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## “The Central Nervous System of Their Characters”: Teaching Extra-Musical Skills Through Choral Singing

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### Abstract:

Why is it important for schools to provide their students with music education? We’ve all heard the easy answers: study after study has shown associations between enrollment in arts instruction, especially music instruction, and increased test scores, grades, and other positive academic outcomes. The connection between arts education and academic achievement, however, might be an “epiphenomenon”. That is, strong arts programs are more likely to appear in well-funded schools that probably also offer any number of additional extracurricular and academically enriching programs. If we accept that quantitative work linking music education and academic outcomes for students is never going to be good enough to make the case for the importance of music education, if we admit that trying to demonstrate that causality is a betrayal of what students and music educators have known to be the true value of music education from the beginning, then we must develop a strong, specific vocabulary for speaking about why music education really matters. Telling the school board or policymakers in charge of allocating funding that music students will be able to play a few tunes on the recorder or will know the difference between homophony and hemiola probably won’t lead to much change. What matters most is the genuinely unique way that being part of a musical ensemble in an educational setting can provide students with extra-musical benefits that transcend the offerings of any other academic program.

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***“The Central Nervous  
System of Their  
Characters”:***

**Teaching Extra-Musical  
Skills Through Choral  
Singing**

[Excerpted version]

Dan Rubins

Education Studies Capstone  
Project

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## I.

### INTRODUCTION

#### WHY MUSIC?

Why is it important for schools to provide their students with music education? We've all heard the easy answers: study after study has shown associations between enrollment in arts instruction, especially music instruction, and increased test scores, grades, and other positive academic outcomes (Southgate 2009; Walker 1995; Johnson & Memmott 2006 etc.) Among low-income students, those with high-arts high school experiences are more likely to score all As and Bs than their low-arts peers, four times less likely to drop out of school by 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and less likely to report that they are bored in school most of the time (Catterall 1998). Students who are engaged with the arts in schools have higher GPAs, higher enrollment at four-year colleges, and are three times more likely to earn bachelors' degrees than their peers who do not participate in the arts (Office of the NYC Comptroller 2014). Specifically, among low-income students, 71% of students with arts-rich experiences attend college vs. 48% of low-arts students (Catterall 2012).

That's all well and good, but how exactly does that work? What makes the arts ideally suited to having this all-purpose impact? If readers accept what these scholars imply – that arts participation influences or causes academic achievement – then, in addition to the possible cognitive link between the arts and academics (music improves cognitive functions like the neural encoding of speech – differentiating speech among background noise – according to some studies), other possible mechanisms include the

qualities and skills bred by arts learning. These include self-confidence, perseverance, connecting with mentors, etc. which all may transfer into the academic domain (Winner & Cooper 2000, who also argue that teachers must explicitly explain to students how these skills might transfer in order to see an effect.)

The connection between arts education and academic achievement, however, might be an “epiphenomenon” (Winner & Cooper 2000). That is, strong arts programs are more likely to appear in well-funded schools that probably also offer any number of additional extracurricular and academically enriching programs. Since non-experimental studies cannot separate the specific effects of other school (or community) programs on students’ academic performance or behaviors, making any causal influence about the power of arts education on academic achievement essentially ignores the bevy of potentially influential opportunities outside of the arts that arts-rich schools are likely to present. Moreover, there could well be a causal relationship in the other direction; students who are already high-achieving academically may be more likely to participate in the arts (Elpus & Abril 2011; Vaughan & Winner 2000), whether because their creativity or motivation has helped them in both academic and artistic spheres, or because they believe that arts participation will assist them in their college application process.

Most of the researchers who present correlations between arts participation and academic achievements do describe their findings in those terms – they are simply correlative, not causal. Unsurprisingly, though, many of the most expansive and insightful reports originate as commissions from arts advocacy organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and Americans for the Arts; despite researchers clearly outlining the limitations of their work within the reports, these studies often can

be framed by their funders in ways which misrepresent the integrity of the research. In an Introduction to an NEA study (Catterall 2012), Chairman Rocco Landesman declares that, while “this report is quick to caution that it does not make the case for a causal relationship between the arts and these outcomes, ... as a non-researcher, I have no hesitation about drawing my own conclusions” (p. 5). Over a decade earlier, Catterall himself had prematurely anticipated the impact of his own research, declaring that his own “unprecedented ... findings are likely to garner a warm reception by readers necessarily lacking much in the way of hard data” (Catterall 1998, p. 1).

The strongest response to this sort of well-meaning attempt to infer a causal relationship between in-school arts participation and academic achievement comes from Winner & Cooper (2000). Analyzing several different studies that suggest that arts instruction fuels positive academic outcomes, they conclude that there is no statistically significant evidence that would even convincingly imply causality (especially given that most of the studies involved voluntary participation and little randomization). They also posit that researchers’ insistence on seeking a causal pathway may be culturally-based: in some European countries, including the United Kingdom, students who perform poorly in academic subjects are pushed towards the more forgiving arts classes, whereas, in the United States, the accumulation of extracurricular arts activities often goes hand in hand with the high-achieving college application process.

In terms of their role in furthering the development of arts education research, such condemnatory pieces may risk additionally alienating those policymakers who may be skeptical of arts education advocates’ arguments. Winner & Cooper’s ultimate service to the field, as they see it, is to urge advocates to “refrain from making utilitarian

arguments in favor of the arts” but instead to produce “stronger, more theory-driven research” (p. 67). The attempt to free arts education researchers from the difficult bonds of data that refuse to demonstrate causality may have been well-meaning, especially since it predated the intensely data-driven landscape post-No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the 2001 legislation which raised the focus on high-stakes testing in language arts and math at the expense of time and funding for the arts. Perhaps, had NCLB not passed the following year, leading to data-driven cuts of arts programs, such pleas for a more qualitative approach might have been heeded. However, as the stream of quantitative arts education research that followed such a scathing review of the literature suggests, policymakers remain far more interested in those “utilitarian” claims about how the arts contribute to overall school performance, not the holistic growth made possible by participation in the arts. Despite such critiques, researchers have continued to present studies that admit their limitations while arts education advocates have persistently framed such findings in the language of causality.

