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Volume 4, Issue 3



Virginia Harmony



2022 Conference



DR. TROY ROBERTSON



DR. JASON MAX FERDINAND



DR. JANET M. HOSTETTER

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 **AUGUST 5-6, 2022***

*SPECIAL CONDUCTING MASTERCLASSES WITH
JASON MAX FERDINAND ON AUGUST 4

 **HYLTON PERFORMING
ARTS CENTER**

10960 GEORGE MASON CIRCLE, MANASSAS, VA 20110

REGISTER TODAY AT WWW.ACDAVOICESUNITED.ORG

President's Message:
Summer Renewal
— Bonny Tynch



Happy Summer, Virginia choral colleagues!

As I write this note, I've hit the "summer marker" of not knowing exactly what day it is. I've arrived! I hope you are using this summer to fill your bucket with what you need! I've needed time to focus on my health, spend time with my family (another one is leaving the nest for college this fall), weed my little flowerbeds, purge and organize around the house, and all the while-- thanks to my air pods--continue to search for music that would be great to program in the coming year.

As you select what fills your bucket, I hope you are choosing to spend two days of renewal with us at the [Voices United Conference](#) (August 5 through 6) at the gorgeous Hylton Performing Arts Center in Manassas, VA. Our own Past-President, Amy Moir, has spearheaded a fantastic team of volunteers from VA, MD/DC, and DE that have put together an amazing two days while bringing international leaders in choral music to our doorstep. Don't miss it! More info can be found in the pages of this newsletter!

Our next state meeting will be over lunch at the Voices United Conference on Friday, August 5th. You will receive an email if you are registered for the conference to pre-order a meal from Panera Bread.

Here are some inspirational things we'll do in this meeting:

- visit with each other IN REAL LIFE.
- share exciting updates on two projects our committees have been working on that will bring more resources to our programs in both urban and rural areas throughout Virginia.
- recognize the outgoing members of our board and R&R chairs and introduce incoming colleagues who have stepped up to serve.
- brainstorm ways in which to engage with ACDA and to share ACDA with your colleagues.
- and, as always, we are looking for your input and ideas and welcome your questions and suggestions. (This is a wonderful time to catch one of us on the leadership team and make a connection. We love hearing from you. Email is always open, too! btynch@vacda.org)

Things we will NOT do:

- we will not play an ice-breaker game--unless you make me. Please introduce yourselves to one another and find someone new to get to know! We need each other now more than ever!

#IAmACDA (September 15 – October 15, 2022)

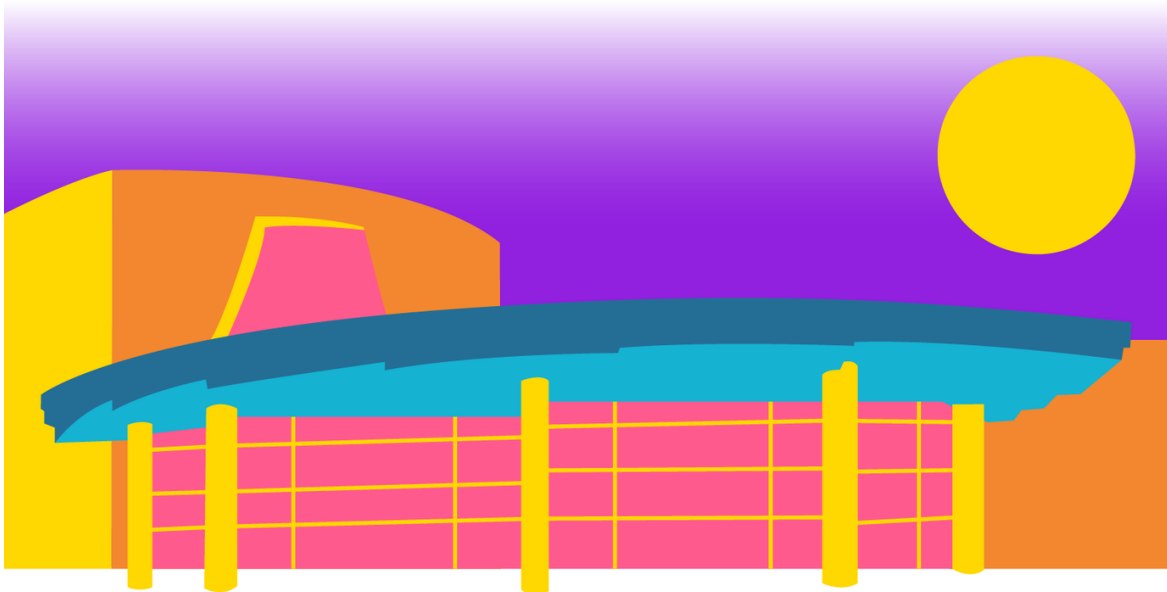
ACDA's membership campaign will only be one month and will look a lot different this year. We will need YOU to help us celebrate the many faces of ACDA and to invite fresh faces into our organization! It is not surprising that our membership numbers have suffered because of the pandemic and will most likely be affected by current circumstances in our economy this fall and winter. ACDA's work to keep choral music thriving in our culture depends on the support of its membership base. You'll hear more about #IAmACDA. But, for now, I challenge you to think of at least one other colleague that you could invite to join our organization. We'll be sharing the tools and benefits of membership for you to pass along, and we'll have access to discounted and complimentary memberships for those that request it! It is the BEST time to join ACDA!

