

THE FULLY EXPRESSIVE CHOIR

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The Fully Expressive Choir: A State of the Art Approach

Comprehensive summary of techniques directors can use to help singers fully engage themselves with music, text, and audience

- Includes step by step process to introduce concepts and skills
- Offers a classroom management approach which supports the vulnerable and collaborative art of expressive singing

A Few Factors which Impact Recruitment and Retention

Some thoughts on helping choirs and choral programs thrive

- Repertoire choice
- The choir's expressivity
- The singers' physicality
- The director's facial expression
- The rehearsal/performance environment
- The director's overall approach
- The final product

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The Fully Expressive Choir: A State of the Art Approach

With special thanks to Kristina Ploeger and our generous volunteer demo choir, The WashingTones!

Most choirs and directors focus on excellence, with much of their efforts on crafting beautiful music. Of course. But I believe today's singers and audiences miss something wonderful if the choir's emphasis is predominantly on the SOUND of the music. Expressive though the sound may be, Choral Music has something more to offer us.

α&ε **choral concert** (adj.+ n), 1. a passionate celebration of shared humanity.

CORE PRINCIPLES

1. Humans are authentically expressive: What's on our minds is on our faces. And in our bodies and voices.
2. What we do with our bodies, faces, and voices can affect the mind – impacting our thoughts & feelings.
3. Authentic expression – that organic mind/body process – occurs whether we're telling the truth, or using our imagination.
4. When singers incorporate authentic expression, their singing is more powerful, poignant, and personal
5. Humans learn to read faces, bodies, and voices from infancy. We can discern moods, truths, and falsehoods. As we watch and listen to singers, we sense when they are truthfully connected to their words and passion, and when they're faking it. We also know when they're thinking only about sound.
6. Through a related process called "emotional contagion," we model the events going on in other people's minds and bodies, connecting to their thoughts and feelings. They're joyful? We're joyful! So, when an audience experiences an authentically expressive choir – with singers fully connecting to the *Meaning and singing well* – that audience is transformed, experiencing deeper levels of personal and social connection. A shared humanity, chorally expressed and communally experienced.

CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT For singers to commit to fully expressive singing, they must feel safe – supported by director and peers alike. The director consciously creates this environment, and avoids shaming, punishing, insulting, or losing their temper. Such behaviors stunt expressivity. For one approach which builds mutual respect, go to the Humanistic Discipline page on my website. Here is a taste of what you'll find there:

To be fully expressive, singers need a safe environment in which to risk being emotionally vulnerable. From my perspective, this can only happen when each singer feels valued and respected as a fellow human being. In unsafe groups, we humans tend to guard our emotions – our expressiveness withering as we do so. Therefore, how we communicate with singers – and how we guide them to communicate with each other – is pivotal.

Loving kindness is what it's all about. If we treat the singers supportively, they will respect us. And when we set uncompromising expectations of Support for all, the singers will meet them. If we accept less, we will get less.

How We Communicate: Conscious Awareness

When we are aware of our thoughts and feelings as they occur we can...

Act from a place of sensitivity, support, and strength rather than REACTING out of anger or frustration

The more Supportive we are, the more Expressive they'll be. The less supportive we are (controlling, punitive, shaming, angry, inconsistent, fearful, with low expectations...), the less expressive they'll be.

How Singers Communicate: They Can be Supportive ... with Your Help

When we are consciously aware of the singers' words and behavior, we can pounce on every instance of unsupportive communication (vital in the first few days of establishing Support)

Be consistent, uncompromising, but kind: *Mean what you Say, but don't Say it Meantly*

Be loving but FIRM; *don't back down*. Being "nice" by giving second chances will guarantee chaos.

Consider **The Support System**, a "disciplinary" progression that creates Safety AND Order w/o punishing.