Not only do these studies fail to show causality, and thereby fail to make a convincing impression on policymakers, but they also suggest that the value of the arts lie intrinsically in their contribution to students’ academic and test-taking abilities. The artists and teachers who care most about providing music education know well that academic achievement is not the only, or the principal, purpose of bringing arts to schoolchildren. Nor is providing students with musical skills and sharpening students’ musical abilities the only thing that students clearly gain from participation in music classes. The extra-musical argument – that the arts matter for what they provide students in and of themselves – can be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Students who learn

how to appreciate and respond to works of art and to create their own art can move forward with their “effort to make sense of the common world” (Greene 1981, p. 118). Maxine Greene’s theory of aesthetic education derives from John Dewey’s writings on the universality of aesthetic experience: art is for *everyone* and all observers of art need to learn how to engage with and respond to the arts they encounter. Greene re-conceptualized Dewey in the context of education, arguing that the creation of real art was too often understood as being part of an “adult world” and that students should be given the tools and the trust to find new ways of looking at the world around them. Teachers, according to Greene, both specialists and generalists, should move away from skill-based pedagogies in order to move their students’ thinking into a freer “artistic-aesthetic domain.”

Music education, then, can be indispensable for students to find comfortable ways of expressing themselves that are not being meticulously assessed, scored, and judged. Rather than requiring standardized answers, music education programs ask students to express themselves as *individuals*, to find their own unique language and to define and realize their own vision – there is no where else in the school day for students to make their work entirely their own.

Students who do not excel academically or feel comfortable in the classroom can find a home in music and have a reason to come to school every day, a real excitement and motivation to get up in the morning.

Students who do not have access to the arts in their schools or communities – predominantly minority students in low-SES communities – are denied the development

of self-confidence in their own voices that students in arts-rich schools experience every day.

The arts ensure that students of all academic rankings and backgrounds can excel by thinking outside the box and find a home *in school*; without the arts, only those students who fit neatly inside those prescribed boxes can be completely successful.

## **THE STUDY**

Preaching this isn't enough, though – I want to *show* this side of arts education to you, in action, on the ground. If we accept that quantitative work linking music education and academic outcomes for students is never going to be good enough to make the case for the importance of music education, if we admit that trying to demonstrate that causality is a betrayal of what students and music educators have known to be the true value of music education from the beginning, then we must develop a strong, specific vocabulary for speaking about why music education really matters. Telling the school board or policymakers in charge of allocating funding that music students will be able to play a few tunes on the recorder or will know the difference between *homophony* and *hemiola* probably won't lead to much change. What matters most is the genuinely unique way that being part of a musical ensemble in an educational setting can provide students with *extra-musical* benefits that transcend the offerings of any other academic program.

As a choral singer with experience leading children's choirs (or, sometimes more aptly, clumps of children who happened to be singing), I decided the best way I would be able to do this would be to find four contrasting choral experiences available to kids from

kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the New Haven area. The four choirs and their leading conductors are as follows:

- 1) United Girls' Choir: a tuition-based community choral program with 550 singers ages 6-18 throughout 32 ensembles in nine towns in the New Haven area. Conducted by Rebecca Rosenbaum for the past eighteen years.
- 2) Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School Choir: an arts magnet New Haven high school with 98 singers across grades 9-12. Conducted by Harriet Alfred for the past eighteen years.
- 3) Hopkins Concert Choir: a private school high school choir in New Haven with 36 singers across grades 9-12. Conducted by Erika Schroth for the past two years.
- 4) Morse Chorale: one of three free community choral programs through Yale's Music in Schools program with 15-20 singers ages 8-18 from a variety of New Haven public schools. Conducted by Stephanie Tubiolo for the past two years.

## **TEACHING CHORAL TEACHERS HOW TO TEACH**

One of the universals for all the choral leaders I met with, whether graduates of choral conducting or music education programs, was the absence of any coursework focusing on these extra-musical benefits.

Dr. Colleen Conway, a music education professor at the University of Michigan who also serves as editor-in-chief of *Arts Education Policy Review*, is in the business of teaching future chorus teachers how to make an impact. Music education students at Dr.

Conway's program at the undergraduate level take courses in both the education and music departments. Students will take "nine credits of coursework about how to create democratic citizens and how to work with students of diverse backgrounds," Dr. Conway explained.

The lessons are there. The issue is how well students learn them since the purely music and the purely education courses rarely overlap.

"Not all of the students figure out how to incorporate that," Dr. Conway admitted. "The smarter students are able to connect the coursework in general ed."

Dr. Conway, who specializes in research on student teaching and training for music educators, argues that the most critical factor in whether or not a choral teacher will be pedagogically conscious of how to foster community, leadership, and other extra-musical skills, is the quality of his or her student teaching placement. Music teachers are least prepared to make an extra-musical input when their mentor teacher in a student teacher year says, "We're going to make them sing beautifully at any cost, nobody talk to each other, no decisions made by kids." As an educator of choral educators, Dr. Conway said one of her most important responsibilities is, therefore, "making that placement mindfully."