I hope to see you in Manassas at Voices United and at our culminating Summer Jolly at 2Silos! Get over to the website and register for our conference!

Warmly,
Bonny M. Tynch
President
Virginia ACDA

SUMMER OF RENEWAL

ACDA Voices United

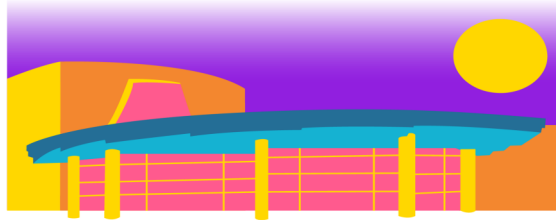


Hylton Performing Arts Center
August 5 & 6

***From your Vice President and Voices United Conference Chair:
Amy Moir***

SUMMER OF RENEWAL

ACDA Voices United



Hylton Performing Arts Center
August 5 & 6

Please join us for the ACDA Voices United 2022 Conference: A Summer of Renewal. You can find registration and hotel information at <https://acdavoicesunited.wordpress.com/>.

The conference is August 5 & 6, 2022 at The Hylton Performing Arts Centre in Manassas, VA. Online registration is open through July 15, 2022. There will also be onsite registration at the conference. Conference attendees can attend interest sessions, shop **The Musical Source** onsite store, and observe honor choir rehearsals throughout both days.

If you are interested in a more intensive conducting workshop, join us on August 4th for small group conducting sessions with nationally acclaimed conductor, Dr. Jason Max Ferdinand. Participants may only register in advance and space is limited. Registration for this experience can be found as an add-on within the regular conference registration.

Do you have community or church chorus members who are looking for a summer singing experience? Registration is open for our Voices United Community Honor Chorus. Rehearsals are August 5 & 6 at the Hylton Performing Arts Center. Please share this with your choristers ages 16 on up! No audition is required; however, singers do need to register in advance with the help of their ensemble director. The conductor is Dr. Troy Robertson. Literature and registration can be found at <https://acdavoicesunited.wordpress.com/community-chorus/>.

Registration closes Friday, July 8 at 9 PM. We hope your choristers can join us for this amazing experience!



Voices United

American Choral Directors Association

2022 Conference



DR. TROY ROBERTSON



DR. JASON MAX FERDINAND



DR. JANET M. HOSTETTER



AUGUST 5-6, 2022*

*SPECIAL CONDUCTING MASTERCLASSES WITH
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VIRGINIA ACDA
American Choral Directors Association



*Virginia ACDA is on
Twitter and Instagram!*

@VAACDA

Follow us for articles from the newsletter,
updates about conferences,
opportunities and more.



