identification with the piece. Ideas of colorblindness, of individuals’ diversity without specificity, of the equalization of all students’ and audience members’ experiences, are brought into the choral classroom when music is addressed as a “universal language” without social context.

Moreover, many teachers still feel uncomfortable approaching non-Western-classical music, or view music as an entity separate from culture or context, potentially reinforcing stereotypes and misinformation. When white composers and Western, Christian traditions are perceived as the norm, with other traditions perceived as exoticized add-ons, and teachers assume that all students’ familiarity, comfort, and experience with this Western music is the same, students of color or students from non-Christian backgrounds can feel alienated, misunderstood, and invalidated. This is intrinsically harmful to these students, and undermines the sense of belonging and cooperation that makes ensemble music unique. In addition, music education is almost universally separated from other disciplines currently. This distances music from any kind of history or social studies education that could allow for more complex, specific contextual analysis of the music being performed. And it stifles the potential for schools to harness this music and context to promote growth in student perspectives and catalyze social action. In education broadly, and in music education even more so, these issues are perpetuated

36 Bradley, “Hidden in Plain Sight.”
37 “The Status of Music Education.”
by a lack of teacher training that includes “critical investigations of whiteness, race, and equity.”

The Goal: Culturally Responsive, Anti-Racist Pedagogy

To remedy this, a choral music pedagogy that works to truly include all students and to enact social change must instead be both culturally responsive and anti-racist, as detailed below. It must actively attempt to include all students in the classroom and allow their voices to be heard, while deliberately instructing students on social contexts, structures of power, and their position and agency to disrupt them.

Culturally relevant pedagogy, as defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings, is a “theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate.” Culturally responsive pedagogy, she elaborates, adds to this by specifically encouraging a more synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture. This includes an amplification of student voices, a collaborative structure of learning and knowledge production, and a concept of teachers as giving to a community and of all students as capable of success. By using methods such as purposefully studying community spaces and involving students in current political debates by taking action (for example, students creating plans for community improvement to actually present to lawmakers), such an education can be used to help students recognize, understand, and critique social inequities.

---

38 Castagno, “Multicultural Education.”
The framework of anti-racist education further solidifies this aspect of pedagogy for social action. To be anti-racist, as defined by Louise Derman-Sparks, an educational system must examine how whiteness creates and perpetuates racism, and deliberately teach children to “identify and resist racism.” An anti-racist pedagogy must create opportunities for conversations about race, culture, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices. It must avoid conveying assumptions that further center whiteness or traditionally majority perspectives (for example, that all students in a class come from white or Christian families). Similarly to theories of culturally responsive frameworks, anti-racist education also aims to help students build the “skills and confidence to work together for social justice in the classroom, community, and society at large.”

An ideal educational method for social change, then, should equip students to understand race as a structural and institutional concept, and should challenge the centrality and normativity of whiteness (defined as a structural advantage and racial privilege, or as the “pervasive ideology justifying the dominance of one group over others”). In choral music education and in education more broadly, such an approach would “center multiple perspectives, worldviews, and peoples.” It would also provide students with an idea of how they can act against the systems of privilege and power that surround them to work towards social justice. As described by Brown, school curricula could be vital to building an understanding of “cultural memory” for students. This “cultural memory” implies an understanding of the narratives constructing how history...

---

40 Derman-Sparks and Ramsey, “What if All the Children in My Class Are White?”
41 Ibid.
42 DiAngelo, “White Fragility.”
43 Castagno, “Multicultural Education.”
44 DiAngelo, “White Fragility.”
45 Brown, “Race, Racial Cultural Memory, and Multicultural Curriculum.”
informs the present, and a reflection on how the systems being studied operate in students’ own lives.

Such an education that promotes social change is necessary in all schools, but especially in majority-white schools, precisely due to the widespread reliance on colorblindness and ideas of racism as solely in the past or solely a function of individual behavior. In *Reinventing Critical Pedagogy*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Embrick argue that a new racial ideology has become pervasive in the United States. This ideology is one of “racism without racists,” of inequality reproduced through institutional racism, that has simultaneously allowed for several frames of subtle, “colorblind racism” to proliferate. Through numerous examples, they demonstrate that such colorblind racism operates on a widespread scale today through methods they term “abstract liberalism,” or the framing of racial issues and government interventions as free-market issues; “naturalization,” or normalizing realities such as segregation that are institutionally or individually racist; “cultural racism,” or the fact that modern racist ideologies often biologize culture or behavior as a proxy for race; and the minimization and denial of racism and discrimination. These examples illustrate the need for an effective education that promotes knowledge of structural, institutional racism and power structures, and that catalyzes change. Without a targeted education to ameliorate it, such an idea of subtle, colorblind racism and an ignorance of structural factors can be allowed to propagate, with its actors retaining a sense of morality.

Ideas of multiculturalism must be disaggregated to be meaningful. Pedagogies relying on this multiculturalism, and on colorblindness, must instead transform to be anti-racist and

---

culturally responsive. “Claims of culture,” as Song terms them, are meant to remedy “serious disadvantages that people face along religious, linguistic, ethnic and racial lines.” In their vagueness, pedagogies of multiculturalism mask the very issues they claim to address. In choral education, this implies that the contexts of repertoire, the facets of culture and identity expressed through music, must be disaggregated as well. Language, race, religious identity and meaning behind a sacred text, region of the world, and accurate performance purposes of a piece -- all must be discussed and analyzed specifically.

Choral music education is one of the most common forms of music education in the United States today. Students can participate in choir regardless of their ability to access instruments or private music lessons or, if approached innovatively, even their exposure to traditionally-taught forms of music notation and theory. Choral education thus can have a broad impact. But choirs often rely on surface-level ideas of multiculturalism that can have detrimental effects, both in alienating students of color and in perpetuating the centrality of white musical forms and stereotypes about others. Instead, choral education must transform, by drawing on theories of culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy in order to include all students and to catalyze social action for the wide population of students it can reach.

**A Focus on Choral Education: Benefits and Unique Potential for Social Action**

An inclusive, culturally responsive, and anti-racist choral education pedagogy is crucial for two main reasons. First, choral education has the potential to transmit numerous musical and especially extra-musical benefits to students; a choral curriculum must be made culturally responsive to allow all students to feel a sense of belonging, and have the opportunity to truly receive and engage with these benefits. Second, and even more urgently, choral music education

---

48 Song, “The Subject of Multiculturalism.”
is uniquely positioned to utilize anti-racist pedagogy to powerfully catalyze social action, due to its ability to move between the classroom and public performance, and to its potential to create an actively inclusive space.

To begin with, choral education has the potential to build musical and extra-musical skills, to train students to be better musicians and better people. Research has shown that music education can improve students’ spatial and numerical reasoning and memory, and that brain functions and structures differ between musicians and non-musicians. In addition, ensemble music activities such as choral music have the potential to strengthen students’ empathy and collaborative skills, and choirs have also been found to be extremely meaningful, coherent social groups with implications for greater psychological well-being. If a choral music education curriculum does not incorporate culturally responsive practices, and does not perform or properly contextualize music from traditions that are not white, Western, or Christian, it severely undermines the potential for some students to receive these extra-musical benefits. If students of color or students from religious backgrounds not often represented in choral music contexts feel that their experiences are ignored in the choral classroom, these students will not be able to receive the full benefits of the supportive, meaningful community of a choir.

It is precisely because of this potential to create empathetic, coherent communities that choral music education is a uniquely powerful space in which to implement culturally responsive practices.

---


51 Shaw, “The Skin That We Sing.”
and anti-racist pedagogies. Choral music is accessible to many students, for whom other forms of instrumental music may have more barriers to entry due to the necessity of lessons or equipment. All students can share their own experiences with and through choral music, and can form powerful bonds with those in their choir, promoting opportunities for true dialogue and understanding. In addition, choral music education provides a unique space to engage with social action in the classroom, as choral pedagogy intrinsically bridges the gap between classroom instruction and dialogue and public performance, a natural venue for engaging with communities and social change. Performances can be geared towards community-oriented or socially relevant themes, can serve particular populations, can benefit organizations, and can amplify individual and collective student voices to a broader community. This is an especially powerful, unique tool to engage with anti-racist, culturally and community-relevant pedagogy and help students to take part in social action within their communities.

**Existing Practices for Social Action: Music Teacher Education vs. Community Ensembles**

Most choral music programs in schools do not yet achieve these goals for fostering social action. Many music teacher education programs remain entrenched in classical norms. Yet there exist extracurricular children’s choirs, nonprofit organizations, and professional and community ensembles that in some ways can be used as models for a school choir.