Only one of the four central instructors in this study actually completed a student teaching year as a music educator. The other three all attended undergraduate and graduate school in choral conducting or music performance. As a result, most of what they have learned about teaching has been on the job.

Harriet Alfred, the Choir Director at Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School told me that, as a Music Education student at Hampton University, there was "not

a whole lot” of discussion of non-musical pedagogy in her undergraduate program, but perhaps that wouldn’t make a huge impact on all music educators-in-training. “My friends and I talk about this. Teachers are not made, they’re born. You can improve your skills, you can enhance what you already have, but if it’s not in there, you’re not going to be successful.”

### **SO ...WHY SING?**

“‘Music makes you smarter’ is really a slippery slope,” Dr. Conway told me. “A lot of us in arts ed policy wish that there were more [focus in advocacy efforts on] the unique nature of what music has to offer, not that your SAT scores and ACT scores will be higher if you’re in an ensemble.”

For Dr. Conway, the true magic of music education, especially choral education, comes from the “aesthetic quality” of the art form itself. Student engagement with the text of choral pieces and the ways in which composers can lift the thoughts of text into music provide a truly singular opportunity for students to respond intellectually and emotionally.

Dr. Conway also points to the typical high school chorus as often the only high school setting that reaches across all types of students – athletes, artists, etc. “A lot of directors make an effort to have ‘come all and sing’ opportunities,” she said, through which the choral experience promotes “an awareness of others that are less like you but yet the same ‘cause you’re all singing.”

Let me introduce one of the major questions I brought into this study: How do choral instructors conceive of the purpose of these extra-musical outcomes? In other

words, *why* should students be learning skills outside of basic musicianship and vocal performance?

In one strand of thought, the extra-musical outcomes – leadership, community, responsibility, etc. – help to construct an environment conducive to excellent music-making. The extra-musical outcomes are byproducts of a process that will lead to improved musicianship and vocal production, but the end goal is the music itself.

In the alternate model, the one Dr. Conway supports, what matters is the process itself. The success of a choral program can be measured not by how the students sound at each concert but what experiences and personal skill-sets students have accumulated over the course of the year.

“You have to sing well or no wants to hear you,” Dr. Conway admitted, but “the beautiful product is not enough.”

Dr. Conway pointed to particular teachers in the Ann Arbor area with whom she places students who do especially excellent work at providing extra-musical benefits to students, largely by being upfront at the beginning of the year about what they hope students will learn and get out of the program. “You have to say to kids, ‘What are we doing here?’” Dr. Conway argued. “You can’t just do it and expect kids to catch on to it.”

The best choral instructors, Dr. Conway asserted, are those who empower students in a variety of ways: allowing students to plan choir tips, conduct some pieces, have a say in choosing repertoire. “Your role in the room,” Dr. Conway told me, should be “as facilitator, organizer, planner, rather than director” and the best choral teachers bring the “ownership of the program back to the students.”

Tom Brand, the founder of the United Girls' Choir program, made the following claim about his program: "Putting on concerts for an audience is a sort of byproduct. What we're trying to do is make a difference in the lives of the choristers, providing an opportunity that cultivates leadership in them...It's sort of like we happen to do music at the same time, but if we had to choose one or the other, we wouldn't be doing any music...You could do that without ever putting on a concert. The performances are sort of a means to an end, they represent something. We're actually trying to sell something that is invisible."

Through this project, I hope to make the invisible visible, to show to you the tangible, perhaps replicable ways, that choral instructors impact their students' lives. Whenever possible I have tried to allow the teachers and their students to speak for themselves. All *you* have to do is listen carefully and imagine the music.

## II.

### GENERAL NOTES

One early text that poses questions about the role of a choir in a school or community outside pure music-making is an odd little book released by Teachers College, Columbia University in 1948. *The Education of School Music-Teachers for Community Music Leadership* presents an overdone study of the preparation levels of choral instructors in South Carolina for their positions in schools, churches, and other music-making organizations. I bring up this yellowing text not because of its arguments (which are fairly vague and inconclusive) but because of two assumptions, or choices, it makes about all the choirs in the study: the singers are white and the leaders are white women.

In the methodology page, Jack McLaurin Watson, the researcher, announces that the study will be limited to “the white population” because, as he writes, soberingly, “The dual educational system in existence in South Carolina made the first delimitation practical; the absence of a program of study for school music teachers in the Negro system made it unavoidable.” We are not so far away, temporally, from this world of segregated song.

I expected, going into this study, for repertoire selection to be a defining aspect of each choral instructor’s engagement with inclusion in the group. I thought that I would see a spectrum of consciousness about how to use culturally diverse repertoire to support and recognize a diverse body of students. What I found fascinating is that, different as each choir is from all the others, most of their repertoire is virtually indistinguishable.

Yes, Co-Op High School's specialty is spirituals. Yes, Elm City Girls' Choir sometimes sing in major choral-orchestral works like the Bernstein *Mass*. But, each choral instructor aims to program music in traditional choral repertoire (usually renaissance and classical periods), gospel, spiritual, folk, pop, and world music genres each year, in addition to the standard middle school/high school choral music fare. This comes from a musical perspective (expanding students' singing techniques), an educational perspective (broadening students' awareness of the music of varied historical moments and cultures), and a sense of obligation: this is simply what is done now. In a city like New Haven, with a 42% African American and 41% Hispanic population in public schools<sup>1</sup>, it would be unthinkable to program a repertoire composed for, and by, white singers. As a result, repertoire selection will not be a major focus of any of my discussions of the choirs I observed – I am more interested here in the contrasts between the choirs and their conductors than the similarities.