***From your Newsletter Editor &
Southeastern Region Coordinator: Matthew Russell***



So still were the big woods where I sat
Sound might not yet have been born.

So still were the big woods.
Feel their protecting spread,
Their uplifting rise,
Their solid, immovable strength.

See God in it all.
Enter into the life of the trees,
The silence full of sound.

Everything is green.
Everything is waiting and still.
Everything is alive.

So still were the big woods where I sat
Sound might not yet have been born. — Emily Carr

Listen to Brian Tate's SO STILL here: <https://cypresschoral.com/composers/brian-tate/so-still-mvt-2-from-the-emily-carr-suite/>

Choral friends and colleagues,

As I write this reflection for you, I am in the Adirondacks spending time with my immediate family after a tumultuous year of challenges, transitions, change, loss, and grief. (There was much JOY and success, too!) Being near the lake and surrounded by “the big woods” full of fresh air and vibrant greenery has allowed me to reconnect with myself--to begin hearing myself think again as I rest, heal, reset, and refocus before starting to consider the work and planning of the next academic year, performance season, and worship cycle. The water, forest, and air quality here in Upstate New York is so alive, beautiful, and peaceful—a true “silence full of sound.” As I hear myself being able to think again, I realize that I wish to share some questions and thoughts with you as we move into our “new, choral normal” while emerging out of our collective Covid pandemic experience with all the challenges and changes that it presented us.

The challenges and changes of the past few years have caused me to ask myself (and others) many questions as we begin to move forward. What did we learn about ourselves, our students, our interactions, our relationships, and our community during this time? How did we grow? What new things did we learn from our adaptive, more “remote” time that we might choose to continue to incorporate and refine in our work as we move forward? What was the cause of our most significant losses? Should we be rushing to return to and re-establish all that might have been lost or to that which was “normal” for us prior to the Covid pandemic? What musical-educational ideas or ideals might we reconsider or even discard? How can we continue to connect and be relevant and/or responsive to and for our choral communities of learners and listeners? Is there a way to re-think and re-balance what a healthy choral program respectful of a work-life balance might be for both students and the teacher/educator/conductor? Are we giving ourselves enough space for grace and room to breathe as we regroup, recover, and move forward? How can we re-balance both process and product as related to choral participation, performance outcomes, and professional productivity? Have we considered more ethical, peaceful ways in which we can move out of survival mode and into our “new, choral normal” that will allow us to thrive, perhaps even in a more gentle, less anxious, and impactful way? And, ultimately: what and just how much is enough?

In the roles in which I find myself teaching and making music, I have been fortunate to work with multiple, diverse communities of learners. Whether teaching graduate or undergraduate university students, high schoolers (public, private, or home schooled), or my church choir members, I have discovered that what students missed and craved most during our Covid experience were the face-to-face interactions and exchanges fostered through our choral communities and classrooms. I have also discovered that many choir members, students, and parents/guardians have found themselves overcommitted and have been making choices about which activities and commitments to hold on to, juggle, or to let go. Even I discovered that before and during our Covid experience I had continued to add items to my slate of commitments, but I had not removed anything in order to make enough space for myself to be able to manage them with ease and efficiency. Respecting others’ time and honoring my time has become much more of a priority in recent months, especially knowing that our time and our health are our most precious gifts.

I have also learned that my students do not enjoy feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or rushed in their learning process; that a little less repertoire with more concentrated, meaningful content and gestation time—all with a little more humor and laughter--helped them to feel more at ease during performances. Less—and, perhaps, less complicated repertoire--with more laughter is MORE!!! Most importantly, I realized that we as teacher-conductors are often the culture bearers and curators of first exposures and first encounters both musically and extra-musically for our students. Every piece of repertoire, learning context, skill-based or technical activity, or distillation of knowledge that we select, share, and prepare with and for our community of learners makes a true impact in their lives whether in the moment, in the musical-textual seeds that we are planting and watering, or for their future participation in the choral art. (I also learned the hard way within recent weeks that intentional masking for the teacher-conductor might be something to consider continuing. After not having been sick for two years due to disciplined, mindful masking, I ended up with a head cold—not Covid, thank God!--all because I got much too relaxed while working for a week with a large group full of unmasked singers. Woopsy!)