1. "Support, please!" (look anywhere BUT at the person/s). At the singer/s' next unsupportive choice...
2. "Tom, could you support us more right now? Thanks." (with a smile – no one's being punished here)
3. And if Tom continues: "Tom, please move [to empty seat, or switch seats with someone]. Thanks."
4. And if he's STILL unsupportive (while you're still kind and calm): "Tom, please sit next to my desk/in the time-out area ... until you're ready to support us. Hope you come back soon. Thanks."
5. Rarely needed: "Please go to Ms. Tina's room until you're ready to support." Arrange with staff first.

As we address our own and the singers' behavior – truly expecting BOTH to be supportive and respectful – we lay the groundwork for a safe and expressive choir which can use the following methods of connection.

And beware the notion that "mutual respect" means, "I'll respect them if they respect me." **No**. Mutual respect means treating those in our care with dignity at ALL times, even and especially when they are acting out.

IMAGERY When we communicate, we see "mental movies" or pictures associated with our words and thoughts. Creating an image of Stanford's soaring bluebird reflected in the lake will get us started....

STORY When we sing, we can create a **Story** which supports the text and music. As with any story, this can include such elements as plot, character, conflict, obstacle, and setting. We can use our imaginations, or base the story on our real life experiences. The director can offer a scenario, or have the singers come up with one. "What character in what situation would need to say these words?" Help them create a story which provides context for the text and music. And as long as the stories don't conflict in tone, they don't have to be identical.

IDENTITY & SETTING Singers, who are you in your story? A specific character you create? Yourself? Where are you? What do you see when you look around this setting you create? What do you hear? Smell?

PERSONALIZING If they choose to sing as themselves, the singers might personalize, sharing deeply held truths as they connect to text and music. In *This Little Light of Mine*, for example, they might be communicating their conviction to "create more artwork" or "stand up to that bully in P.E.," connecting to these personal passions as they sing.

WHO ARE YOU SINGING TO? When we communicate in our daily lives, something is going on that compels us to share in a specific way with a specific **Other**. That unlocks expressiveness in real life, and in song.

THE OBJECTIVE You are singing to someone, but what's your goal? In life, we try to affect the other people's thoughts, feelings, and/or actions. (Do I want you to believe in global warming? To cheer up? To stop talking?) *The objective is perhaps the most powerful tool for singers.* When they commit to affecting the other in their story, making it important to do so, their connection is deepened, and their expression is even stronger. In addition, the Other's imagined reaction actually affects the singer; if the Other reacts the way the singer hopes, they will actually feel (and express) a victory. If not, defeat, frustration, and perhaps rededication to the goal. (When singers focus primarily on "singing it well," their faces usually express boredom, worry, or a generic sort of intense concentration.)

Help singers make **Internal Choices**. External statements such as "Look happy," "Show your feelings on your face," or "Sound sad" will lead to inauthentic expression. And your audience will be less than fully engaged.

"FACE" THE DIRECTOR As singers commit to their story – creating imagery, playing their objective, knowing who they are and to whom they are singing – they get to use their imaginations once again. Since they are most likely looking at you (their director), YOU become their Other. Give them a few moments to look at you and create the other's face overlaid on yours. The imagination can work miracles in a millisecond, so this process need only be initiated in order to take hold and give them ongoing traction.

As they sing, they try to affect you since you have become the person (animal, deity, etc.) they are singing to. They can also try to affect the real you, if that fits their story. As they "face" you, they can use their imaginations to create their Other's reactions, or they can react to your authentic reactions in the moment. *As you conduct, let them try to affect you rather than you trying to affect them; connection & expression is their responsibility.*

MOVE WITH THE MUSIC (Be the Willow, not the Oak) Since the body and the mind are intimately linked, avoid suggestions which stifle the singers' authentically connected movements or facial expressions. Not letting them smile, for example, discourages truthful connection AND vibrant, expressive singing. If the tone needs help, have them relax the jaw, match vowels, or smile "tall" rather than "wide."