That said, and returning to the racialized expectation of the little Watson book, I want to give a disclaimer that, while race may not be an explicitly central part of the stories I will tell, it is a central concern of choral education (and choral music) nationally. The African American and European choral traditions do often diverge stylistically in tone and expression. Gospel and spirituals, performed by predominantly white choirs under white conductors, will never be the genuine article. That, however, while often problematic, does not excuse the lack of diversity nationwide in choral singing, and teachers may sometimes struggle for strategies outside of diversifying repertoire to make

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nhps.net/nhpsdemographics>

the school or community chorus into something that all students see as an appealing, inclusive space.

The remnants of that “dual educational system” remain potent – students of color are still far less likely than their white peers to attend schools with excellent music resources, or to have the socioeconomic opportunity to pursue the musical arts outside of school. Between high-SES and low-SES schools, there are startling imbalances in access to music instruction, number of arts courses, and dedicated arts spaces for both elementary and secondary schools, according to an Institute of Education Sciences report (Parsad & Spiegelman 2012). To offer a few of the most disturbing statistics: of the highest-SES schools (those with under 25% of the students on free and reduced lunch), 96% of high schools offer music classes vs. 81% of lowest-SES schools (those with over 75% of the students on free and reduced lunch). Of elementary schools with music classes, 82% of high-SES schools have a dedicated music room as opposed to 65% of low-SES schools, and low-SES schools that do have music programs allot much less instruction time to them than do high-SES schools. Among high schools with music classes, 62% of high-SES schools offer more than five courses whereas only 35% of low-SES schools do. In all of these cases, there is a steep drop-off in resources for the bottom category of SES – that is, schools with 50-75% of students on free and reduced lunch have arts resources much closer to the highest-SES schools than to the lowest-SES schools.

In competitive audition-based choirs, then, throughout all grade levels, students with access to more musical resources often have an advantage over their peers. This will become important in my discussion of the United Girls’ Choir program alone since only

UGC has a rigorous audition process. Co-Op's High School Choir and Morse Chorale are both majority African American, like the school and district they reflect. The Hopkins Concert Choir, while largely white, draws on a school population that is only 30% students of color (the choral program approximately matches that statistic)<sup>2</sup>.

The Watson book concludes with the assertion that the average public school teaching career in South Carolina last under ten years because “she usually marries and assumes a role in the adult life of the community.” He goes on to ask, “What about the post-teaching days of the trained music teacher? Would not her role in the community be more satisfying to herself and more productive to society if she felt confident of her ability to use her special competency in the larger field of adult musical activity?” (p. 86) This view of the trained woman in society is antiquated, sure, but the general expectation that women choral conductors go into teaching and male choral conductors pursue professional music careers persists. Throughout the book, Watson consistently uses female pronouns to describe all hypothetical choral leaders, never acknowledging that he is choosing to do so. All four of the instructors profiled in this study are women (Tom Brand, not a woman, founded United Girls' Choir as their sole conductor but now plays only an administrative role). Harriet Alfred, director of the Co-Op choir, is the only woman of color profiled. Demographically, while a sample size of four is evidently not sufficient to make any conclusive claims, a 2015 study revealed that, among test-takers seeking music education certification, over 86% were white and over 56% were female. The conversation turned only to issues of the director's gender in my United Girls' Choir interviews, the only single-sex choir in the study. All of the women included, however,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hopkins.edu/Page/About-Us/Hopkins-at-a-Glance>

have trained in a skill-set and worked in a field dominated on the *educational* side by women and on the “*professional*” side by men. The Hopkins Concert Choir and Co-Op High School Choir struggle to recruit an equal number of male voices – note, too, in the Hopkins section, the performative hypermasculinity of some of the basses and tenors in the chorus. Male singers often continue to feel like they must justify or explain their presence in the chorus room, perceiving it as a female-centric space.

In some cases, minority students may not feel that arts curricula adequately reflect or respect diverse students’ cultural backgrounds or experiences. Traditional music curricula emphasizes the Western canon, specifically white male composers, and music educators rarely engage students in conversations about the intersections of race and music history, even when ensembles perform spirituals or Latin American music rooted in historical experiences (Bradley 2007). The gender discrepancy in music class enrollment (girls greatly outnumber boys) may be due to over a century of stereotyping of music study as a particularly home-oriented or effeminate activity (Koza 1993). It should be noted, however, that while males enroll in arts classes at lower rates than females, and minority students enroll in arts class at lower rates than white students, the loss of post-NCLB arts opportunities did not alter the gap between gender-based arts enrollment (girls and boys lost out on the arts to the same degree); meanwhile, it devastatingly widened the arts access gap between minority students and whites. In other words, gender differences in arts enrollment can only be attributed to personal choice, even if those choices are strongly influenced by cultural norms and stereotypes, but instead racial and SES differences in arts enrollment respond both to personal choice within schools and to systemic cuts in arts education across schools.

In the pages that follow, I will share my observations from visits to four very different choirs, along with my conversations with the leaders of each choral program. It is critical to remember that my observations are simply snapshots of each choir. I was lucky enough to get to sing alongside two of the choirs – the Elm City Girls’ Choir and the Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School Chorus – while conducting this research, but even a collaborative musical experience does not mean that I can guarantee that I have understood the essence of each choir.

I began each interview by asking the instructor whether the rehearsal I had observed had been typical or not, in terms of music-making, behavior, etc. In each instance, the choir was at a different stage in the rehearsal process: for example, Hopkins High School was six days away from their major Spring Concert while Elm City Girls’ Choir was preparing to work with a guest conductor later that week. The rehearsal techniques that I observed, not to mention the pace of the rehearsal and the quality of the music itself, unquestionably depended upon such variables.