In summary, it's all truly about making informed, developmentally appropriate decisions and having realistic, contextualized expectations for ourselves and for others. One does not need to adjust their standards; one just has to adjust their expectations. And, choral/musical excellence does NOT require perfection!!! Both our reasonable decisions and our realistic expectations help protect, uplift, strengthen, and give life unto our ensembles and students for whom “sound might not yet have been born.” Let us be more like the calm, non-anxious trees described in Emily Carr’s poem and remember: **“Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape.”**

As I sign off as editor for our newsletter, I am hoping that you have felt that your voices have been encouraged, supported, heard, and amplified. It is my great hope that as a new editor comes on board and that as our formats for effective communication continue to evolve, that we are all still able to share our stories and wisdom with each other. It truly is our shared stories and collective professional wisdom that helps us to connect and will ultimately “save” us as we navigate through this “new, choral normal” and landscape.

Hoping our work together over the past four years has helped to generate a more perfect VIRGINIA HARMONY. I have certainly learned a great deal from ALL of you!!!

Cordially... in peace,
Matthew



From your World Music and Cultures R&R Chair: Helai Karim

Everyone has always said that things settle down a bit once you make it past year five. The pandemic messed with two of my four years thus far, so I think that means that by year seven that should happen? With year five starting in the fall, it's safe to say that nothing has chilled out, but my whirlwind experience has still managed to be a dream come true.

The Virginia ACDA Diversity Coalition began conversations during the pandemic. Thanks to Daniel Jackson, who spearheaded this coalition, I was invited to participate. Daniel spent many hours on the phone with me, asking essential questions like “what is choral music education missing in the Northern Virginia area?” or “what frustrates you about the norms of choral music education?” No one had asked me questions like this before. Supportive colleagues and mentors have always surrounded me, but nothing makes an impact like being asked your opinion to make you feel like you truly belong.

These conversations as a coalition lead to our podcast series, *Beyond the Podium: Choral Conversations*. It has become a platform where diverse voices in Virginia can share their experiences and have a place to ask difficult questions similar to those that Daniel asked me.

We had a chance to interview Dr. Kari Adams from Florida State University, who shared her views on District Choral Assessments and their value. Daniel and I asked some heavy-hitting questions that Dr. Adams authentically answered. Some of these questions were related to **the potential for inaccuracy in executing culturally diverse repertoire due to the limitations of our standards**. We discussed director's hesitancy to program diverse music during assessment season. Our hesitations and pressures surrounding assessment should not be why we do not program diverse literature.

To listen to the interview, please visit: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5AeRXEVXQt5TBQuYOync78?si=bf158ab41a924a0c>.

My thought is that there should be an additional step to the assessment process. This step would be to hold directors accountable for thoroughly researching the culturally appropriate execution of their chosen literature. This information would include the origin of the literature and highlight a director's knowledge of its historical and cultural context. I have yet to figure out what this informational sheet would look like or be called, but directors would submit information about their literature and address their choices for elements such as tone quality. I wonder how this step might change the pieces we see at assessment and ease the hesitations so that our students can be exposed to more literature?

Representation matters. We all know this. I might be one of the only choral directors in Virginia of South Asian descent, but ten years from now I hope that changes—especially with the number of South Asian students we teach now. My love for music didn't begin in the choral classroom, but in my parent's basement listening to cassette tapes from the best musicians Afghanistan had to offer as well as the iconic Bollywood movie songs we played on repeat. The choral classroom and my family gatherings are still two different musical and cultural worlds. I am itching to find ways to blend the two.