Expect singers to move, and teach them how. They can move with phrasing, rhythm, meaning, and more – with such movement being different than a simple bouncing or swaying to the beat. Congruent movement enhances musicality as it supports the singers' mind/body connection. As the mind sends signals to the body, the body expresses – and sends messages back to the brain, thus reinforcing overall connection. Singers released from stillness will often say things like, "I felt so much more expressive; the song almost sang itself!"

On the other hand, a stiff or still body usually sends the mind a message of anxiety, stress, disengagement, or passivity, and it will suppress the dynamic and nuanced expression you are trying to encourage. NOTE: No need to fear Chaos ... you can always ask singers to tone it down.

An **Active Neutral** body position can incorporate the brain's signals without contradicting or dampening them: Feet shoulder-width apart, one foot slightly in front, knees unlocked (weight slightly forward toward balls of feet), torso lifted and expanded – with head, shoulders, arms, and hands energized but loose. Vibrant fluidity reigns.

Out of the Box Thinking One thing that was clear (and exciting) at this year's ACDA national convention: The group and individual approach to physical expression knows no bounds! MOST of the choirs at ACDA had innovative staging or movement that delightfully contradicted the traditional notion of how choirs "must stand" and "must move." From fully staged pieces in the opera mode, to avant-garde staging, to modern dance elements occurring while the singers remained on the risers... Bottom line? The audiences RAVED and LOVED it!

INTRODUCING SINGERS TO THIS APPROACH

I try to do these exercises whenever I start work with a new group. They take about 30 minutes, and I highly recommend them as a foundation for expressive singing. Without them (or something like them), the singers will likely have insufficient buy-in, and their understanding of the concepts and techniques may be similarly limited.

1. I start by saying something like, "If Steven Spielberg sent a camera crew to follow you around for a week, then edited the footage to 90 minutes, he would be impressed. Each of you would be so natural, so real, so authentically expressive that you would be nominated for an Academy Award! But if I told you to get on the risers and sing – using those same expressive abilities – chances are you wouldn't know exactly what to do. Let's explore what we humans do in real life, so you can use those same skills in your singing."
 2. Have the singers stand and slump, frown or pout. "Whatever you do, don't smile. On the count of three, say 'I'm so excited,' trying to get your neighbors to feel some of that excitement as well. But **DON'T CHANGE YOUR BODY, AND DON'T CHANGE YOUR FACE.**" [Lead them in this.] "Now stand tall, bounce on your toes, shoulders back, chest high, smile (and stop bouncing but keep that vibrant and energized feel in your torso). Now your line is, 'I'm so depressed!,' but don't change your body, and don't change your face." [Lead them.] "Good, now slouch, frown, pout. Your line is, 'I'm so depressed.'" [Lead them.] "And stand tall... Your line is, 'I'm so excited,' one, two, three, go."
- "What did you notice? Was it odd to have the body and the meaning not match up, but when your meaning and body DID match up it felt right? Natural? Congruent?" Then explain the mind/body connection. "When the body and facial expression match the meaning – and vice versa – all systems flow."
3. Teach Active Neutral stance, explaining its related importance. Contrast it with Passive Neutral (a flat affect and body). Let's see what else we do in real life...."
 4. "Think of a time when you experienced or witnessed a funny, scary, or exciting event. [30 seconds]. Now, split up in groups of two, with both of you standing and facing each other. One of you talks for about 40 seconds. I'll give a signal, then the other person talks. The listener JUST listens, though certainly you can react. Wait for my cue to begin – with the person with darker shoes going first – and begin."

Lead the exercise then ask them the following:

- How many of you saw pictures or mental movies of what you were talking about? That's called Imagery, and we experience it often – whenever we talk about a past event, a person not in the room, even when we fantasize.
- How many listeners saw pictures of what the speaker was talking about?
- How many listeners noticed that the speaker's face had different expressions – it didn't just stay passive neutral?
- How many speakers noticed that the listener's face had different expressions?
- How many listeners noticed that the speaker's body moved – not just staying in passive neutral?
- How many speakers noticed that the listener's body moved?
- How many listeners noticed that the speaker's voice had different levels of pitch, volume, rate....?
- How many of you noticed that your *emotional state* changed – you experienced different feelings as you spoke? As you listened?