It would therefore be unfair to make any comparative claims about the choirs in terms of *better* or *worse* or *more* or *less effective* pedagogies. Indeed, such comparisons would go against the purpose of my project, which is not to pit choral instructors against each other but to demonstrate the immense capability of choral leaders to respond in diverse ways to the needs of their students and to the communities in which their choirs exist. Nor can I make the argument that these choirs run the full gamut of K-12 choral experiences: missing from this study are in-school public school choirs at schools without an explicit art focus, choirs linked to religious organizations (although United Girls’ Choir is based on the church-based Trinity Boys’ Choir model), and – perhaps most

importantly – choirs that are not very good or are led by music teachers who lack confidence in their own skill-sets.

Michael Yaffe, Associate Dean of the Yale School of Music, who oversees the Music in Schools program (including the Morse Chorale, profiled here), warned me that music teachers notoriously boast about the successes of their choirs. That has proven to be true. Each of the choral instructors interviewed for this project believe fiercely in the power of music and in the potency of their pedagogy to transform students' lives. The anecdotal evidence, however, supports those claims in every case. My study, then, is as much as about the reflective process with which each instructor engages as it is about the active process of leading a choir. I believe that I saw proof of the development of each extra-musical quality that the teachers told me were at work – leadership, community, flexibility, risk-taking, and responsibility, to name some categories broadly. But, even if you are unconvinced that the instructors have been successful (or unsuccessful) in doing what they say they do, my hope is that you will recognize that conscious engagement with the extra-musical outcomes described in this study, comprise the first, all-too-rare first step to bringing those outcomes to fruition.

I should also note that I have changed the first names of all students whom I met or observed over the course of the study.

#### IV.

### **“I CANNOT FIX SILENCE”: THE COOPERATIVE ARTS AND HUMANITIES HIGH SCHOOL CHOIR**

The alarm went off at 6:30 a. m. I don't think I'd ever woken up so early in college even though it was my normal wakeup time in high school. I somehow got dressed, showered, and stumbled in the early morning light down the street to the Cooperative Arts and Humanities School.

That's nothing compared to Harriet Alfred's morning routine. "My alarm goes off at 4:50 'cause I have to start the snooze process," Ms. Alfred, who lives in Hamden (a 15-minute drive from New Haven), said. "I come in energized. If I come in sluggish, they'll be sluggish. It's almost like a professional performing arts career, they don't really care how you feel as a performer. If they pay for a ticket, they want to see a show. 'We're supposed to be educated, you're the teacher, you're supposed to be superwoman.'"

After a pause, Ms. Alfred added, "I have 211 sick days. I need to start taking some."

At the beginning of every school year, the student causing Ms. Alfred the biggest problem in her freshman/sophomore high school choir is Avery Wilson. She can't send him to the principal. She can't talk to him after class either. The problem is that Avery Wilson graduated Co-Op (as the school is informally known) a few years ago but not before leaving an indelible mark on his choral program by reaching the Knockouts round of Season 3 of *The Voice*. (He would later sign a recording deal with Clive Davis.)

“They’ve seen, they’ve heard, and some of them are intimidated. ‘Is that what she’s looking for?’” Ms. Alfred explained. “Actually, no. I don’t want Averys. That could be a pain in the keester. Actually, he had a good work ethic, but when their heads get like this, I can’t work with them. I don’t like a whole lot of soloists, that can be a pain in the behind.”

If any New Haven high school choir is going to have a whole lot of soloists, though, it would be Co-Op’s. Co-Op is an arts magnet high school, which means that its students get in through a lottery, not by audition (like comparable public schools, such as New York’s LaGuardia High School, known as ‘the *Fame* school’). On the one hand, since it is part of New Haven’s magnet program, Co-Op’s theme is the arts (its motto is “Celebrate all the arts in all that you do!”), so many students would be turned off by the arts focus: each student majors in either vocal music, instrumental music, theatre, dance, visual arts, or creative writing. On the other hand, the magnet designation means that Co-Op receives extra funding that New Haven’s largest non-magnet schools, Wilbur Cross and James Hillhouse High Schools, do not. Rather than send their kids to a poorly-resourced school, parents who win the Co-Op lottery may enroll their children regardless of interest in the arts, a problem that the arts instructors, like Ms. Alfred, simply have to work around.

It helps, of course, that freshmen in the choral program rehearse ninety minutes a day, five days a week. “I say, ‘you have the seat, you have to earn it,’” Ms. Alfred told me. On top of their choral responsibilities, vocal majors at Co-Op take two years of music theory, and can choose from electives in recording arts, piano, composition, and AP theory. Many students come to Co-Op and “don’t know how a whole note from a

doughnut,” but Ms. Alfred urges them to apply what they’re learning in music theory and to use appropriate terminology (system, measure, beat, etc.) to ask or answer questions. In order to balance the choir, Ms. Alfred also opens it up to students in string and band ensembles, especially male students, who split their rehearsal time between the groups.

But, “if anybody misses the concert, they are really dead weight, I don’t need them,” Ms. Alfred asserted, before softening and telling me about a boy who was signed up for the vocal program against his will but ultimately came to be glad he was part of the choir.

The freshman/sophomore 7:35 a. m. rehearsal I attended began with Ms. Alfred taking attendance, offering a running commentary if any students were missing: “Come on, Christian, drag it in! Jerome? Clarissa? Henry? I’m gonna hurt him. Jasmine? TJ? I’m gonna kill him.”