There is a substantial musical disconnect between the various worlds within our world. We as choral educators feel it. Our students feel it. My Spotify playlists feel it. It took me years to understand Western scales and disengage quartertones from my brain. So many of our South Asian students receive training in Indian Carnatic music from some of the most pristine *Ustads*. We must remember that our students are *expanding* their musical skillsets through choral literature and Western music as a whole. The last thing we want is for them to feel that the Western choral literature box takes precedence. None of us consciously create that type of narrative, but **we must be intentional in our conversations with our students about our choral literature and its limitations.**

From your Instrumental to Vocal R&R Chair: Harlan Zackery

I sincerely hope you all are finding opportunities for rest, relaxation, rejuvenation, and self-care during the summer months. It is certainly well-earned after another year of finding “normal” within the confines of the pandemic. As I contemplated what to write for this article, I began thinking of my first days as a choral teacher and director after transitioning from the band and orchestra world. After speaking with a few other directors who have recently made that transition to choral music, there were several obvious and some not-so-obvious “reality shifts” encountered upon making that instrumental to choral transition.

- 1.) Singers cannot (or should not) sing for hours on end.

To be honest, neither can instrumentalists play forever. However, keep in mind that in most band and orchestra compositions, each instrumental group gets a chance to rest at some point during the composition. In many choral compositions, the voices sing for much of the duration. You will want to keep this in mind as you determine your rehearsal and performance order. I cringe to think of how grueling my rehearsals were on singers when I first began my choral journey. Luckily, I had a wise mentor who cautioned me to plan vocal breaks within my rehearsals, especially the longer rehearsals. Doing so helped the singers to preserve their voice, energy, and focus for the entire rehearsal. I had to ask myself: “Would you ask a trumpet section to play that phrase 10 times and expect them to have enough lip left to continue?” Probably not!

- 2.) Singers are social beings (for the most part).

There is something about the choral art that breeds social interaction. Perhaps this is due to the fact that singing is, at heart, communication. That communication, using the same mechanisms in which we converse, invites more of the same. Of course, you will find exceptions in every kind of ensemble: choral ensembles that are not social, and instrumental ensembles that are quite social. However, I think about my orchestra days when, five minutes after rehearsal ended, EVERYONE was gone. That kind of thing rarely happens after my choral rehearsals. I have found it tremendously helpful to incorporate social events into every year/season or even social time during rehearsals to allow everyone a chance to be verbal and social. This was particularly helpful during the days of remote instruction at the height of the pandemic, and it may continue to be useful to those of you who continue to teach remotely.

- 3.) All our scores contain the same information.

Unless you’re singing from partbooks, every singer in your ensemble will usually see everything you see. I found that this makes a difference in how I communicated rehearsal directions. No longer did I refer to “concert this or that,” because everything is in concert pitch in a typical choral score (unless you have an accompanying instrument other than the piano). This fact also allowed me to engage in more detailed study of each piece with each ensemble. It also gives the singers a different level of awareness about the whole of a composition as they can see, hear, and feel their relation to everything and everyone else involved in the composition.

4.) Singers carry their instruments with them.

You may say “Thank you, Captain Obvious!” but there’s more than meets the eye. The voice is often an extension of our mental and emotional selves. For many of our choristers, the voice is inseparable from their self-image. For directors, it means being cognizant of the fact that any critique of the voice is often translated as a critique of the person. Keep this in mind when offering well-meaning critiques. Exercise care in talking about and coaching the individual voice. It makes a difference and helps us to further honor and respect the human element in the work that we do.

I hope this helps you in some small way as you make the transition into working with choral ensembles. As always, if I can be of any assistance to you along this journey, please do not hesitate to reach out. I am always willing to help! Enjoy the remainder of your summer!

From your Tenor/Bass Choir R&R Chair: Kerry Wilkerson

WORKING WITH MALE CHANGING VOICES

Working with adolescent male voices can be a challenge.

My own voice began to change when I was only 11 years old. In November of 1977, my elementary music teacher announced that she would be producing a Christmas musical with our sixth-grade class. It was to be a big production with costumes and scenery. The lead parts would be auditioned, and those who did not get roles would sing in a chorus. We were all taught a song to sing for her in front of the class, and, one by one, we were auditioned before our peers. It came time for me to sing, and I stood before the class with a great deal of confidence as I loved to sing and knew that I would do well. But, what happened next was much more than embarrassing: it was tragic. I tried to sing, but I could not settle my voice in a comfortable octave (octave displacement). My voice was changing, and I knew it. So did the music teacher, but she did not know what to say. Instead of explaining that my body and voice were going through a very natural transition (vocal mutation) and, perhaps, another key might be more comfortable for me, she told me plainly: “You can’t sing.” I was told to sit quietly in the back of the room when the rest of the class rehearsed for the musical.