In music teacher education, issues begin with the auditions required to enter undergraduate programs. Even though music education is not in name a necessarily Western classical performance-oriented field or degree program, auditions for these degrees often require repertoire selected from lists of classical songs (“from the European/American high art bel canto tradition”\(^52\)). At many universities, to gain entrance into competitive music education degree

---

\(^52\) Koza, “Listening for Whiteness.”
programs, it has in recent years become almost a given that students would have already studied voice or an instrument privately. In other words, the K-12 school setting is not enough preparation to enter the music education field. As Koza writes, the auditions at her university maintain “narrow definitions of legitimate musical knowledge” that “shut out potential teachers...and are tying the hands of teacher educators.” Such an audition based solely in Western classical music is required at a majority of universities.

Furthermore, universities often do not aim to extend the scope of this “legitimate musical knowledge” to encompass multiple traditions, or to systematically discuss the value of community engagement through music. Koza writes, “race has rarely been mentioned in past discussions of undergraduate school music,” and that university curricula perpetuate a “musical monolingualism” that could proceed to foster divides between music educators and many of their K-12 students. Most music teacher preparation programs do not prepare teachers for teaching outside of the Western Classical canon at all, let alone provide frameworks for adequately contextualizing this music. This leads to K-12 musical educators often feeling uncomfortable with teaching outside the Western Classical canon, whether due to unfamiliarity with the material or discomfort with ideas of inauthenticity that can arise if not contextualized or approached properly.

---

53 Koza, “Listening for Whiteness.”
54 Ibid.
56 Koza, “Listening for Whiteness.”
progress, the vast majority remain in this tradition.

This is not to say that European or Western classical music should be excluded from undergraduate music education curricula or from K-12 choral education, or that students of color cannot enjoy or succeed in Western classical music. Rather, a Western classical music framework should be included as just one of many valid musical languages in curricula. Students in majority-white schools should be guided to understand that what might often be seen as the predominant musical form is one of many valid ways of expression, and that musical performances also can take several forms and impact many populations.

Apart from standard K-12 scholastic music ensembles and teacher education, community and professional choirs throughout the country can provide models for both repertoire expansion and social justice-oriented community engagement. Such ensembles include networks of children’s choirs, such as the Young People’s Chorus of New York City, the Boston Children’s Chorus, and Chicago Children’s Choir. Many of these ensembles provide in-school choral instruction as well as extracurricular choruses, providing evidence for the successful extension of their pedagogical principles into standard K-12 classrooms.

The Boston Children’s Chorus provides perhaps the most extensive example, with their mission to “integrate social justice education with music education,” and to bring “singers of different races, ethnicities, religions, gender identities, and socioeconomic groups together in a meaningful and collaborative activity.” The choir aims to celebrate “the music of many different and diverse cultures,” and most tellingly, to “promote a culture of critical questioning and robust dialogue.”

This is achieved through the active facilitation of “discussions about difference.”

and “creating space for singers to explore difficult issues.”

Boston Children’s Chorus educators also lead workshops for schools in the Boston area, that cover topics such as protest and social movement songs, facilitating social justice conversations through music, and socially conscious choral programs.

Chicago Children’s Choir similarly aims to inspire and unite children from diverse backgrounds to “become global citizens through music,” while the Young People’s Chorus of New York City aims to “provide children of all cultural and economic backgrounds with a unique program of music education...while creating a model of artistic excellence and diversity that enriches the community.”

The Young People’s Chorus attempts to achieve this by complementing their musical offerings with purposeful mentoring programs, as well as intentional conversations and workshops that center around societally relevant themes.

A few other choirs throughout the country have also begun to work towards social justice, with many focusing on contributing to political and social protests and movements through targeted songs. Though these are generally amateur or professional adult groups, many methods that they use to engage with communities and social movements or goals can be used by school choirs as well. Some of these choirs, such as the organization Justice Choir, have created templates for choirs hoping to partner with community organizations and contribute to movements, incorporating specifically composed songs and frameworks for dialogue. Others, such as the newly formed professional Kaleidoscope Vocal Ensemble, work to deliberately create a diverse, inclusive singing ensemble, while also performing music that amplifies the

---

61 Ibid.
voices of composers of color or specifically addresses issues of racism, and purposefully discussing this music and the power of inclusivity in their choir during their concerts and workshops.66

Such models are more difficult to find within the K-12 classroom. While community and professional organizations can directly engage with political movements and protests, such social action would likely not be feasible for a school choir to engage in directly. However, templates from such professional organizations, and especially from the children’s choirs described above, can still be utilized by school choirs to engage in community performances and discussions, and to make students aware of the potential political and social power of their music and their voices.

Conclusion: Designing a Novel High School Curriculum

Choral music education in most schools does not realize its potential to include all students, to teach musical and extra-musical skills fully, and to be a transformative platform to foster social action. Too often, K-12 choral pedagogies neglect student input, work toward standards of performance over deeper educational goals, and rely on ideas of multiculturalism and colorblindness. Instead, curricula should engage student voices through anti-racist and culturally responsive pedagogies.

In this capstone project, I propose a novel high school choral curriculum to work towards this goal. Following from the arguments presented in this essay, this curriculum is founded on the belief that an ideal high school choir should:

a. Incorporate a variety of repertoire, including but extending far beyond Western classical norms to affirm a variety of musical languages and understandings.

---

b. Facilitate purposeful discussion, which allows for appreciation of the social and historical context of the repertoire and the choral tradition, as well as an encouragement and validation of student voices and contributions.

c. Promote engagement with the surrounding community. Students should gain an understanding of the place of musical ensembles within a broader community, of the potential of those ensembles to look beyond themselves to convey socially oriented messages and to meaningfully, responsively collaborate with community members and organizations.

d. Strengthen students’ musical and choral ensemble skills. These should include skills of notation and terminology from Western notation and the listening skills necessary for ensemble singing, but also be supplemented with vocal techniques and language skills specific to particular pieces of repertoire. These should also include skills related to composing and creating musical ideas, amplifying student voices.

Overall, the goals of this curriculum are to promote the inclusion of all students and to catalyze social action. Students are encouraged to engage fully in every aspect of music making. Students are involved in the formulation of musical pieces, ideas, themes, and performances, and will develop their singing and musical skills. And even more crucially, they gain an understanding of the historical and social contexts of the music they sing, of the capacity of choral music to create meaningful communities, and of the applications of musical performance to community engagement.
This grade 9-12 curriculum emphasizes inclusive, anti-racist education and draws from the National Core Arts Standards for its musical objectives.67 The curriculum is divided into five units, each relating back to the overarching goals and pedagogical foundations described throughout this essay. These units are meant to supplement the core process of musical rehearsal that of course remains at the heart of a choir classroom. Each unit is short enough to be taught alongside the musical rehearsal process, and should culminate in a public performance.

The first unit emphasizes the fundamental musical grounding that students will need to rehearse and perform in a choir throughout the year. Students review foundational elements of notation and terminology, and begin the practice of discussing contexts of repertoire and relating that repertoire to their own lives and identities, which will continue throughout the year. The second unit guides students through a constructive, responsive framework for community engagement through music. The third unit asks students to reconsider traditional canons of choral music, to rethink the sort of pieces that are often termed “masterworks.” The fourth unit gives students the opportunity to compose songs based on meaningful texts that they choose. This aims to enhance students’ understanding of a variety of choral pieces by investigating the compositional process. It also works to amplify student creative voices, and allow students to experiment with the expression of societally and personally relevant messages through song. The fifth and final unit provides a more in-depth look at the social and historical contextualization of repertoire. Students independently research the contexts of pieces of music or composers’ lives, broadening their understanding of the varied cultural and historical underpinnings and implications of any piece of music.

---

In addition to overall goals or units, which are kept broad enough to be applicable to schools in a range of communities, the curriculum includes specific lesson plans for each unit. These lesson plans incorporate ideas for assignments and projects as well as lists of sample discussion questions. Finally, the curriculum also includes a guide to repertoire selection that shares examples of composers currently doing innovative, multidisciplinary work, as well as a list of resources that could be helpful for educators.

This curriculum aims to promote social change through the medium of a high school choir. First, it facilitates direct social action with a choir’s community through purposefully designed performance. Second, it challenges students and teachers to critically question beliefs and norms, by using music within its social and historical context as a platform to consciously discuss anti-racist and anti-discriminatory ideas.

A high school curriculum is just a beginning, towards creating inclusive, socially engaged communities through choir. So many other aspects must continue to be addressed and discussed, from representation in the field of choral music, to curricula at other grade levels, to in-depth looks at programming practices, and much more. But this curriculum provides a starting point. And I hope that it can be a useful resource -- one that truly harnesses the unique potential of a choral space to allow for the inclusion and input of all students, and that equips students to continue questioning and resisting the uneven structures of power surrounding them, throughout their lives.
CHOIR AS COMMUNITY

An Inclusive, Anti-Racist High School Choir Curriculum
Curriculum

Overview

Choral music in schools has immense potential to benefit students musically and extra-musically. Choirs can create strong, meaningful communities, and especially with their capacity for public performance, can provide unique spaces for pedagogy that promotes social engagement.