Rehearsal elements that, in other circumstances, would seem to be clearly rooted in a pedagogical philosophy are often practical in Co-Op’s heavily bureaucratized system. For example, students lead warm-ups for two primary reasons: firstly, if Ms. Alfred is out sick, her substitute will not be a music teacher, and a student-led warm-up ensures that some productive singing can happen in her absence. Secondly, it gives her a chance to take attendance through Co-Op’s temperamental electronic system. First, Ms. Alfred must take attendance in her homeroom class (mainly consisting of her freshman/sophomore choral students) at 7:30. By 7:35, the rest of her choir has begun to stream in, and she must take attendance *again*, five minutes later, even though many of the students have not left the room.

The morning that I observed, midway through the second round of attendance, the software logged Ms. Alfred out.

She turned to me and sighed: “They make us depend on technology and it doesn’t work right. Now I need to send an email. If I could just take attendance once and be done, we’d be alright.”

She had to begin taking attendance *again* -- luckily, the students leading the warm-up were perfectly confident in continuing for as long as necessary. (At the end of class, Ms. Alfred must then electronically record each student’s participation score for the day out of 10 – students lose points for behavioral issues.)

For concerts, students wear choral robes, which live in Ms. Alfred’s classroom during the year. There, too, the shift from the black dresses and tuxedos that preceded Ms. Alfred’s tenure at Co-Op was pragmatic: in addition to hoping to save the school and families the expense, a robe can be worn by multiple people over the years. Ms. Alfred encountered a robe crisis early on in her career when her thirty-voice red-robed choir expanded to fifty, but, instead of receiving the precise same color, Ms. Alfred was sent an order of dark burgundy robes. Not to be undone by this error, Ms. Alfred made the distinctive choice that the girls would wear the red robes and the boys would wear burgundy: as the robes have begun to get older over the past two decades, she is moving towards replacing all robes with burgundy, but, she reminded me, “as long as we sound good, nobody ever talks about it. That’s the story of the robes.”

The other major rehearsal element outside of Ms. Alfred’s control is the need to conduct district assessments. These take the form of a Role Call, a sight-singing exercise

developed from their pre-existing rubrics by Ms. Alfred and Danielle Storey-Carson, the choir director at Wilbur Cross High School, to meet the new standards.

The Role Call assessment, tedious as it may be, has become, in many ways, the heart of Ms. Alfred's community-building curriculum. (Dr. Conway, of the University of Michigan, described quartet tests in front of peers as a great way for students to gain confidence in performing in front of others – Ms. Alfred takes the extra-musical benefits of the assessment to the next level.) Due to time constraints, the Role Calls must take place during choral rehearsals. Over the course of each semester, Ms. Alfred will call up four singers (one from each section) to sing an excerpt from the repertoire in a quartet. She will note down and score various musical elements – intonation, diction, etc. – and then will give each singer individual feedback while the rest of the class talks quietly. At the rehearsal I attended, she conducted three role calls, which took up a good fifteen minutes of rehearsal. That may sound like a hefty break for most of the singers in the room: Except.

The first Role Call included a hesitant soprano with a quiet but pure sound. As soon as she stopped singing at the end of the assigned passage, the entire room exploded into applause and cheers.

“Now, you all know, did we hear that in August?” Ms. Alfred asked, standing up. “I’ll take all the credit.”

When she had finished giving the soprano feedback, she gave her a hug. (Ms. Alfred told me that she is careful to make sure that her feedback is always constructive. “I learned that from my psychiatry teacher,” she explained. “It’s a sandwich. You start positive, put that negative in the middle, but sandwich it with some positives.”)

The last Role Call was even more evident of the community feel of the choir. The singer most under the microscope was a very tentative alto. As she sang, singers on the sidelines danced along to the music, calling out support throughout the test.

“Let me tell you something about this one,” Ms. Alfred declared when the test was complete. “Altos, she showed up!”

The room erupted into shouts, echoing Ms. Alfred’s proclamation.

“She showed up!”

“That’s right, Bethany!”

“We’ve been fighting all year, every day,” Ms. Alfred told Bethany, before lowering her voice: “I’m impressed.”

At the end of class, Bethany raced over to Ms. Alfred’s desk, eager to recount her Role Call experience – and survival.

“I couldn’t stop shaking,” she said, sounding relieved.

“But you did it!” Ms. Alfred replied.

The students grow to understand that Ms. Alfred is “not looking for the next Whitney,” as she said to me. “I just want you to be the best community ensemble singer that you can be.”

This knowledge shapes the way that the students support each other. They did not give Bethany a standing ovation for her performance or for what she sounded like but for her courage in singing the alto line on her own and for her confidence in standing up to sing in front of the class.

Later, when I asked Ms. Alfred about the Role Call and how it fits into her class, she spoke specifically about Bethany’s struggle throughout the year: “That last girl to

sing is a milestone. She might be labeled chronically depressed. I talk to her, try to boost her self-esteem, it goes beyond this classroom, it has to. It has to go beyond what happens just in this hour and a half period.”

Ninety minutes a day, five days a week might sound like a lot of time, but it’s not very much for Ms. Alfred to accomplish all that she intends beyond the singing.

“They come with a baggage you would not believe,” Ms. Alfred explained. “I build a family unit.”

Going into this project, I expected that I would be able to define the terms ahead of time for the extra-musical benefits I would see. I had broken down what I would be looking for into five categories: *trust, inclusion, community, responsibility, and self-expectation*. (Leaving out *leadership* was just an oversight, as five minutes with the United Girls’ Choir revealed to me.) Quickly, though, I realized that choral instructors often define their own most important terms, and that the words that they choose matter. Ms. Alfred’s insistence that her choir is a *family* isn’t just a cozy way to say that she hopes to build community – by teaching her students that the Co-Op Choir *is* a family, she ensures that they believe it as well.