The good news from this personal story is that it did not deter me in any way from pursuing a career in vocal performance. In fact, this event probably propelled me to study the human voice and its intricacies so I could understand what happened to me at that moment in time. Through higher education and personal curiosity, I began to understand the physiological changes that occurred within my own body that led to that fateful sixth-grade audition.

I always enjoyed singing and, when pondering my future toward the end of my junior year of high school, I spoke with my parents and my high school choral director (who was also my private voice teacher) about auditioning as a voice major in college. They all encouraged me to pursue this direction, and I went on to major in music education as an undergraduate. My dream job was to become a high school choral director, but I got sidetracked when, toward the end of my undergraduate career, one of my professors handed me an audition announcement for the Air Force Singing Sergeants. After winning the audition, I entered basic training two weeks after graduating from college. This began what was to become a twenty-nine-year performance career as a military chorister, serving from 1989-1998 with the Air Force Singing Sergeants and from 1998-2018 with the Army Chorus. It was during my years with the Air Force that I was first invited into middle schools and high schools to work with male changing voices.

After a few years of being a guest clinician in secondary schools, my dear friend, Lynn Jennings (with whom I served with in the Air Force), invited me to start a private vocal studio at Lake Braddock High School in Burke where she was Director of Choral Activities. My teaching locations have changed over the years, but the clientele in my private studio remains mostly high school students, a handful of adults, and my favorite: the male changing voice. You can easily understand my heart for working with younger voices through my traumatic experience recounted in the first paragraph. In the private studio, my wife and I operate jointly as our primary objective when working with adolescent voices is to create a safe environment. This enables us to guide them through this ever-evolving process of self-discovery.

While I am writing this article mostly from the perspective of a private voice teacher, my background also includes a master's degree in choral conducting with many years of experience as an assistant conductor with the Air Force and the Army, as well as a year (2005-2006) as the primary choral conductor at Bishop Ireton High School in Alexandria and 14 years (2001-2015) as Assistant Director of Music Ministries at Vienna Presbyterian Church (VPC) in Vienna. My time with VPC was largely spent conducting a youth choir (grades 7-12) for weekly services. This is where much of my background and education with changing voices was put into practice.

Here are a few things I have learned along my journey that may be helpful to some of you:

Know Your Pedagogy

- Be able to articulate in your own words the physiological changes the adolescent male is experiencing. They are similar--but a bit different--from the female adolescent voice.
- Help them understand they are going through a process (vocal mutation), not an event. While the change can be relatively quick for some (3-6 months), some voices take much longer (up to 4 years) to settle and dealing with the aftermath can be lengthy, depending upon the student.
- Acknowledge that this vocal change can be frustrating.
- Have them sing in their soprano/alto range as long as they can. Let the voice gradually lower by shifting keys for solo songs or dropping the singer to a lower choral part as needed. This assumes they will be able to read the lower part in choral music. More to come on that.
- Keep exercising the falsetto register after the voice has clearly changed. This will help strengthen the vocal folds in multiple ways. Be aware that not all changed voices will have falsetto, and it's okay if they don't.
- In the case of an audible "crack" going into the upper "passaggio" (passage from chest to head register), encourage the adolescent male singer to work toward lightening the tone in the upper register and blending the new head voice with the new falsetto voice, if possible. Starting from the top, descending on a five-note scale using the [u] vowel will work better than approaching from the bottom. This technique may not be possible for all, but for some they will find what I hear as a "falsetto-head mix." This "mixed register" voice not only can be especially useful and healthy in the short/immediate term, but also, over time, can become the core to a well-supported lyric baritone or tenor voice.
- Incidentally, the "top-down" approach applies to adolescent female voices as well. Keep them singing in the upper register as long as possible before allowing them to access the chest voice fully. For both female and male voices, realize that the passaggio is shifting in their voices during these adolescent years.