However, most choral education programs in the United States today do not fulfill this potential. Instead, many school choirs focus heavily on performing the music of white composers and Western, Christian traditions. They also tend to rehearse music without meaningfully discussing the social and historical context of both the repertoire and the ensembles themselves. These practices can lead to the alienation of students of color and students from non-Christian religious traditions. This also diminishes the power of ensembles to foster truly inclusive community and social engagement. The following curriculum aims to disrupt this pattern, by drawing on theories of culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy to promote the inclusion of all students and to catalyze social action.

In this high school curriculum, students will be encouraged instead to engage fully in every aspect of their music-making. Students will be involved in the formulation of musical pieces, ideas, themes, and performances, and will develop their singing and musical skills. And even more crucially, they will gain an understanding of the historical and social contexts of the music they sing, of the capacity of choral music to create meaningful communities, and of the applications of musical performance to community engagement.

This curriculum provides a starting point. So much of learning, both for students and educators, happens as a result of students’ questions and suggestions. This is no less true in a choir and is instrumental to the growth and development of ensembles. Students may raise questions, push back on directions, or express discomfort with pieces of music or performance choices. These thoughts and questions can lead to full-group discussions that shape opinions, spark innovative ideas, and greatly influence decisions for rehearsal and performances -- often in ways that are more inclusive of students and audience members. Throughout the year, it should be made clear that student input is valued and welcome.

This grade 9-12 curriculum is adaptable to most schools, but is most relevant and urgently necessary in majority-white schools. It emphasizes inclusive, culturally responsive, anti-racist education, and its musical goals draw as well from the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS).

The NCAS are a set of standards developed by the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards to create “a process that guides educators in providing a unified quality arts education for students
in Pre-K through high school.” They include ten overarching Anchor Standards, divided into categories of Creating, Performing/Presenting/Producing, Responding, and Connecting, that are applicable to any area of arts education. They also comprise discipline-specific standards. Within music, these disciplines are: Harmonizing Instruments, Composition and Theory, Traditional and Emerging Ensembles, and Technology.

This curriculum is structured into five sequential units. Each unit aligns with a particular set of National Core Arts Standards, and builds upon these to include problem-posing, culturally responsive, anti-racist pedagogies. Each unit aligns with overarching NCAS Anchor Standards, as well as more specific music standards from the Composition and Theory Strand and Traditional and Emerging Ensembles categories (the index numbers of the standards are given in the unit frameworks for reference). Standards from these categories were included, as they are the two music categories most relevant to a choral ensemble: any music course can work to build students’ theory and composition skills, and standards for ensembles are clearly relevant to choirs. Particular example standards most fitting for each unit were selected by reviewing all of the Anchor Standards and standards for these two strands, and determining standards that align particularly with problem-posing, responsive pedagogies as well as with essential musical skills. The standards listed for each unit provide just a sample of those that are applicable, however, as most of the standards are interconnected and rely upon one another.

Each unit is meant to supplement and be taught alongside the choral music rehearsal process, and is meant to culminate in an end-of-unit concert or other public performance.

Unit 1, Introduction to Choral Singing, emphasizes the fundamental musical grounding that students need in order to rehearse and perform in a choir throughout the year. Students review foundational elements of notation and terminology, and begin the practice of discussing contexts of repertoire and relating that repertoire to their own lives and identities.

Unit 2, A Focus on Community Engagement through Music, guides students through a constructive, responsive framework for community engagement.

Unit 3, Rethinking the “Masterworks Concert,” asks students to reconsider traditional canons of choral music.

69 “Home | National Core Arts Standards.”
70 Many schools (and university or professional musical ensembles) follow a tradition of including one or more “Masterworks” concerts in their annual programming. These concerts are centered around substantial works of music -- most of the time, these pieces are drawn from a canon of established, classical works by Western and male composers.
Unit 4, Student-Led Composition and Performance, gives students the opportunity to compose songs based on meaningful texts that they choose. This aims to enhance students’ understanding of a variety of choral pieces through investigation of the compositional process. It also works to amplify student creative voices, and to allow students to experiment with the expression of societally and personally relevant messages through song.

Unit 5, A Focus on Historical & Social Contexts, provides a more in-depth look at the social and historical contextualization of repertoire. Students independently research the contexts of pieces of music and composers’ lives, broadening their understanding of the varied cultural and historical underpinnings and implications of any piece of music.

Curriculum Layout

The first part of the curriculum provides road map-type frameworks for each unit. This framework begins with a unit overview that describes the overall goals and structure of the unit. Next, it includes a Learning Targets section, which comprises: a) the National Core Arts Standards that align with the unit, b) Essential Questions that the unit considers, c) Enduring Understandings for students to hopefully take away from the unit, and d) Unit Objectives, or more specific goals for the procedures and activities of the unit. Some of the Enduring Understandings come from the NCAS, and others are added in light of aligning the curriculum with culturally responsive, anti-racist, and student input-driven pedagogies. The framework continues into an Assessments and Activities section, which lays out the main assignments for the unit. Finally, a suggested week-by-week lesson schedule is provided for each unit. This provides a general sequential timeline that can be modified depending on the particular class schedule and time available for a choir (modifications are suggested).
After this general curriculum framework, the second section of this curriculum provides specific lesson plans for each unit. These include more detailed assignment and activity instructions, discussion questions, and procedures to provide a method to carry out the goals of each unit. Finally, a guide to inclusive, innovative repertoire selection is provided, as well as a list of additional helpful resources.  

---

### Part 1: Unit Frameworks

#### Unit 1: Introduction to Choral Singing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit Overview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As choirs typically consist of some students who have sung previously (with the group or otherwise) and some who have not, this unit serves as an introduction to the experience of singing in a choir. Students will strengthen skills in reading and notating music, interpreting pieces for performance, listening to one another, and vocal technique. Students will learn repertoire for the first concert of the year and begin to discuss the musical, social, and historical context of this repertoire.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Targets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>National Core Arts Standards</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MU:Pr4.3.E.IIa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MU:Pr6.1.E.IIa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Questions</th>
<th>Enduring Understandings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do musicians prepare works for performance, specifically in an ensemble?</td>
<td>A choir can and should be an inclusive, collaborative space with opportunity for all members’ input.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the context and intent of pieces is essential to informing repertoire selection and performance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Unit Objectives**

- Students will be familiar with names of symbols and markings related to staffs, clefs, notes and rests, time signature, tempo, rhythm, dynamics, articulation, and style.
- Students will learn or review fundamental vocal and choral technique.
- Students will begin learning repertoire from a variety of compositional styles and purposes, cultures, and time periods.
- Students will read about and discuss the historical and social context and meaning of the repertoire selected including textual interpretation, historical background, composers’ lives and intent, social importance and purposes of pieces when relevant.

**Assessments and Activities: Evidence of Learning**

**Formative:**

- Weekly in-class short lectures and discussion of repertoire (i.e. first 20 minutes of one rehearsal a week)
- Brief weekly readings on repertoire and historical time periods with short responses
- Short assignments on basic music theory, reading and notation skills
- Participation in rehearsals

**Summative:**

- Final concert
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Lesson Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>Introductory survey, review of music notation &amp; important terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6</td>
<td>Weekly short lecture and teacher-led discussion of repertoire for first concert: historical context, composer, intent of piece, musical style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Rehearsal/dress rehearsals (for entire class period time).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Rehearsal of repertoire for Concert 1.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Modifications:**

- Ideally, classes would be able to discuss context/background of all pieces in the concert program. However, depending on time constraints, teachers could choose one piece to focus on for dedicated discussion time. These discussions could be as short as ~10 minutes at the beginning of a class period, if necessary.

- For the rest of the pieces, students could be given written summaries of background/context to supplement this.
Unit 2: Community Engagement Through Music

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit Overview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A new set of repertoire will be introduced for the second concert of the year, which will take place at or in partnership with a community organization. Students will be involved in the process of connecting with this organization to develop a meaningful performance or project, perhaps in conjunction with a community event, fundraiser, movement, or service activity. Such organizations could include: educational organizations or schools with younger students with whom high schoolers may be able to connect; medical facilities, nursing homes, or retirement homes; local nonprofits; community art spaces, and more. Possible activities could include concerts at these facilities, workshops with younger children, or other ideas developed in partnership with the organizations. This unit emphasizes responsive, respectful community engagement: students will ask community members or organizations about their needs, and devise a plan together with these organizations. Students will also continue strengthening skills in vocal technique, reading and notating music, and contextualizing repertoire.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Targets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Core Arts Standards(^{74})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MU:Cn11.0.E.Ia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Questions</th>
<th>Enduring Understandings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can music be used to meaningfully interact with and contribute to community spaces and groups?</td>
<td>“Understanding connections to varied contexts and daily life enhances musicians’ creating, performing, and responding.”(^{74})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do musicians prepare works for performance, specifically in an ensemble?</td>
<td>Music can be used to connect with and support the goals of social movements or community organizations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unit Objectives

- Students will continue learning repertoire from a variety of compositional styles and purposes, cultures, and time periods, and discussing contextualization of this repertoire.