"Alright, **AND THIS IS KEY** – how many of you said to yourself, 'I'm going to start by feeling anxiety, with my face communicating that plus a little fear. About 10 seconds in, I'm going to shift my facial expression to surprise while my voice rises 60% in pitch and volume. Then, my right eyebrow is going to angle upwards 15 degrees, while my lower lip pulls down 1/8th of an inch.' Anyone? Probably not, because 99.99% of us don't function that way! Our feelings and expressions happen automatically as a result of our thoughts – we don't control or manipulate them, unless we're attempting to deceive or con! And most songs come from a truthful orientation – we take them seriously and can therefore trust that an authentically expressive approach will honor the composer and lyricist's vision.

You have just created a microcosm of a particular choral concert. The speaker was the authentically expressive choir, and the listener was the authentically engaged audience. But your words were based on *real life* experience, and you were *speaking*. What happens when you sing, and your text is harder to relate to? [Introduce the concept of Story as well.]

5. I tell the singers that I'm addicted to social networking sites, and haven't left my house in years. "I have no passion for anything else. It's 'all Facebook, all the time!'" They, on the other hand, know how wonderful the world is, and what I'm missing. Their objective is to get me – their Other – to come out of the house and begin to enjoy life's bounty. **HOWEVER**, they will communicate about an imaginary topic – something I **KNOW** they have never experienced. In unison, they say something like, "I had a wonderful time on the moon last night!"

5 (continued). And they continue to talk about that as they try to get me to come out of the house. But, when I raise my arms up, they SING their words ... and when the arms come down, they talk. Sing, talk, sing, talk – all in an unbroken stream of verbage with one ongoing objective.*

At the end of this exercise, we process...

- How many of you saw images of what you were talking about? When you sang as well?
- How many of you noticed that your bodies moved – you gestured or were otherwise active?
- How many of you noticed that your voice varied in pitch, volume, or other qualities – all related to the meaning of your words and the intensity of your connection in the moment?
- How many of you just happened to notice that your face was expressive – not just Passive Neutral?

The singers now realize that they can be authentically expressive while singing and using their imagination. "The brain doesn't know the difference between truth and imagination; virtually identical neurochemical processes occur with both."

6. *At this point, I interject, "By the way, anybody get a little nervous when I mentioned singing?" And we discuss what I call the Coolness Cop, or the Perfection Police – that part of all of us which protects us from making a fool of ourselves, or being rejected for our inadequacies. We discuss two key elements:

- A. To be a confident, empowered, and fully expressive performer, our Inner Critic must be small. If that part of us is too big, our fears rule us – and we choose "safe" over "vulnerable," "timid" over "fully committed."
- B. People have found several ways to lessen the Inner Critic's impact. They've said to that part of themselves, "Hey, everybody else is going for it, and they're still OK." And "Thanks for protecting me all these years, but I'm a big person now and I can do it myself."

Perhaps the most effective tool for minimizing the Inner Critic is the focus on the Other, raising the stakes and doing everything possible to impact that being. This is effective simply because the Inner Critic is all about SELF-consciousness, and OTHER-consciousness is its direct opposite. If you're completely immersed in the act of impacting the Other, the brain will have no room for the Inner Critic.

7. The choir sings *Happy Birthday* two times. First, focusing on "beautiful singing." Next, they sing to a three year old who just saw the birthday cake crash to the ground. *The child is devastated.* "What's your objective? Who are you singing to? A real person? Someone imagined? Their name? In order to avoid self-consciousness when everyone says different names ("Happy birthday, dear _____!"), visualize victory when you say their name. If you want them to stop smiling and smile – they stop crying and smile." I introduce Facing the Director and give them a moment to imagine Pete as their three year old. "Take 30 seconds to start the creative imagination process." They sing, with Pete just starting them out then standing there. *Their experience and sound is very different.* We process their observations and experiences.