Ms. Alfred stays after school on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays for at least an hour and a half to make herself available to students to catch up on music or just to talk. I noticed that much of rehearsal – during the warm-ups, in between Role Calls – was spent with students coming up to Ms. Alfred with questions, often while the rest of the class sat having side conversations. This might be distracting or inefficient, but, then again, this choir rehearses for seven and a half hours a week so allowing students to

interact freely with each other and with their teacher may be crucial to creating the sense that this is a safe, home space.

During select class periods, Ms. Alfred holds “family meetings” for students to talk about issues or ideas that are important to them. Role Call, in addition to being the locus of students supporting each other in the moment, also provides an opportunity for mentorship, with sophomores showing freshmen how to follow a musical score (for the singers totally new to written music) and explaining how the Role Call works.

How did Ms. Alfred develop her pedagogical model and find her place at Co-Op? Throughout her elementary school and high school years, her teachers continuously foiled her attempts to leave her school choir, insisting that she had the voice to pursue a career in music, and that she would benefit from expanding her comfort with choral literature. She received a scholarship to Hampton University where she sang under Roland Carter, a leading advocate for expanding choral music in the African American tradition. Halfway through her undergraduate degree, Ms. Alfred switched her major from vocal performance to music education.

She got her first teaching job in New Haven after college, leading elementary school choir classes for ten years, afraid to make the move to high school because of her limited piano skills. When the Co-Op position opened up in 1998, she jumped at the opportunity but instantly regretted it when she encountered the undisciplined group of singers she was to teach. After about three years, though, “I was rolling,” having graduated the less dedicated singers. All students would be aware of her three-word message for how to behave in her class: “I don’t play.”

She recalled a recent moment in which she had to lead forty members of her chorus through the school hallways so the students could cast their votes for student council representatives. As other teachers barked commands, one young educator looked at her mouth agape. ““They just move when you say move,”” she exclaimed in disbelief.

Ms. Alfred knows the reason for that: “They know I respect them, they know I support them, and when you give that to them, they give it back to you.”

The choral family is presumably what makes the kids respect Ms. Alfred so much. At the beginning of rehearsal, the kids shut up as soon as she called out, “Hands up!”

She asks the kids not only for respect for their teacher and for each other but for other students outside of Co-Op as well. When I visited the Co-Op rehearsal, the students were preparing for the New Haven High School Choral Festival, a partnership between the Yale Glee Club and three high school choirs, Co-Op’s, Wilbur Cross High School’s, and High School in the Community’s. Co-Op’s choir is easily the strongest of the three participating schools, but Ms. Alfred reassured me that she tells her students that, “we’re going to sound good only because you’re here every day. I want my kids to go in there with a sense of humility. I want them to hear [groups that are] better than them so they can sit down a little bit. There’s somebody there better than you all the time and don’t you forget it. There’s just not a lot of that in New Haven, unfortunately.”

I should also mention that I was impressed by the respect that the singers showed for me. Early in the rehearsal, a singer ran over to me to lend me her music folder. When Ms. Alfred switched from one song to another, a second singer came over to make sure I had found the right piece of music.

That folder is full of diverse repertoire, but the choir excels at gospel and spirituals, Ms. Alfred's favorite genre. The songs rehearsed on the morning I attended included a few standard high school choral pieces and arrangements as well as a challenging piece in Swahili and two gospel pieces. The freshmen and sophomore choir is also singing a James Bond song. In the junior and senior choir, Ms. Alfred noted, "I'm kicking their butt with a madrigal called *Come Away, Sweet Love*." Throughout the year, she aims to introduce some baroque and classical pieces, songs from the pop world, "something Chanukah-ish that deviates from the normal Christian sacred music," and several movements of the seasonally-performed Handel's *Messiah*, in order to give the students the ability to "go and sit in [on any Messiah performance] and be proud 'cause you know this. We have to keep music alive in our communities."

Ms. Alfred emphasizes a cappella repertoire so that students can fully watch her when she comes out from behind the piano and so that their performance opportunities are not limited to venues with in-tune pianos. In addition to their three or four standard performances each year, including the Yale festival and an MLK program, small groups of the choir are sometimes asked to perform at a function or elementary school when students can be released from their classes. Most recently, Ms. Alfred had brought students to perform as she accepted an award at Barnard Environmental Studies Magnet School for her musical contribution to New Haven Public Schools. (Ms. Alfred also was the 2008 New Haven Teacher of the Year.)

Empowering students to sing confidently (even if, as my own choir teacher used to say, they are "brave and bold and wrong") fuels Ms. Alfred's pedagogy.

“Every voice is important,” Ms. Alfred told me. “As long as you let something out that we can work with. I cannot fix silence.”

During the rehearsal proper, one soprano came in very loudly and confidently – at completely the wrong time.

“You know what?” Ms. Alfred cried. “That’s the loudest I think I’ve heard you this whole class! She came in wrong and strong and I ain’t mad at you. I heard it, she meant that thing.”

Achieving similar goals, Ms. Alfred’s easy-going but Socratic rehearsal style keeps students on their toes without singling anyone out against their will. Cutting sopranos off midway through a phrase in *Ascribe to the Lord*, a gospel piece, she asked the class, “Was I justified in stopping them? Why did I stop?”

One student offered, “Articulation,” but Ms. Alfred pushed him further, asking, “Articulate the what?”

“The accent mark,” he responded.

Later, Ms. Alfred, asking her singers to punch each note in the same song, taking a new, accented breath with each re-entry, paused to reflect, “Y’all gonna have some good little abs.”