- Students will collaborate to research and identify a community organization and/or event for performance.

- Students will learn about and follow a framework for responsive community engagement through music, by working together with partner organizations to develop a plan that best fits the organization’s needs.

- Students will continue discussing historical and social context and meaning of the repertoire selected for this performance, with particular attention to social engagement through music.

- Students will continue to develop musical technique and skills.

Assessments and Activities: Evidence of Learning

Formative:

- Student (in small groups) identification of community organizations to partner with and short presentations on their choice and ideas

- Weekly lectures and discussions (i.e. 20 min of one rehearsal a week) of repertoire and on use of music in community engagement

- Mid-unit survey given to the partner organization to ask if their needs are being met, and how the partnership could be improved

- Participation in rehearsals

Summative:

- Final performance or project at a community location/in partnership with a group

- Final reflection discussion or writing assignment

- Final survey given to the partner organization

Lesson Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Lesson Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (if possible, introduce earlier,</td>
<td>Introduce mini-project: students work in small groups to research possible community organizations (teacher can suggest some options)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
before the unit begins) and contact organizations. Depending on schedule, it may work best to assign this task a few weeks in advance and have students begin researching.

2

Decide on an organization to work with. Students contact the organization, and ask about their needs (if needed, students contact several organizations until finding a good fit).

3-6

Weekly short lecture and discussion of repertoire: historical context, composer, intent of piece, musical style, specific repertoire with a social engagement intent. Discussion of social, political, or community engagement through music.

Mid-unit survey developed in class, given to partner organization to ask about areas for improvement and their needs going forward.

7

Final rehearsals and performance/workshop/project (or performance may be at a later date due to community organization availability, in which case units could also be rearranged).

Students write final reflections.

Final survey developed in class, given to partner organization for their reflection.

Ongoing

Rehearsal of repertoire.

Modifications:

- Depending on time constraints, in-class discussion of repertoire could be cut down or eliminated for this unit.

- Lecture or discussion on broader themes and history of community engagement through music (i.e., protest songs) is beneficial, but not essential.

- In-class discussions of constructive, responsive community engagement and check-ins for the community engagement activity throughout the unit are essential.
# Unit 3: Rethinking the “Masterworks Concert”

## Unit Overview

Repertoire, centered around larger works of music, will be introduced for the third concert of the year. This can be done alongside other music ensembles (i.e. orchestra, band) if these are present at the school, or independently. This unit will encourage students to discuss what it means for a piece to be considered a “masterwork,” tracing the history of this canon and exploring ideas of expanding its inclusivity. Students will strengthen interpretive musical skills necessary to prepare, perform, and critically analyze longer, cohesive pieces of repertoire.

## Learning Targets

### National Core Arts Standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anchor Standard 4</th>
<th>“Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 6</td>
<td>“Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 7</td>
<td>“Perceive and analyze artistic work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 11</td>
<td>“Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| MU:Pr6.1.E.IIa | “Demonstrate mastery of the technical demands and an understanding of expressive qualities of the music in prepared and improvised performances of a varied repertoire representing diverse cultures, styles, genres, and historical periods.” |

## Essential Questions

- What does it mean for a piece of music to be a “masterwork” or part of a canon deemed essential?

- Historically, why have particular types of composers and compositions been termed “masterworks” or performed more frequently?

- Should we shift these perceptions as performers, and if so, what can we do to make a change?

## Enduring Understandings

- Social and historical factors have shaped understanding of a canon and “masterworks” that endures today.

- Musicians have a responsibility to expand the idea of this canon; this understanding can be applied to disciplines beyond music as well.

- “Response to music is informed by analyzing context (social, cultural, and historical) and how creators and performers manipulate the elements of music.”

---


76 “Music: Traditional and Emerging Ensembles.”
**Learning Objectives**

- Students will learn, prepare, and perform one or more large, substantial musical works, potentially involving other musical ensembles if possible.
- Students will learn about and discuss the inclusivity/exclusivity of the traditional Western musical canon and explore possibilities of changing or expanding it.
- Students will continue to discuss the historical and social context and compositional intent of the selected repertoire.
- Students will continue to develop musical technique and skills needed to perform the selected repertoire.

**Assessments and Activities: Evidence of Learning**

**Formative:**

- Weekly lectures, short readings, and discussions (i.e. 20 min of one rehearsal a week) of repertoire and contextualization
- Written response proposing a piece or composer to be included in such a concert
- Participation in rehearsals

**Summative:**

- Final concert of large work(s)

**Lesson Schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Lesson Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>Introduction of new repertoire, centered around substantial works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6</td>
<td>Rehearsals and weekly discussions (see Unit 3 Lesson Plan for discussion frameworks).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dress rehearsals and performance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Modifications:**

- Some choirs may have time for weekly discussions, others every two weeks, others just once during the unit. Some amount of discussion of repertoire is essential for the themes of this unit. But depending on time availability, the frequency and length of discussion time can be adapted.
Unit 4: Student-Led Composition and Performance

Unit Overview

In this unit, students will reflect on the processes that are involved in composing a piece for a choir. Students will learn the basics of composition and choral conducting through brief exercises. Students will then gain experience composing a short song or piece for choir, conveying a message based on a student’s chosen text. Students will collaboratively develop concert programs, potentially including student compositions. Some students may conduct the group in the fourth performance of the year. Students will continue working on contextualizing repertoire and strengthening musical skills.

This unit aims to help students understand new facets of the compositional and performance process, and to contribute their own voices and creative ideas to shape musical compositions. The hope is that taking students through this process will help them realize their own agency and capacity to produce new music, and in the use of this music to carry the visions and messages of impactful texts and ideas.

Learning Targets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Core Arts Standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MU:Cr1.1.E.IIa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MU:Cr3.1.E.Ia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| MU:Cr3.2.E.IIa | “Share personally-developed arrangements, sections, and short compositions – individually or as an ensemble – that address identified purposes.” |
| MU:Pr4.1.E.IIa | “Develop and apply criteria to select a varied repertoire to study and perform based on an understanding of theoretical and structural characteristics and expressive challenges in the music, the technical skill of the individual or ensemble, and the purpose and context of the performance.” |
| MU:Pr5.1.E.IIa | “Develop and apply appropriate rehearsal strategies to address individual and ensemble challenges in a varied repertoire of music, and evaluate their success.” |

**Essential Questions**

How do musicians generate compositional ideas?

How do musicians generate interpretive ideas, i.e. through conducting?

How do performers select repertoire and build concert programs?

**Enduring Understandings**

Repertoire selection and interpretation must be guided by knowledge of social and historical contexts of pieces, and guided by ideas of inclusivity.

“Performers make interpretive decisions based on their understanding of context and expressive intent.”

**Learning Objectives**

- Students will learn to compose basic phrases and exercises.
- Students will learn some basics of conducting.
- Students will complete a short composition project (a song/melody or a piece for a choir), with original text or text from a selected source with specific purpose.
- Students will discuss the process of repertoire selection for public performance.
- Students will continue to develop musical technique and skills.

**Assessments and Activities: Evidence of Learning**

Formative:

- Basic conducting exercises
- Basic composition exercises, writing and revising main composition project throughout

---

78 “Music: Composition and Theory Strand,” National Core Arts Standards.
the unit
- Participation in rehearsals

Summative:
- Final concert (with a few pieces conducted by student conductors)
- All students turn in a composition
- Students suggest repertoire for Unit 5 concert

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Modifications:
- The most important part of this unit is that students compose songs or pieces. The requirements of this compositional assignment can be varied to best fit the needs of the choir.
- Learning about conducting and repertoire selection, and having pieces conducted by student conductors, would be beneficial, but is less essential.
Unit 5: Focus on Social and Historical Contexts

Unit Overview

This final unit will build on previous work to focus more specifically on student-driven social and historical contextualization of repertoire. Students will lead and facilitate discussion of repertoire. For a final project assignment, students will undertake primary and secondary research on the historical/regional/societal contextualization of a piece of repertoire or composer’s life. Students will also work collaboratively to curate program notes for the final concert. Students will continue strengthening musical skills.