Be patient and persistent

- Recognize that the male and female brains are growing at different rates during puberty.
- Frequently, you may have to tell an adolescent male who is going through a voice change: "You can do this. It just takes time and hard work." Or, come up with some other positive mantra that works for you and your student(s).

Use the piano thoughtfully

- A changed voice may not be able to find the lower octave if a teacher is trying to teach them the bass part by playing it an octave above on the piano.
- Doubling the octave when teaching from the keyboard can be helpful for the changed and unchanged voices in a group setting.

Be careful when giving vocal demonstrations

- As a general rule, in my humble opinion, women should refrain from giving vocal demonstrations in the male vocal range and vice versa. Think about this. Is it ideal for the adolescent female voices to mimic/imitate a male voice singing in his falsetto? The same rule applies for the adolescent male voice. Attempting to mimic/imitate a female singing in chest voice can be quite confusing, not to mention the potential vocal pathology absorbed by the teacher chronically utilizing this practice over the course of a school year!!
- Use good vocal role models. When possible, have more advanced students give vocal demonstrations in the choral setting. Invite a male voice teacher--maybe from your local college or university--to offer vocal demonstrations.
- Play recordings of choruses or singers you particularly admire.
- Encourage your students to seek out opportunities to attend live vocal recitals, choral concerts, or touring Broadway shows if and when possible. If you're reading this and you live in a rural area, trust me, there is a local college or university relatively close to you that has tons to offer. Contact me and I will help you make a connection with them if you don't know where to start.

The tongue is a root of all evil for singers

- Recognize that the tongue is a voluntary muscle; the singer has control.
- The tongue is a root of throat/jaw/laryngeal tension.
- Use tongue exercises daily. You can find many good ones on YouTube: search "tongue exercises for singing."
- Use falsetto to help the male changed voice experience relaxed tongue/jaw/throat/larynx before engaging "more weight" (i.e., heavy mechanism).
- Teach them the fundamental concepts of a low, open, expanded breath (as opposed to the high, constricted, tight breath that leads to tongue/jaw/throat/laryngeal tension) for singing in the upper extension.

Be upbeat and positive

- Celebrate when something goes right; support and encourage when things are not where they need to be.
- Use terms like "changing voice" or "expanding voice" as opposed to "breaking voice" or "broken voice."
- Use the term "passaggio" instead of "break." Explain to the adolescent singer that the "passaggio" is shifting during these formative years (i.e., puberty).

Emphasize sight reading in the classroom

- Teach everyone how to read both treble and bass clef. This is a non-negotiable with my students.
- An adolescent male voice may start the school year singing Soprano 1 and end the school year singing Bass 2. The ability to read other parts is absolutely essential to guiding them through the process of vocal change.

Keep them singing!!

- Develop a student mentoring program. Identify student leaders and pair them with those who are struggling.
- Develop a parent support group (i.e., "choral boosters" or whatever you want to call it. At VPC, I simply called it my "Parent Support Group"!!!)
- Educate parents on the importance of encouraging their young men to sing in the home for lifelong self-expression.
- Encourage adolescent students to seek out community children's choruses, a church or local youth choir, or private study. It will help them immeasurably short term and give them the foundation to sing for a lifetime long term.

Get help if you need it

- There is absolutely no shame in asking for help if you, the choral director, are feeling overwhelmed and know you cannot possibly give the time and attention needed to an individual or a group of young voices who are going through this challenging transformation. There are private teachers out there, like me, who thoroughly enjoy working one on one with changing voices. If you don't know where to start, reach out to me and I will help connect you with private teachers in your area.

From your SING4VA Coordinator: Kerry Wilkerson

Sing for Virginia: Meet the Composer A conversation between Kerry Wilkerson and Catherine “Kitty” Fields

This is the third of a series of ‘Meet the Composer’ conversations intended to introduce all of you to the wealth of talent in our state. Kerry recently had the opportunity to chat with Catherine “Kitty” Fields, a Burke, VA-based composer:

KW: Where were you born/raised/educated?

CF: I currently live with my family in Burke, where I was born and raised. I am here while I complete my final year of undergraduate studies in music composition at the George Mason School of Music.

