



## World Music for Choirs: Benefits, Barriers, and Basic Pedagogy for Teachers

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The use of world music continues to be an important topic for discussion among choral directors. Questions ranging from "Why should we program world music?" to "How can I program world music when I am not fluent in the language?" often present challenges to its incorporation in the classroom.

An examination of the historical importance of world music and its inclusion in the National Standards provides justification for dealing with the benefits, barriers, and basic pedagogy of programming world music, thus encouraging more teachers to program a wider variety of world music and expose more students to diverse cultures through music education.

When looking historically at world music's emphasis in the classroom, the late 1800s and early 1900s were dominated by music from the Western European tradition. It was the middle of the twentieth century that saw a wider discussion about music of other cultures.

One event that sparked this greater interest was the Yale Seminar (1963), where the delegates complained about a lack of diversity in repertoire in the classroom (Palisca, 1963). Following the Yale Seminar, the Music Educators National Conference (MENC) sponsored the Tanglewood Symposium and also reiterated the fact that music from all cultures belonged in the classroom (Choate, 1968).

In 1979, the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) formed a committee on Ethnic and Minority Concerns and made a commitment to offer more sessions on diverse music at conventions ([http://acda.org/archive/acda\\_history](http://acda.org/archive/acda_history)). MENC continued to point out the need for music of diverse cultures being included in the classroom through its release of the National Standards for Arts Education in 1994 (Blakeslee, 1994) and again in 1999 at the Vision 2020 meeting, which

set goals for music education through the year 2020 (Madsen, 2000).

Although the National Standards require world music's inclusion in the classroom, there are often legitimate barriers to its introduction and inclusion in daily teaching. Some of these include limited class time, difficulty of foreign languages, lack of quality recordings, and difficult tone quality choices (Cash, 2012; Marsh Chase, 2002). Although these barriers may make world music difficult to include in the classroom, there are benefits that often outweigh the barriers.

Examples of the benefits include using music to expose students to different cultures, meeting the National Standards through the inclusion of world music, and teaching other musical concepts through world music. Students often find the music exciting, and the possibility that students' preferences may be expanded is a good thing. Accepting the fact that the benefits of programming world music outweigh the barriers teachers face, a number of basic pedagogical tools can help make the inclusion of world music much easier for teachers and provide enhanced experiences for their students.

Music publishers often include either phonetic pronunciations or International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols as a key for pronunciation in the scores. Recordings of the spoken text are sometimes made available to teachers, allowing them to feel confident as they walk into the classroom to teach a language they may have never heard or spoken. In addition, quality recordings of world music are becoming more readily available (YouTube, iTunes, Spotify), providing examples for teachers and students alike.

Once there is increased proficiency with the language, there are several approaches to teaching a work that will save

both time and energy in the classroom. An idea presented by Ben Allaway includes a three-step process. First, the teacher briefly explains the meaning of the text. Then she models the text for the students, having them repeat it aloud. Challenging phrases can be drilled one at a time.

Next, the teacher sings the bass part and asks the basses to imitate. If the work is lengthy, the teacher may consider using only a phrase or two that can be repeated as much as is needed. While the basses are repeating that particular phrase or section, the teacher begins to sing the tenor part, having the tenors join once they have heard their part.

As the tenors and basses are repeating the section together, the teacher sings the alto part. Altos join in after hearing their part. Finally, the process is repeated for the sopranos, and all are singing together (Holt & Jordan, 2008). This technique can easily be employed with SSA or TTBB scores. Also, depending on the voice part normally sung by the teacher, octave displacement may be necessary with students taking the part up or down an octave as needed.

Another pedagogical approach includes learning the work on a neutral syllable prior to using the particular language. This is particularly helpful if the parts are somewhat difficult and if adding another layer of language from the beginning would complicate the learning process even further.

Beginning with a neutral syllable has other benefits. The teacher can establish the tone quality needed for the entire work, letting the text take on the qualities of the neutral syllable. For instance, if the piece is to be somewhat subdued and a warm, rich tone quality is desired, an “oo” vowel might be particularly useful in learning the notes and rhythms.