Learning Targets

National Core Arts Standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anchor Standard</th>
<th>“Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anchor Standard 11</td>
<td>“Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MU:Cn11.0.E.IIa</td>
<td>“Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MU:Re9.1.E.IIa</td>
<td>“Evaluate works and performances based on research as well as personally- and collaboratively-developed criteria, including analysis and interpretation of the structure and context.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MU:Re7.1.E.IIa</td>
<td>“Apply criteria to select music for a variety of purposes, justifying choices citing knowledge of the music and the specified purpose and context.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Essential Questions

How can repertoire selection foster or hinder inclusivity in an ensemble and be used to deliver a message to audiences?

How can an understanding of the social and historical context of pieces impact performance?

Enduring Understandings

Repertoire selection and interpretation must be guided by social and historical contexts of pieces, and by ideas of inclusivity.

“Performers make interpretive decisions based on their understanding of context and expressive intent.”

“Understanding connections to varied contexts and daily life enhances musicians’ creating, performing, and responding.”

---

Unit Learning Targets/Objectives

- Students will be able to lead discussion on the social and historical contexts and text and musical interpretation of pieces in repertoire for this final concert.
- Students will gain the skills necessary to write program notes for the final concert.
- Students will gain the skills necessary to carry out primary and secondary research on pieces of repertoire or composers.
- Students will continue to develop musical technique and skills.

Assessments and Activities: Evidence of Learning

Formative:
- Group presentations/students leading weekly discussions on each of the pieces of repertoire for final concert
- Students write and revise program notes for final concert in their groups
- Participation in rehearsals

Summative:
- Final project and concert

Lesson Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Lesson Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Repertoire is introduced, including 1-2 student compositions from the last unit if possible. Group projects assigned on researching historical and social context and performance intentions of repertoire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-6</td>
<td>Rehearsals; Possible weekly student group presentations leading discussions on each piece of repertoire, its social and historical context and musical style and performance implications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dress rehearsals, final concert, final project due.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Rehearsal of repertoire.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Modifications:
- Depending on time constraints, student in-class presentations could be eliminated in favor of submission of a written or creative final project that does not use in-class time.
Part 2: Sample Lesson Plans

The following section provides a specific lesson plan for each unit. The lessons should supplement the musical rehearsal process, allowing for conscious, targeted discussion and student input. These plans are meant to provide guiding templates for each unit that can be adjusted in accordance with your school’s needs.

Unit 1: Introduction to Choral Singing

Sample Lesson: Musical and Theoretical Foundations

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will review (and/or be introduced to) the general musical concepts necessary to sing in a choir. Such concepts should include musical notation and terminology, choral terminology, and basic considerations of vocal health and technique. Students will be introduced as well to the goals of this particular curriculum and of the year, related to community engagement, diversity of repertoire, contextualization of repertoire, the use of music in social action, and more. Students will provide insight into their own interests and goals for the year, goals for musical learning, and current familiarity with musical concepts.

Objectives

- Students will be familiar with names of symbols and markings related to staffs, clefs, notes and rests, time signature, tempo, rhythm, dynamics, articulation, and style. Students will also be familiar with key vocabulary related to choral music.

- Students will learn or review fundamental vocal and choral technique.

- Students will begin learning repertoire from a variety of compositional styles and purposes, cultures, and time periods.

- Students will read about and discuss the historical and social context and meaning of the repertoire selected including textual interpretation, historical background, composers’ lives and intent, social importance and purposes of pieces when relevant.

- The ensemble will rehearse in preparation for the first concert of the year.

---

80 This may, out of necessity, likely include a focus on Western notation, due to practicality when considering available choral music. If so, it should be emphasized to students that this is one of many ways of notating and framing music.
Lesson Procedure

1. **Introduction to the class and year**: Students are introduced to plans for the year and goals for concerts and projects.

2. **Introductory evaluation and survey**: Students are given a survey to gain information about musical background and interests, as well as their familiarity with some of the broader concepts of this curriculum. Questions to include:
   a. Music theory/terminology questions including identifying note names, scales and keys, symbols, vocabulary.
   b. Questions related to students’ musical background, including their past experience with choir and with other areas and activities in music.
   c. If logical for the ensemble, a musical skills assessment in which students are asked to sight read individually.
   d. Questions related to students’ interests and goals, such as:
      i. Why did you join choir?
      ii. What do you hope to get out of this year in choir?
      iii. Is there anything in particular you hope to explore? Particular types of music (or specific composers and pieces), or things you want to learn?

   Teachers use the responses and assessment to guide the content and difficulty of musical instruction in this unit. If levels of familiarity with musical concepts vary widely within the class, students can choose from differentiated levels of assignments to complete.

3. **Lecture(s)**: Interactive lectures are given on musical concepts, including musical notation, musical and choral terminology, vocal technique, and possibly musical genres relevant to the year’s repertoire, with repertoire examples played in class. For example, a possible list of important vocabulary to know can include: terms related to choirs (soprano, alto, tenor, bass voice parts), dynamics (forte, piano, crescendo, etc.), and key and time signatures.

4. **In-class and take-home exercises**: Students are given in-class and take-home exercises on reading music, identifying notes, keys, and time signatures, and identifying concepts in scores such as dynamics and definitions of terms.

**Modifications**

Depending on class time, the length of lectures can be modified and some content can be transformed to take-home readings or activities. If less class time is available, teachers may want to focus solely on teaching basics of musical notation and terminology that are absolutely vital to the ensemble’s progress. If more time is available, lectures can be expanded to include details of musical genres and vocal technique.
Additional Resources

1. **An open source database of resources**\(^{81}\) helpful in teaching musical fundamentals, including:
   a. **Reading Music**
   b. **The Basic Elements of Music** (incl. rhythm/meter, melody, harmony, counterpoint activities)
   c. **Introduction to Music Theory**
   d. **Exploring Music Theories**

2. **teoria**: a website of music theory tutorials and exercises\(^{82}\)

---


Unit 2: Community Engagement Through Music
Sample Lesson: Discussing a framework for collaboration with community organizations; developing a partnership

Lesson Overview
In this lesson, students will learn about, reflect on, and discuss responsive frameworks for community engagement through music. Starting from an initial teacher-provided framework and contact with a local organization, students will help to collaboratively design and carry out a plan for responsive community engagement, with this organization as a partner. Such organizations could include: educational organizations or schools with younger students with whom high schoolers may be able to connect; medical facilities, nursing homes, or retirement homes; local nonprofits; community art spaces, and more. The exact form of this final activity (i.e. workshop with younger children at a school, performance or workshop in the community, non-musical collaboration, benefit concert, etc. or a combination of any of these) as well as the type of community partner organization can be modified to fit the particular community’s needs.

Objectives
Students will:
- Practice reflecting on, writing about, and discussing constructive, responsive ways to engage with communities and community organizations through music.
- Collaborate to research and identify a community organization and/or event for performance.
- Learn about and follow a framework for responsive community engagement through music, by working together with partner organizations to develop a plan that best fits the organization’s needs.
- Continue discussing historical and social context and meaning of the repertoire selected for this performance, with particular attention to social engagement through music.
- Learn repertoire from a variety of compositional styles and purposes, cultures, and time periods, and discuss contextualization of this repertoire; continue to develop vocal, musical, and ensemble skills.

Lesson Procedure
1. **Introductory activity**: distribute a handout with a few guiding questions to determine students’ current ideas about music-related community engagement. Questions to include:
- Brainstorm ideas of workshops, performances, or other activities for community engagement through music, either in general or for our community in particular.
- What is the value in or purpose of using music to connect with communities or organizations?

Students share responses to these questions with the class, to guide full-class discussion of potential community engagement ideas. Students return to this activity at the end of the unit to write down closing reflections and to guide discussion.

2. **Introductory lecture:** A brief introductory lecture to the unit is given, outlining a framework for meaningful community engagement through music. This emphasizes the importance of asking about and responding to the needs of a community partner organization. It also describes the value of a collaborative plan that can turn into a longer-term series or otherwise lasting partnership.

3. **Developing a partnership** (in-class and take-home activities): Prior to the unit, the teacher finds an organization in the community with which to partner. Students are divided into groups. Each group is tasked with leading (or being the “point people”) for one phase of the project. These phases include:
   
   a. Initializing formal contact with the organization. The teacher should also be involved in these conversations (whether email, phone, or in person). Students should be sure to ask the organization what their needs are, and what kind of performance, workshop, and other activities could be beneficial to them. This group, with the teacher’s guidance, will then share the organization’s responses with the entire class.
   
   b. Brainstorming to develop a specific plan for the partnership activity. This group, with the teacher’s guidance, will lead a class discussion to determine particulars of the activity, based on the organization’s initial requests. This group will then contact the organization to ask their thoughts on the specific plan. After that conversation, this group will present a final, accordingly modified plan to the class.
   
   c. Specific preparatory tasks required for the project (i.e., suggesting what pieces from the ensemble’s repertoire so far to perform if there is a performance component).