JUMP INTO THE REP The singers are now ready to apply their skills and concepts to the repertoire. They've learned what they do as authentically expressive humans, and they can transfer those thoughts and behaviors to their singing. With you creating that supportive environment and empowering the singers as individual artists, the choir can explore what might be new and exciting territory. And your audiences may be in for quite a journey as well – a shared journey Humanword.

If you'd like to explore this approach further: My book is *Choral CHARISMA: Singing with Expression*, published by Santa Barbara Music Publishing. Website is www.choralcharisma.com, or email me at tpcarter@earthlink.net. I'd love to support you in whatever way I can. *Thanks so much for being here today!*

A FEW FACTORS WHICH IMPACT RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION ... and just might build your audiences

Repertoire choice. Is it rewarding to sing? Challenging but not overwhelming? Fun, interesting, engaging to listen to and think about? Rhythmic and melodic hooks on occasion? Humor? Is there variety of sound and substance, both musically and textually?

The choir's expressivity. Are people connected to music and text? Are they moving in relation to their mental/emotional/musical impulses, or do they stand relatively still. Are their faces authentically alive with the *specific* meaning and poignancy of the text and its musical setting? Or is their focus more on perfection, singing well, or making the audience *believe* they're authentically engaged? Are they having a powerful, poignant, and truly joyful experience in front of their potential new members in the audience? Or are they looking like a bunch of relatively bored or intense people singing together? And do they all smile humbly and gratefully during applause, as they look at the audience members and silently send the message, "Thank you so much! I had a blast singing that for you, and I'm so glad you liked it."

The singers' physicality. Are their feet hip or shoulder-width apart, with one foot slightly in front? Is their weight tipped ever-so-slightly forward? (If their feet are together, they will reduce their mind/body connection substantially.) Are they aligned vertically, so that the sternum is elevated, the head is comfortably held, and they feel a vibrant sense of aliveness and flexibility rather than stiffness or tension?

The director's facial expression. Are you truthfully engaged with the soul of the music, allowing your face to do whatever it wants to do as you 'dance' with the choir? Or is your face modeling what you want the singers to do vis a vis expression? The former is the face of a director who has given the power and responsibility for expression to the singers. The latter is the face of a director who believes the singers can't do it by themselves, and need the mirror. One is empowering with high expectations, and the other is somewhat disrespectful (albeit not intentionally), with low expectations. Each face and approach will ultimately impact both singers and audience members.

The rehearsal/performance environment. Is it a positive, supportive, and safe place – consciously created and maintained by the director – where each member knows that they will not be teased or shamed by *anyone*? Or do members gossip or insult each other, with no meaningful response from the director? Or does the director shame and intimidate, even throwing tantrums or rages on occasion? Does the director have good boundaries and time management, always respecting the singers by doing their best but not taking themselves too seriously?

The director's overall approach. Does the director see all humans in the room as valued co-creators working toward a shared artistic goal? Or is it more about the director doing this, that, and the other as they strive to craft a certain sound from these human 'organ pipes'? Is "control" their inner mantra and outer affect as they work towards "perfection," or are they empowering the singers to be co-equal artists in the *process*, everyone tapping into the same well of shared humanity which inspired the words and music in the first place? (Do they see themselves as a "Good Director" or a "God Director"?)

The final product. Does everything come together well – with neither the technical nor expressive elements pulling negative focus? Are there momentary thoughts in the audience of "Wow, they're good!" before they are swept away to the land of shared human connection ... to something much more powerful than "perfection"? Does the choir memorize the music, or are they holding folders much of the time? The latter will prevent their full personal engagement, and will affect the audience accordingly. Memorizing whenever possible, on the other hand, will allow for much more connection between singer and music, singer and director, and most importantly, between singer and audience.