



The Singer's Library

Directing Conductors

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Two new books offer guidance for choir directors, including a fascinating and necessary discussion about achieving healthy vocal production in a choral setting.

Millions of singers participate in choral ensembles every year in the United States, according to Chorus America.¹ In school choirs, church choirs, or community choirs, choral singing helps foster a love of music among singers from amateur to professional.

Whether choral directing is a primary or secondary field of interest, two new books from GIA Publications provide countless strategies and perspectives for conductors looking to improve their craft. The first book is written as a guide to those directing school choirs while the second explores the philosophies of 10 prominent children's choir conductors.

'Habits of a Successful Choir Director'

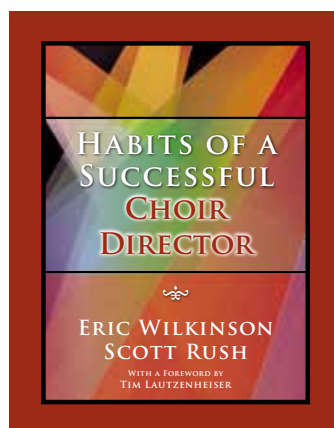
Coauthors Eric Wilkinson and Scott Rush understand that school teachers never seem to have enough time. Therefore, even the layout of their book, *Habits of a Successful Choir Director*, is organized for ease of use and quick digestion of important information. For instance, immediately following the table of

contents is a bulleted list of 10 objectives, the first two of which may be the overriding goals of the book: 1) "Provide a 'how to' book that presents effective teaching principles with depth and understanding" and 2) "Utilize a 'nuts and bolts' approach to the everyday issues a choir director faces and stay away from foundations and educational psychobabble."

New teachers will benefit from reading the book cover to cover to learn about the myriad considerations that come into play in the choral classroom, such as Teaching the Components of Singing; Quality Repertoire Is the Key to Success; Managing the Classroom; the Importance of Appropriate Assessment; and Working with Parents, Principals, Faculty, and Staff. Veteran teachers may peruse the chapter titles to find the specific areas where they are seeking new ideas.



Brian Manternach



Wilkinson and Rush wrote the book systematically, beginning with nonmusical tasks and progressing with “an evolution toward the music-making process.” It addresses “guiding principles”—including Organization, Communication, the Choir Handbook, and Taking Care of the Little Things—and calls upon teachers to regularly and

complete are part of what accounts for the high burnout rate of young teachers. Armed with the information and resources provided in *Habits of a Successful Choir Director*, teachers of all levels of experience stand to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of how they approach the vitally important work of educating young people through music.



‘Working with Young Singers’

Author Melissa M. Mills interviewed 23 children’s choir conductors about their careers working with young singers for her two-volume set titled *Working with Young Singers: Educational Philosophies of Expert Children’s Choir Conductors*. She then crafted those interviews into narratives, the first 10 of which appear in Volume One. In this volume, the word “philosophies” may imply a focus on the broad view. True, this book is less “nuts and bolts” than *Habits of a Successful Choir Director*. But it contains more than mere pontifications

honestly assess their own skills and performance in the classroom.

Most chapters begin with a list of common pitfalls followed by possible solutions and are then arranged in easy-to-follow sections and subheadings. The many exercises and activities suggested throughout the book can be readily implemented in class, and the appendixes contain templates for important forms and documents (on class procedures, attendance policies, a “contract of mutual consent” for parents and guardians, etc.) that can be tailored to fit individual classrooms.

And most chapters end with checklists to further emphasize important points and inspire action plans for the future.

Due to the book’s thorough content, many readers will undoubtedly identify with the question by Tim Lautzenheiser in the foreword: “Where was this reference anthology when I started teaching?”

The seemingly endless lists of tasks and expectations school choir directors must meet and

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"A common concern among the conductors is choosing repertoire that is both varied and of high quality. In this effort, Elsner vows to avoid 'sing-songy rainbowy stuff that's not going to make my singers brighter.'"

on big-picture platitudes as the thoughts shared are as practical as they are philosophical.

Mills asked the conductors to discuss their influential past musical experiences, their current musical experiences and insights, and their thoughts on the future of choral music education and children's choirs.

Differences in philosophy emerge almost immediately. For instance, Barbara M. Tagg encourages directors to have an ideal sound in mind before beginning to work with a choir so that every vocalise can be done within the context of that sound. In this way, choirs can have the same sound from one year to the next.

By contrast, Emily Ellsworth says, "I don't have a 'choral tone' that I impose on all the singers." Rather, her goal is to elicit the healthiest singing she can from everyone in the choir.

A similar approach is used by Christy Elsner, who encourages a free, full tone that is grounded in healthy

vocal production so singers can find their "real" voices. She finds that by consciously trying not to "over-manipulate" the singers, her choirs sound slightly different each year.

In another example, Anne Tomlinson describes being influenced by the "blended tradition of the upper Midwest." Therefore, she teaches a combination of vocal technique with choral blend.

Janet Galván, however, does not even use the word "blend," believing that it leads singers to try to change their voices to sound like someone else.

Perhaps ironically, many of the contributors do not specifically identify as "children's choir conductors." This is in part because many of them have backgrounds in other areas, as directors of adult choirs, voice teachers, or rehearsal pianists. Doreen Rao expresses another reason: "I think that professionals interested in working with children in choral music should consider themselves first as choral teachers."

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A common concern among the conductors is choosing repertoire that is both varied and of high quality. In this effort, Elsner vows to avoid "sing-songy rainbowy stuff that's not going to make my singers brighter."

Nearly all the conductors spoke of their work as a responsibility—not simply a job. Elsner points to the conductor's responsibility to be passionate, demanding, consistent, and nurturing, while Henry Leck says a teacher's responsibility is to make any task feel achievable and to teach it in small enough pieces that it feels logical. Betty Bertaux identifies some of her primary responsibilities as respecting the children under her guidance; teaching them how to sing more beautifully, accurately, and naturally; and teaching them how to keep their voices healthy. She also describes her own responsibility to be well prepared for rehearsals and to keep herself in good shape musically and pedagogically.


Many conductors also discuss the desired outcomes of their work. Rao says, "I want my students to become all that they can be intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually through the musical experience," while Leck asks the question, "What have we done with a child's life?" He says, "... success is only measured by the life-changing impact one has had."

Mills states that her intention for Volume One of *Working with Young Singers* is to capture and preserve the legacy these conductors have created so the next generation of conductors can find guidance and inspiration. A music educator herself, Mills is also a former children's chorister who understands firsthand the impact these choirs have on young lives. Each contributor's ideas are generously shared in a spirit of graciousness and gratitude that permeates the book. Readers will find many techniques worth exploring

alongside insights that motivate the intentions behind their work.

Brian Manternach is on the voice faculty of the University of Utah's Department of Theatre. In addition to his contributions to Classical Singer, he is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing. An active singer, he holds a doctor of music degree from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Visit www.brianmanternach.com for more information or contact him at bmantern@gmail.com.

Endnote

1. www.sfcv.org/article/chorus-america-and-americas-millions-of-choral-singers 



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