---

83 If feasible with your timeline, this lesson/unit can alternatively be spread out over several months so that earlier in the year, students can be involved in the process of finding a community partner organization. To do so, students can “pitch” ideas of organizations individually or in groups. Then, the teacher (or a class vote) can decide which organization to contact initially. Students can contact this organization and ask if they would be interested in a potential partnership, and what kind of activities they would find beneficial. If they are not interested, another of the student-proposed organizations can be contacted, and so on.
d. Mid-unit and end-of-unit check-ins with or surveys for the organization. This group will lead conversations with the organization at the midpoint of the unit to ask the organization’s opinion on the progress of the plan and if there are any changes on their end. This group (or another, depending on class size) will also lead conversations with the organization after the partnership activity is carried out to ask for their reflection and needs going forward. This group will lead class discussion based on the organization’s responses to brainstorm changes to the plan, and at the end of the unit, to brainstorm potential extensions of the partnership.

4. **In-class discussion:** Prior to the community engagement activity, students have a brief in-class discussion centered around principles of the framework and plan they have followed, as well as around preparing for the final activity. Questions to include:
   - What did you learn from the process of developing a plan with this organization? Did you change your mind about anything?
   - What are some things we should keep in mind during our final performance/workshop/activity?

5. **Community engagement activity:** Students will carry out the performance, workshop, or other community engagement activity in partnership with a community organization. Students write a brief open-ended reflection or complete another kind of summative assignment following the activity.

6. **Closing activity and discussion:** In the rehearsal following the community engagement activity, students have an in-class discussion to summarize and reflect on the experience. Students who led the end-of-unit conversation with the organization share the organization’s responses with the class. Questions to include:
   - What do you feel was successful about this collaboration? What are some areas of improvement, or questions you have going forward?
   - What did you learn following actual implementation of this activity? Did the experience change your mind about anything? What are your thoughts now on the value of using music in community engagement?
   - What are your ideas for how to extend this partnership? Are there other activities we could do this year, as a group or outside of school? Are there other organizations with whom we could partner in similar ways, or any other ideas for maintaining lasting engagement and positive collaboration?
Additional Resources

Here are some examples of groups that engage with communities through music, that could serve as models or inspirations for forms of connection:

1. **Street Symphony**: an organization that “engages communities directly affected by homelessness and incarceration in LA County through performances, workshops and teaching artistry.”

2. **Hear Your Song**: an organization started by Yale University students to give “kids who are hospitalized, sick or immunocompromised at home, or isolated from their loved ones the opportunity to write lyrics, collaborate with composers, and hear their songs recorded.”

3. **Urban Voices Project**: an organization that aims to “create community spaces with music to bridge vulnerable individuals to a sense of purpose and improved health,” and to “place music & singing community spaces in every medical and social service site” through “music workshops in partnership with social, civic, and healthcare organizations.”

4. **Community MusicWorks**, especially their [projects with community partners](https://communitymusicworks.org/community-partners/): these projects include concerts in collaboration with community development organizations, sharing music at city or neighborhood events, and youth programs.

---


Unit 3: Rethinking the “Masterworks Concert”
Sample Lesson: What makes a masterwork? Examining the canon.

Lesson Overview
The concept of the “masterworks concert,” of school or professional ensembles performing substantial, long works of music by renowned composers, is well-established in choral traditions. However, most of these concerts tend to center around pieces from an accepted handful of Classical composers -- in other words, pieces by dead white men. In this lesson, students will consider the question: “what makes a masterwork?” Students will be asked to reflect on why the genre is currently often so limited in perceptions. Students will be introduced to and discuss a range of possible pieces of music that could be considered masterworks, in preparation for performing one or several of these works in a final unit concert.

Objectives
- Students will:
  - Practice reflecting on, writing about, and discussing questions related to how music is assigned value traditionally and how such paradigms can be changed.
  - Learn about and discuss the inclusivity/exclusivity of the traditional Western musical canon and explore possibilities of changing or expanding it.
  - Develop skills needed to critically analyze musical compositions in historical and societal context.
  - Develop skills needed to critically listen to pieces of music and discuss elements of these recordings.
  - Use these discussions and reflections to inform performance of a substantial musical work.

Lesson Procedure
1. **Introductory activity**: distribute a handout with a few guiding questions to determine students’ current ideas about concepts such as: are students aware of terms like “masterwork,” what do students think determines a “masterwork,” who are some composers, musicians, or pieces of music students may have heard of related to choral music if any, what might students be interested in learning. Students share their responses and look for common themes in a full class discussion. These could also take a more open-ended format as opposed to specific questions, though a list of possible questions for such a handout and discussion is attached.
Teachers use responses to these questions and the common themes found to guide discussions and lecture, especially the final end-of-unit discussion
- For example, after listening to a piece of music, teachers ask students to consider a common theme from their responses, and ask how this piece connects to that theme.
- At the end of the unit, teachers review some common themes found in students’ initial responses and hand back initial handouts. Teachers ask students to consider if and how their opinions have changed.

2. **Introductory lecture**: Next, the teacher gives a brief introductory lecture about the unit’s essential concepts. This lecture addresses topics such as the traditional idea of a “masterwork,” along with accompanying recordings of parts of a work like the Mozart *Requiem* or other classical “masterwork.” Points to touch on include:

- The term “masterwork” most often refers to traditional, famous, powerhouse pieces of classical music. See, for example, this album compilation of 100 *Classical Masterworks*, though this does not refer specifically to choral music. For a specific reference to masterworks in choral music, see *Choral Masterworks: A Listener’s Guide.*

- These are most often pieces from the European/Western classical tradition. They are most often pieces by white men (for example, in the aforementioned album, all are written by white men). They are most often pieces written (at least) decades in the past.

The lecture also prompts students to consider why these pieces may have become idealized as “masterworks,” and why other pieces may be excluded from this canon.

3. **Short reading assignment**: Students are given a brief reading assignment to complete independently in between classes/rehearsals. This reading is a synthesis of sources compiled by the teacher, or direct academic articles; and can be longer or shorter depending on what grade levels make up the choir. The reading(s) will be centered around some key concepts of music history and the evolution choral tradition of today that are related to the formation of the widely held current conceptualization of “masterworks.” Students are also given a brief reading assignment about the compositional and performance intentions and contexts of particular pieces of music --

---

88 Michael Steinberg, *Choral Masterworks: A Listener's Guide* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). This book provides insights into fifty “choral masterworks.” The Oxford Press summary of the book states that Steinberg “spans the entire history of classical music, from such giants of the Romantic era as Verdi and Berlioz, to leading modern composers such as Elgar, Rachmaninoff, and Stravinsky, to contemporary masters such as John Adams and Charles Wuorinen.” Even the modern composers mentioned are white men, but this is considered a thorough guide to “masterworks.”
those that are going to be performed in this unit’s concert, and those that will be part of the listening activity.

4. **In-class listening:** In the next block of class time that can be set aside for a non-rehearsal lesson, students listen as a group to selections from several pieces of music, some that are traditionally termed “masterworks” or part of the classical choral music canon, and some that are quite separate from this canon. These may be written by non-male, non-Western composers, people of color or from a style or culture of music that is otherwise often excluded. They may draw from secular texts or non-Christian religious texts. They may also allow students to learn about and address a societal issue through music. Performance intentions and compositional contexts (time period, composer’s general background) are briefly discussed before listening (students should have read about these prior to class). Students are given a handout to fill out and follow along with while recordings are played in order to promote intentional listening.

5. **In-class group discussion** (small group or full group depending on class size): After listening to these selections, students discuss the similarities and differences between the pieces. Students discuss whether each could be termed a “masterwork” and why, what obstacles may have prevented particular pieces from coming to the forefront of a traditional canon, etc. -- potential discussion questions are attached.

6. **Closing activity:** If time permits or depending on the grade levels in the choir, a closing activity for the lesson/unit could take the form of: students responding again to the initial questions asked in the opening handout, or students writing and turning in “program notes” for the masterwork that is to be performed.

Examples of Questions and Recordings:

**Introductory Handout or Discussion Questions:**

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word “masterwork,” when it comes to choral music? Can you think of any examples, or a general description?
2. When you think of choral music, what composers or pieces of music come to mind? What performance settings?
3. Why do you make these associations with choral music or with “masterworks”?
4. Why do you listen to music? Does music ever cause you to think differently, to feel a part of something larger? Is this an important purpose of music?89
5. What do you think is the purpose of “masterworks? Consider the purpose of the genre as it stands today, and the purpose of the term itself.