Parts can be learned independently and then layered to form a beautiful, appropriate sound on one vowel. Then, the teacher can model the text using either a phonetic pronunciation guide, the IPA symbols (International Phonetic Alphabet), a recording in the language, or a student or colleague fluent in that language. If an immediate transfer from the neutral syllable to the text proves difficult, the teacher can ask half the class to use a neutral syllable and the other half to sing the text. Switch the procedure prior to everyone singing on text.

One final pedagogical tool that can help introduce world music to a choir involves teacher modeling. First, the teacher speaks the text in rhythm to the students, breaking it into phrases as necessary. Then, she models the part while the students keep a steady beat using body percussion. The teacher repeats the part and asks the students to tap the rhythm while the teacher sings.

Next, the teacher sings the part while the students tap the

rhythm and mouth the words. This systematic approach allows students to hear the part three times, thus solidifying their familiarity with it prior to singing. Finally, the teacher sings one phrase at a time, and the students immediately sing it.

After drilling individual phrases, the teacher can model combinations of two or three phrases. Singers repeat the combined phrases. Eventually, the singers will be able to sing an entire section. This technique works well with less-experienced singers with limited sight-reading capabilities. It is also useful in developing students’ aural skills and tonal memory.

There are ample opportunities for teachers and students to experience the many benefits of programming and performing world music from many cultures around the world. I hope that the pedagogical strategies offered here will encourage teachers to program more world music and experience greater success in teaching world music in their classrooms.

With implementation of these approaches, teachers will gain confidence, be empowered, and thus expose their students to a variety of musics from around the world, not only allowing them to meet state and national standards, but also to achieve more diversity in their programming, thus improving the learning experience of their students.

## Resources

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*Don't be too timid and squeamish about your actions. All life is an experiment. The more experiments you undertake, the better.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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### **The Mother/Daughter Choir: A Unique Experience for Your High School Women's Choir**

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Several years ago, I attended an outstanding ACDA National Conference session titled "The Venus Factor." The presenter talked about the unique qualities of the psyche, personality, and nature of females and the possible implications for directors of women's choirs. The session was designed to encourage directors to find activities, traditions, and music that would empower the members of high school women's choirs. After returning home, I was inspired to find ways for the females in my women's choir to embrace their uniqueness.

As in most high school situations, the singers in the women's choir are those who do not make the top mixed ensemble. But I was determined to develop distinct activities for our women's choir that would inspire the girls and make them feel special. One of the first ideas I implemented was a mother/daughter choir, which is now a much-anticipated and

treasured tradition at our school.

### **Creating the Mother/Daughter Choir**

It is important to realize that not all families are the same. Make it clear to the young ladies in your choir that when you say "mother," you mean biological mom, adopted mom, step-mom, older sister, aunt, grandma, or the lady who lives next door who has been like a mother to you. Also, it's fine if the students invite more than one "mom."

### **Publicize**

Start publicizing the event at your school's open house. Prepare a letter that includes a description of the event, a repertoire list, and dates and times for rehearsals and the performance. Share the letter at your open house when you introduce yourself to parents. Give the letter to your women's choir students during the first week of school. I also put the letter on our choir website and e-mail it to parents by the second week of school. Moms declare their interest by returning the signed letter to me.

### **Prepare**

Give every interested "mom" a rehearsal packet that includes the rehearsal dates, printed copies of the music the choir will perform, and a rehearsal CD. I record every voice part for each song. I don't ask moms to decide the part they will sing until they arrive for the rehearsals. I also post the rehearsal tracks on our choir website.

We hold two rehearsals. At the initial rehearsal, I ask my daughter (or another musician) to help me with sectionals. Two rehearsal dates, rather than one, are scheduled because you need to accommodate work, sports, and family schedules. The final rehearsal is scheduled on the night of the concert, an hour before it is to begin. In order for the mothers to feel prepared and calm about the performance, it's important that the final rehearsal take place in the performance space with risers and lights. All women's choir members are required to attend the two special rehearsals, but I never exclude a mother who can't make it to the practices.

### **Perform**

I always schedule the mother/daughter choir performance at the beginning of the concert. Mothers are called to the stage