KW: Where are you currently based?

CF: I will be in Burke most likely for another year, and God willing, I’ll be moving out of state for graduate school! I would love to end up back here in northern VA, though. It’s a fantastic area.

KW: When did you start composing?

CF: I wrote my first real composition, a piano prelude, in 2016 when I was a junior in high school.

KW: What's your primary instrument?

CF: Piano. I do enjoy singing, but I’ve never taken formal voice lessons. I would like to, though!

KW: What's your favorite subject matter for choral works?

CF: I love setting sacred texts, or poetry that’s theological in some way. Especially texts that are well known and often set, like the Pater Noster, or the Psalms. My faith plays a central role in my life and writing. I find that the process of setting these texts in itself is a meditation on the words, and often brings me to a richer understanding of them. My lofty objective is to reveal what’s “between the lines” of the text to the listener by way of the harmonies, color, and melodic line.

For example, my setting of the Lord’s Prayer for SATB divisi choir invokes a somber, dark musical language for much of it, making use of the minor mode, dissonance, and non-functional harmonic progressions. For those who pray, we tend to pray the hardest in times of desperation and sorrow. This setting keeps in mind the brutal truth of a fallen world, and our tearful prayer in the midst of it. There are some gleams of hope as the harmonies shift into major progressions at “Thy Kingdom come” and the word “Heaven,” implying hope not for this world, but the next. Yearning suspensions reminiscent of the erotic “Tristan chord” take over at “Lead us not into temptation,” symbolizing the many siren songs that entice human beings to their death (power, money, substances). These suspensions arrive at an extremely tense diminished chord, which finally opens into a glorious G major chord (the parallel major of the piece) at “Deliver us from evil,” meant to feel as if one were being rescued from drowning, seeing the light of day after being very near death. It then dissolves back into the minor theme, fearfully repeating “from evil,” acknowledging that evil’s presence will remain as long as the earth spins.

KW: What's your favorite choral ensemble? SSAA, TTBB, SATB??

CF: I like writing for SATB, because of the broad palette of timbres. I have also written for the angelic SSAA grouping, and I would very much like to write for TTBB at some point. There is something very bracing about the sound of a male choir; there's just so much strength. To answer the question: It depends on the day!

KW: Do you like to include instruments/instrumentation with choral compositions?

CF: So far, I have only composed for acapella choir. Soon, I would very much like to do a piece for choir and orchestra or wind ensemble. One of my favorite pieces of all time is Stravinsky's Mass for SATB chorus and double wind quintet. This would be an exciting instrumentation to work with!

KW: Do you compose exclusively for choruses, or do you have other works you would like for us to know about?

CF: In April, the Mason Wind Symphony premiered a piece of mine called *Fantasy* for piano and wind symphony. I also have some piano works, some chamber and solo instrumental works, and I've also written a handful of songs.

KW: Where can we listen to your works? YouTube? Pro webpage? Etc.

CF: Much of my music is on Soundcloud and YouTube which can be found under Catherine Fields Music. I have a WordPress site as well: www.catherinefieldsmusic.wordpress.com. There are many works for which I am still seeking recordings and performances!

KW: Are you available for commissions?

CF: Yes, I am! In a limited capacity, albeit, as the academic demands of senior year loom upon me.

KW: How much time do you need for a commission?

CF: Between 2 and 6 months, depending on the length of the piece.

KW: What else would you like to say to the choral directors reading this?

CF: I have two SATB choral works (with divisi) that have yet to be performed or recorded, as they were completed around the time of the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. One is based on parts of Psalm 116 ("What shall I render to the Lord, for all His benefits to me?"), and the other is the setting of the Lord's Prayer. The university choir has been slammed with concerts of other repertoire, and my pieces are a bit too difficult for the volunteer church choirs I have access to. It would mean the world to me to find an ensemble able and willing to sing these pieces!

Other than that, I have currently in the works a piece, not for choir, but for solo soprano and orchestra. It's a setting of Robert Frost's beloved poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." I am hoping to get it premiered around Christmas time!



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