---

6. What are your questions for this unit?

Listening Activity:
Sample pieces of music (along with some traditional canon pieces); descriptions of pieces can be adapted into reading assignment or explanations of pieces before listening in class:
1. **To the Hands** by Caroline Shaw ([No. 6, I Will Hold You, description of the piece](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UXebBWdno); “To the Hands - Caroline Shaw,” accessed April 12, 2020, https://carolineshaw.com/tothehands/).
2. **Considering Matthew Shepard** by Craig Hella Johnson ([We Tell Each Other Stories, All of Us, description of the piece](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHJF_Z0Xk8k; We Tell Each Other Stories from “Considering Matthew Shepard” by Craig Hella Johnson, accessed April 30, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IggIrJnf9gE).
5. **Seven Last Words of the Unarmed** by Joel Thompson ([recording, description of the piece. article](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ggIrJnf9gE; “The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed” | SphinxConnect 2017, accessed April 30, 2020, https://www.reenaesmail.com/this-love-between-us-prayers-for-unity/).)

Sample listening handout questions:
1. Write down your initial thoughts about this piece. What do you notice -- are there instruments? What emotions seem to be associated with the piece? What did you hear that makes you say that?
2. What messages are conveyed through this piece? Does it connect to broader societal themes?
3. What are your thoughts on how the composer conveys the intention/meaning of the piece or text through the musical setting?
4. What are some similarities and differences between the pieces?
5. For each, write a few notes on why this piece could be considered a masterwork (or if you disagree, why?).

---

Group Discussion Questions:

1. Share your thoughts on the structure, mood, tone, etc. of the pieces.
2. Share your thoughts on how the composer conveys the intention or messages of the piece through music.
3. Share your thoughts on similarities/differences between these pieces.
4. After listening to these pieces, what are your thoughts on the purpose of such substantial works of choral music (to convey particular messages?)? What do you think defines a piece as a masterwork, or should give it a place in this kind of canon?
5. Should the term “masterworks” be used at all? What are some advantages and disadvantages to its use?
Unit 4: Student-Led Composition and Performance

Sample Lesson: Student compositions; what do we consider when we compose and select repertoire?

Lesson Overview
In this lesson, students will reflect on the processes involved in composing a piece for a choir, and in selecting repertoire. Students will focus on how these processes can reflect their own experience and their own choirs and communities specifically. Students will gain experience composing a very short piece or melody (the specific assignment can be adapted to fit the particular ensemble’s and particular student’s levels and needs) based on a student’s chosen or written text. A major goal of this lesson and unit is to help students understand many facets of the compositional process, and to contribute their own voices and creative ideas to shape musical compositions. The hope is that taking students through this process will help them realize their own agency and capability to produce new music, and to use this music to carry the visions and messages of impactful texts and ideas.

Objectives
Students will:
- Practice reflecting on, writing about, and discussing processes related to:
  - Selecting or writing text for a choral composition.
  - Writing music in alignment with this text.
  - Selecting repertoire for particular purposes, performance spaces and events, and ensembles.
- Develop skills needed to select text to set to music and to compose one-part melodies and songs, or fragments of/complete pieces with harmony using this text.
- Share and discuss their own rationales and methods for this process.
- Use these discussions to inform end-of-unit performance, which, if possible, could include student compositions.

Lesson Procedure
1. **Introductory Lecture**: Analyzing repertoire for performance. The teacher presents a brief lecture about the unit’s essential concepts, and introduces the repertoire that will be performed in the end-of-unit concert. This lecture addresses topics such as descriptions of the main ideas behind each piece of repertoire for the concert, including important information about the composer or compositional themes and processes; as well as any important musical concepts that may need to be reinforced or taught to make
compositional exercises possible (could be reinforced with worksheets or brief readings as well).

An opening discussion or handout can also gauge students’ experience with and interest in songwriting and composition. These responses should be used to guide the level and variations in composition exercises and activities throughout the unit. Questions to include: Have you composed music or written a song before? What kind of song?

2. **In-class Analysis of Repertoire and Discussion**: For several or all of the pieces to be performed in the concert for this unit, students discuss the text and compositional settings. Students are given brief readings or lectures on any important background information on the text, piece, composer, time period, region, etc., then discuss both overall pieces and particular phrases or sections on which it makes sense to focus more deeply. Questions to include:
   a. What is the overall message of this text? What are some themes you notice, in the content, the context, or language?
   b. What are some ways in which the musical material of this song supports or amplifies the text (i.e. volume, tone, particular melodies or recurring patterns)?
   c. How about the overall mood of the piece and text? How do they seem to align?
   d. Are there any parts that you are confused about, or choices in the setting of this text that you disagree with?
   e. What message or intention do you think this piece carries for the audience in a performance? What do you think the composer’s goal was in choosing this text and this musical setting; what could our goals as an ensemble be in performing it?

3. **In-class Composition Exercises**: Students are guided through short composition exercises, with initial examples given by the teacher. First, students are given a short few-note phrase and are asked to extend it. Then, they progress to developing their own short melodies or setting a short piece of text to a melody. Students complete these individually and share with small groups, or could even complete some of them in groups.

   The activity can be modified depending on students’ comfort with reading and writing music; for example, students can develop and sing short tunes or settings of short phrases of text rather than notate them musically, and then be guided through the process of notating them if time and class size allows.

   Another possible exercise is looking at one particular text, discussing its meaning, and comparing different composers’ settings of the same text -- what do students like and dislike about each interpretation? What might each composer have been trying to convey?

4. **Take-home Composition Project**: This project can be modified depending on students’ comfort with notating music and the level of the choir. Students may be able to sing and
record something they have developed, with optional notation for students who feel more comfortable with it. Some choirs may have several or many students who feel comfortable or interested in writing longer melodies or pieces with harmony or for a full choir.

A baseline required assignment is given with optional additions; the length of composition expected is also varied depending on each group of students’ needs. Students first choose a text -- a poem, speech, news article, book, quotes by a particular person or with a particular theme -- or write their own text of a specified brief length. Students then write a paragraph on the reasoning behind selecting or writing this text. Next, students set this text to a melody. If possible, students also add harmonies and even extend this to a short piece for a 3 or 4-part choir (if not required, students are encouraged to extend their pieces if interested). Students write a brief reflection on their reasoning for setting the text to this melody.

5. **In-class Discussion and Sharing Compositions**: Students share their songs in class. Students explain their reasons for choosing the texts and melodies, and offer comments on other students’ songs.

6. **Concert**: Based on the initial discussion of the concert repertoire and students’ compositions, a couple of activities can be done to supplement the core performances of this concert.
   a. Students write program notes for the concert repertoire based on their analyses and discussions of the texts, musical settings, and intentions.
   b. Student compositions are performed in the concert. If some students have written fleshed-out pieces of music, these can be performed. Alternatively, multiple students’ written fragments or short melodies can be performed in an interactive, lecture-recital style where students introduce their own texts and melodies to the audience and the choir then sings their melodies/excerpts from songs in unison.

**Modifications**

Depending on available time, some in-class elements can be excluded. In-class discussion of compositional choices in the choir’s performance repertoire can be shortened or incorporated into comments in rehearsal time rather than dedicated activities or exercises.

A variation on this unit could focus on protest songs or songs advocating for causes. The rest of the choir’s performance repertoire for this unit would also focus on that theme, and students would compose songs related to chosen causes or messages. For more details, see the Additional Resources below.
Additional Resources

1. A list of music composition lesson plans, exercises, and activities for all grade levels.95

2. For a variation of the unit that focuses on protest songs (but also for widely applicable discussion questions and lesson suggestions), see:
   b. Lesson plan: Teaching with protest music.97
   c. Lesson plan for teaching about presenting messages through song.98

---

97 Gonchar and Schulten, “Lesson Plan | Teaching with Protest Music.”
Unit 5: Focus on Social and Historical Contexts

Sample lesson: Using primary sources to analyze social and historical context; instructions for a final project assignment

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will discuss and address in more detail the historical and social contexts of particular pieces of choral music repertoire, and will gain an understanding of the importance of this awareness. Classroom discussions and activities will build to a final project in which students will closely examine one piece of music and/or one composer’s life, using historical or contemporary primary and secondary sources to develop an understanding of contexts that informed that piece of music, and to give a final presentation or develop a written or creative project. If possible or desired, students’ presentations/projects will align with the pieces being performed in the final end-of-year concert, and students could then also produce program notes for this concert. Depending on school and ensemble structure and grade levels present in the choir, this unit will be done in conjunction with a history, social studies, or language arts department in order to deepen students’ understanding of concepts such as primary source analysis.

Objectives

Students will:

- Practice reflecting on, writing about, and discussing the compositional, historical, societal contexts of pieces of music and how they impact the piece’s/composer’s style, content, and performance intentions.

- Develop skills needed to critically analyze musical compositions in historical and societal context.

