

To Read or By Rote?: That is the Question

by: Anthony Trecek-King,
Special thanks to Melanie Trecek-King

As a conductor of young choristers, I believe the most central aspect of my job is to create lifelong lovers of art music, and to accomplish this task I must teach my singers the basics of musical literacy. I have found that achieving shorter-term goals of successful concerts becomes easier when the longer-term focus includes skills such as sight reading, ear training, and musical independence.

Too many times I have visited choral classrooms where musical literacy is not a central tenant of the curriculum. I once had a colleague tell me that it is a waste of time to teach young choral singers how to read music. A more common explanation is the lack of time required to teach the singers how to read music while also preparing for an upcoming performance. In my opinion this would be like a reading teacher saying they do not have enough time to teach their students how to read, so instead they simply read to them stories aloud. Another common, although less articulated, justification is the lack of confidence in the abilities of children.

It is true that teaching music by rote gives more instantaneous results. However, I often joke that I teach my students how to read music because I am too lazy to teach them each song otherwise! My job actually becomes much easier with more of an initial investment into musical independence. A choir that is capable of reading the score themselves has boundless potential.

Allow me first to share with you two experiences that profoundly affected my opinion on this subject.

My first day in choir was in high school in Bellevue, Nebraska. The choral director, who is now a good friend and the man I credit with instilling in me a lifelong love of choral music, began with stretches and vocalizations. We were told to think about things like the shape of our mouths, our sound placement, and our breathing, and

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he drew pictures on the board to help us visualize our voices. When we finished our warm-up we took out a piece of music and began to sing, without the help of a rehearsal accompanist. Thus my first introduction to choral music was also my first introduction to sight reading. Four years later I had learned the lesson loud and clear: Learning how to read music in general was the most efficient way for the ensemble to learn any single piece of music.

More recently I had the pleasure of working with two of the world's great professional choirs in the Netherlands. Their musicianship was phenomenal, to say the least, and their abilities were virtually limitless. I had never seen a choir rehearsal like it: Starting pitches were rarely given, and they rehearsed without a pianist, even though they were sight reading. Instead, each singer had a pitch fork and would independently correct any mistakes along the way. Needless to say, I was taken aback. I next had the pleasure of seeing the organization's children's and youth choruses and saw the same skills being taught and used, in singers as young as 10! Their sight singing could rival most college choirs and their musical literacy and understanding was simply astonishing. This experience greatly expanded my concept of the abilities of children and young people. Of course Dutch children are not inherently better musicians than American

children. The difference is the level of expectation.

You may be thinking about all of the differences between your situation and the examples I have just given, such as the amount of rehearsal time, government funding of the arts, or the select nature of the singers in certain choirs. Of course, all of these points are valid, and yet resemble excuses to justify not teaching musical literacy.

Allow me to now share with you some of my own experiences at the Boston Children's Chorus, which educates singers of diverse ages, incomes, religions, ethnicities, and cultures. Our younger choirs (ages seven to ten) meet just once a week for an hour and 45 minutes, and give between ten and 15 performances during the year. They also all learn how to read music at a basic level, and we study sight-singing and ear-training. Singers in our more advanced choirs all have pitch forks and often are required to learn pieces of music as homework. In all of our age groups we make learning music fun and often include games or even contests to keep singers interested. As students progress in age and ability levels they are expected to become more and more musically independent. Successful performances are always a thrill, but even more thrilling is seeing a child "get it" for the first time, and watching their appreciation for art music grow over time.

Musical literacy is an investment. It is also a gift, and our duty. It takes time, and it can be difficult to teach, but for many choristers we are the only exposure they may ever have. As music educators we have the opportunity to dramatically impact the lives of our singers. The skills we teach them will stay with them forever, as hopefully will their appreciation for the art to which we have dedicated our lives.

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