Curiously, perhaps, Ms. Alfred is largely a one-woman show in terms of the choir’s management. There are no student officers in the choir – “I remember even in high school, the function was really, ‘what do you do?’” she recalled of her own high school choir’s student leadership. Students do run warm-ups and occasionally conduct a piece, but, with the exception of a Teaching Assistant, usually a senior, who helps out in

the freshman/sophomore chorus with sectionals and around the classroom, Ms. Alfred has no official help.

She admitted that sometimes that approach can be limiting. “I know I tend to be more, ‘you’re going to do what I tell you to do,’” but, in 2010 or so, the Co-Op principal suggested to Ms. Alfred that she encourage more student-driven work. This led to students developing their own performances for a talent show, leading to the formation of a smaller vocal group group, which still sings together.

I asked Ms. Alfred how being part of the New Haven Public School system interferes or impacts the way that she runs rehearsal. Without hesitating, she rattled off seven major changes she would like to see, beginning with a more streamlined attendance system.

She would like to have an accompanist so that she can focus on conducting and encourage the students to watch her when they sing. She would like the school to offer private voice lessons to vocal majors to “make this closer to a conservatory-style music school.” She would like a bigger room – her complete choir is now 98 singers, and she can barely fit the freshman/sophomore chorus in the risers. Speaking of which, she would like more opportunities to bring the entire choir together to rehearse – as it stands now, she only has the whole ninth to twelfth grade group twice before each concert.

At the beginning of the year, the program could benefit from an interview or vocal assessment – not an audition per se but an opportunity for Ms. Alfred to know where students stand vocally and in their dedication to singing.

She also has major qualms about the district’s process for assessing her teaching, which focuses on evaluating her lesson plans. “You can put anything on paper, I can put

all kind of bull down, I can write up a lesson plan like nobody's business and then do nothing," she lamented. Instead, "come see what I'm doing, interview the kids, that kind of thing. Don't get me going down that road, I can't stand all that paper."

At the same time, Ms. Alfred acknowledges the unusual resources that Co-Op provides. "If you're at Co-Op, you have no reason to be felon," Ms. Alfred said, citing the "fabulous" afterschool program, largely staffed by Yale student volunteers who tutor and lead Major Progressions, an a cappella group. Co-Op just produced *Pippin*, the Stephen Schwartz musical, as well as a talent show open to all students – "they just have to reach out and take advantage of it."

The family feel of Ms. Alfred's class is not limited to the vocal program either. Ms. Alfred suggested that all of Co-Op's teachers in the arts departments are committed to instilling that sense of community, especially in the instrumental music and theatre programs. (On the other hand, visual arts students are "doing their own thing" and she barely recognizes them in the hallways. "I say, 'You go to this school?'"")

At the end of our interview, I asked Ms. Alfred what, for her, was her central goal for her students. Here is her response:

"I want them to leave here with an enriched experience in their art that they will hopefully be able to take with them to improve whatever community they're going to. We can't let that music die. [I hope] that cooperation, discipline, dedication, dependability all become the central nervous system of their characters."

At the end of rehearsal, many of the students left the room singing.

## VI.

### WHY SING?

Is it really true that only choral singing can achieve the results described here: the extraordinary leadership fostered by United Girls' Choir, the warm, familial sense of community at Co-Op High School, and the space to take risks in Hopkins Concert Choir?

As usual, Rebecca Rosenbaum has an answer: "I don't think it's the best or only for sure. I think art – self-expression of any kind can make you vulnerable and being willing to make yourself vulnerable is part of what makes you create a bond with other people. Not only are you making yourself vulnerable because it comes from your own body, but it requires a community of singing."

So, no – and yes.

The unique nature of choral music is multi-fold: everyone in an ensemble is playing the same instrument, and because that instrument *is* the human body, performing vocal music inherently taps into the singer's identity in a way that no other type of music performance can. Choral music requires that you genuinely listen to the people around you, whether to tune a harmony, or find a perfect unison. (Think, for a moment, about programs like the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, which brings Israeli and Palestinian teenagers together through dialogue and shared song.) A choir is necessarily a space where you can't do it alone but where every voice matters.

What should the future of choral education look like, then?

Tom Brand thinks it should look a lot like United Girls' Choir, since "we really

don't need any more skilled labor. It's like a sustainable food co-op, you're growing more food, the more asparagus you grow, the farmers you can have to grow the asparagus to feed more farmers. Every town in the northeast can have one of the choirs. We could have ten-thousand choirs."

Maybe so, but I don't think the UGC model is what the Co-Op kids universally need. Not the Hopkins students either.

Choral education is like putty – even if the substance remains the same, the master teacher/artist/conductor can shape a program to meet the needs of any student population, ensuring that the ensemble gives students the types of extra-musical support that will be most beneficial for them.

It is foolish to make the argument that singing in school can fix *everything* for every student. It can't. But it can work *towards* fixing *anything*, at least as far as a student's individual growth is concerned.

So, what I hope for the future of choral education is that we stop talking about how taking music classes in schools will make kids better test-takers and start talking about music education will make kids better people. Teachers – in all subject but especially the arts – should be taught and encouraged to focus on the ways in which their classes provide students with avenues to leadership, community, accountability, and safe risk-taking.

Music teachers have the capacity, as Ms. Alfred put it, to shape the "central nervous system" of their students' characters. It's time they were given the resources, training, time, space, and respect to do their jobs right.

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## **INTERVIEWS**

Harriett Alfred, The Cooperative Arts and Humanities Magnet High School Chorus

Tom Brand, United Girls' Choir

Colleen Conway, University of Michigan

Bridget Nixon, United Girls' Choir

Rebecca Rosenbaum, United Girls' Choir

Erika Schroth, Hopkins Concert Choir

Stephanie Tubiolo, Morse Chorale