- Develop skills needed to critically listen to pieces of music and discuss elements of these recordings.

- Learn about the process of writing program notes for a performance.

- Use these discussions and reflections to inform final ensemble performance and potentially to contextualize this performance through written program notes.
Materials

1. Access to primary source database (i.e. Library of Congress collections,99 publicly available; schools may have access to other primary and secondary source databases)

Lesson Procedure

1. **Introductory activity:** distribute a handout of questions to determine students’ current ideas about concepts such as: what is your familiarity with these composers/pieces of music (drawn from those that will be performed)? What do you know about the intentions/purposes of these pieces of music? What should we keep in mind when performing these pieces? Do you know about primary and secondary sources, and what is your level of familiarity?

   Responses should be used to guide lectures in this unit, as well as to guide a final discussion or handout. If many students are unfamiliar with primary/secondary source analysis, the component of lecture and in-class activities to guide students through this process can be emphasized or extended. Students’ responses can also be returned at the end of the unit, and students can reflect on what they have learned.

2. **Introductory lecture:** The teacher presents a brief introductory lecture about the unit’s essential concepts. This includes discussion with students, and addresses topics such as the necessity of contextualizing repertoire and intentionally thinking through performance purposes. This also includes a brief introduction to the contexts and historical background behind some or all of the pieces to be performed in the final unit concert.

3. **In-class analysis and discussion:** For one or two of the pieces of music that are being performed in the final concert, students collaboratively analyze primary and secondary sources to discuss questions related to the social and historical contexts of these pieces.

   Recordings of this piece or these pieces are played. Students are provided with ~2 primary and secondary sources related to each piece and its time period/compositional region/events that shaped the composer’s life, understanding, or inspiration for the piece, and are asked to read these, discuss in small groups, and then discuss with the larger class. It may be beneficial to guide students through one example piece as a class and then break into groups to more independently analyze a second piece; then groups share ideas with the class.

---

Students are guided through a brief example of a primary source analysis, and then given time to read and analyze sources related to the piece being studied. Discussion questions include:

- What do you notice about the primary sources? (open-ended discussion of primary source analysis) What are some broader societal themes you might notice or be able to infer from these sources?
- How may have these themes impacted the composer’s life or the composition of this piece?
- What are some themes you notice in the text of the piece? How are these themes, or societal/contextual themes reflected in the musical composition of the piece?

The following examples demonstrate the kinds of accompanying materials to be used, for specific sample pieces of repertoire:

a. Example 1: analysis of the piece *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* by Joel Thompson, alongside a description of the piece’s premiere performance and two newspaper articles about the events that informed and inspired the piece.

b. Example 2: analysis of the piece “Poem of Praise” by Florence Price, along with a biographical article about the composer’s life as well as two historical documents, advertisements, or newspaper articles from the time and region.

4. **Group final project assignment**: students are divided into groups and complete a similar, but more open-ended, analysis. This can focus on other pieces that will be performed in the final concert. Alternatively, students can research and select a choral piece of their preference.

Students use available databases or library resources to find primary and secondary sources related to this piece of music and composer. If that is not possible, the teacher identifies and provides students with resources related to the piece and composer. The final project can take the form of in-class brief presentations, a written assignment, or a creative format like a video, a mock newspaper or newspaper article, a review of the piece of music, etc. Students also write program notes for the upcoming concert.
Additional Resources

1. **Introductory guide to primary source analysis** (suggested for grades 6-8 or beginners).

2. **A sample lesson** in which students create newspapers based on primary sources from the 1920s to analyze *The Great Gatsby*; methods from this literature lesson plan can be extended to analysis of musical pieces and their historical periods.

3. A **database** of articles on music history and composer biographies.

---


Appendix A: Selecting Repertoire

I don’t want to prescribe repertoire here. Every teacher has an idea of their own students, of their own community, of their own audience, that provides a clearer guide to appropriate repertoire selection than what I could suggest in a blanket list. As you are probably aware, many lists of repertoire for ensembles of various grade levels can be found online from which to draw to create a set of repertoire that works for your ensemble.

I do, however, want to urge you to very intentionally think about diversifying your repertoire choices, and just as importantly, to intentionally decide how to frame these choices to students and audiences. Dividing repertoire into delineated categories, such as “world music” or “songs by women composers,” can send the message that particular types of music are tokens to be set aside, as supplements to a standard norm rather than an integral part of a whole.

Instead, I hope that every concert program includes a diversity of repertoire, each piece not labeled as representative of some category but considered as its own unique form of music. Some elements to consider can include: a diversity of composers’ identities, time periods, musical styles, musical traditions, and including secular music, arrangements of popular and folk songs from around the world, and sacred music from a variety of religious traditions. I also caution against programming too much music from non-Western cultures arranged by white composers, especially if part of a “world music” series (at least, please look into the arranger’s background and intent in arranging the piece); if these are programmed, please also add pieces actually written by composers of color or non-Western composers.

Perhaps common threads can be found between pieces from various musical traditions and styles to create themed concert programs. I hope that you will also consider carefully the meaning, the message, and the purpose of each song you select. It can be incredibly powerful, for both performers and audiences, to include songs composed with strong social messages and intents.

In thinking about this, I want to direct you to a few suggestions to start and frame your planning. Here are just a sample of living composers’ works that draw on multiple musical and choral traditions, focus on messages of justice, and provide new ideas of what choral music can be and what powerful change it can support and enact.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Much of the music by these composers is secular, although some draw from varied religious traditions. I would recommend adding folk music from varied religious traditions as well as choral arrangements of traditional religious songs from non-Christian religious traditions.
Composers:

1. **Reena Esmail**
   a. “Indian-American composer Reena Esmail works between the worlds of Indian and Western classical music, and brings communities together through the creation of equitable musical spaces.”
   b. Esmail has written several works for choir as well as for choir with orchestra that combine elements of Indian and Western music, language, and traditions. Her works often carry messages of unity and seek to amplify hidden voices. Some pieces include: *This Love Between Us: Prayers for Unity* (drawing from seven different religious traditions), *I Rise: Women in Song*, *Earth Speaks*, and many shorter works including *Tuttarana*, *White Key*, and others (and some commissioned for children’s choirs specifically) listed on her webpage.

2. **Joel Thompson**
   a. Thompson’s best-known work is *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, which sets the last words of seven young black men killed by police. He has also written shorter works including *Hold Fast to Dreams* and *Caged Bird*.

3. **Caroline Shaw**
   a. One of Shaw’s most extensive works for choir is *To the Hands*, which centers around “the suffering of those around the world seeking refuge, and of our role and responsibility in these global and local crises.”

4. **Craig Hella Johnson**
   a. One of Johnson’s most extensive works for choir, which also includes many movements that could be excerpted for a high school choir to perform independently, is *Considering Matthew Shepard*. This concert-length work reflects on the story of Matthew Shepard, a gay student killed in a 1998 hate crime.

In addition to these and other living composers, I also suggest looking into the works of composers from prior eras whose music is not often performed today (or not widely known in the United States), whose works have been hidden and marginalized due to factors including race.

---

107 “To the Hands - Caroline Shaw.”
108 “Considering Matthew Shepard | Conspirare.”
and gender. Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, and Modesta Bor are several such composers who have written works for choir.
Appendix B: Additional Resources for Teachers

Anti-racist, culturally responsive education and theories:


Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia G. Ramsey, “What if All the Children in My Class Are White? Anti-Bias/Multicultural Education with White Children,” *Young Children* 60, no. 6 (November 2005): 20-26.


Music education (anti-racist, culturally responsive pedagogies, equity, and representation):


- Includes sections on history and educational policy; “Reclaiming Difference in Music Education” (chapters on race and racism in music education, refugee and immigrant students, gender and sexuality, disability, and more); just practices (chapters on including diverse musical creativities, repertoire choices, and more); case studies of projects; and social justice-oriented pedagogies.


Music education alongside language arts/social studies instruction:

References


Derman-Sparks, Louise, and Patricia G. Ramsey. “What if All the Children in My Class Are White? Anti-Bias/Multicultural Education with White Children.” Young Children 60, no. 6 (November 2005): 20-26.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVMWR2SCbOU.


https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/.


https://nafme.org/about/position-statements/inclusivity-diversity/.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4XliPZcQk0.


Kegerreis, Richard Irl. “Flint Central Launches the High School a Cappella Choir Movement.” 


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-UxeBWdno.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kCxF3BZVA0.

“Transforming the Landscape of Teacher Education in Music.” Accessed April 21, 2020.


We Tell Each Other Stories from “Considering Matthew Shepard” by Craig Hella Johnson.


https://nafme.org/music-education-needs-incorporate-diversity/.

https://www.bostonchilddrenschorus.org/educators/professional-development.

https://doi.org/10.1177/105268460001000501.