


CHAPTER EIGHT

*The Y Factor in an X Chromosome World*

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When approached about contributing to this book, I was asked to provide a male perspective about conducting women's choirs and how I, as a male conductor, have been successful with women's choirs. I was flattered by the invitation, but stumped by the topical request, hence, my double *entendre* intent in the chapter title: the "Y" and "why" of the male perspective. In this chapter, I briefly discuss my perceptions of gender bias in this field, share the bulk of my thoughts about my programming philosophy and success as a women's choir conductor, and highlight a few perceived, distinct qualities inherent in women's choirs.

CONTEMPLATING ISSUES OF GENDER

Before beginning directing women's choirs, I was aware of the perceived second-place status associated with this genre. In the past, the majority of women's choirs in the United States were comprised of individuals that did not "make the cut" for the top ensemble. These individuals were decent singers—often quite good—but not labeled as "the best"—and most of my colleagues made this status clear by their actions in the treatment of these choirs. Literature choices were frequently spotty, sometimes challenging, but often drivel. There was a belief that the individuals in these ensembles could only rise to the challenge of being adequate or acceptable. It was unlikely that the ensemble would excel or exceed one's expectations. Also, because there was not an extended range of voices available in a same-sex ensemble, the group sound would not provide a quality level of sonic satisfaction, particularly true for a women's ensemble. Some might say, "At least a men's choir has a sound that is robust and entertaining."

At the same time, the women's liberation movement ushered in a new sense of personal power and worth for women. However, there was almost an extreme, exclusionary sense that accompanied this movement: a sense that men did not belong in this particular club. Men could not possibly understand these real gender struggles and therefore, should not participate. This was a realm about women and for women.

I had to answer the question, "Where do I fit in with this cadre of conductors?" My male counterparts believe this type of conducting is acceptable, but not exactly worthy of one's real time and effort. As most conductors know, a women's choir will always be second place. Why would a male in this society be satisfied with second place? Initially, my female colleagues have often unknowingly made me feel as though I am not a club member, but rather an outsider, due to my Y chromosome. Perhaps they think, "He may achieve adequate results with a women's choir, but how can there be a serious commitment to this genre? He must be biding his time, waiting to move to a mixed choir." Or, "He's occupying a space that could be filled by a female counterpart who is passionate about this genre." Consequently, I often feel I have been relegated to what seems a liminal state of existence—respected for my success with the genre, but not really able to neatly fit into an expected stereotype.

In my view, neither of these perceptions is acceptable and both are lacking the broader perspective of what I perceive for the role of a conductor of women's choirs. To be a successful conductor of a women's choir, or any ensemble, for that matter, gender is irrelevant. Primarily, one must be a good conductor. I realize this may seem obvious, but it is a critical beginning point. One cannot be successful in the choral arena unless skilled in one's craft!

It is always difficult to objectively self-evaluate one's successes and failures. Consequently, I sought feedback from students and colleagues as I considered specific elements that have led to our ensemble's success. Four recurring themes surfaced: fundamental sound, programming, belief in the individual and development of the whole person, and team building.

## THE FUNDAMENTAL SOUND

The fundamental sound of my women's ensemble is clean, healthy, and vibrant, which I attribute to my understanding of the female voice. I attempt to listen to each individual voice with no preconceived limits. However, I am constantly aware of the overall health of the voice and welfare of the student. At that point, it is imperative I listen carefully to the sound and also weigh in the individual responses from students. My encouragement to students in my ensemble is to *try* and to *trust*.

To assist with flexibility in range, agility, and timbre, I sometimes move students between sections. This movement allows for maximum flexibility with minimal health concerns. To help blend the overall sound, I have adopted and incorporated a structured voicing/voice placement method that I was introduced to through a workshop with Weston Noble and later with Mary Scheibe. At the beginning of the academic year, I set aside a thirty-minute window of time to spend with each section of the ensemble. During this sectional time, I isolate the quality of each voice and then pair each voice with two complementary partners (one on each side). When a good vocal fit is discovered, singers sense a freedom in their vocal production and the sound is appropriately amplified.

Finally, I address the "elephant in the room" on day one. I never ask my singers to produce a non-vibrato sound, but rather encourage an approach that, at times, will minimize the amount of audible vibrato. This approach encourages healthy vocal production and achieves desired results for stylistic variety.

## PROGRAMMING PHILOSOPHY

Programming is a rudimentary component of our success. Performances are interesting, creative, and often contain an element of the unexpected, largely due to varied literature selection that is challenging, engaging, and relevant to the audience and participants in the ensemble. Important elements for developing a successful program are embodied in my programming philosophy.

## SELECT QUALITY LITERATURE

Selection of repertoire is a challenging and rewarding process. Fortunately, the composition of women's choral literature, written specifically for women, has exploded in the past decade. The challenge comes with sifting through this massive output to discover true gems that will *speak* to you, the ensemble, and your audience. Guidelines include:

- choose quality texts that are essential to the success of a rehearsal cycle and performance. Seek texts that speak to the intellect and emotions of the group. Choose texts that will stimulate discussion and maintain ensemble interest over a period of time;
- search for repertoire composed for women's ensembles. Too often, our libraries are filled with transcriptions of boy-choir or SATB compositions. If a composition was written with women's voices, ranges, and timbres in mind, the chance for performance success will greatly increase. Also, my primary aim is to find a good composition, regardless of the gender of the composer. However, if a woman composes the piece, it is a bonus;
- commission new works for women's choirs. It is exciting to have a tailor-made composition written specifically for your ensemble. Budgets are always a concern, so if a personal commission is not feasible, consider being involved in a consortium project. In either case, I have discovered a great value in connecting my ensembles with living composers who write specifically for my group. There is a heightened sense of pride due to this personal connection with the composition, and audiences are anxious to connect with these new works during the premieres. If possible, invite the composer to participate in the rehearsal process and premiere through an on-site visit or Skype. This approach brings the process to life and makes a lasting impression on the choir and listeners. Encouraging an understanding of this living art form will support a rich body of new works by young and/or established composers—works that

may be the chestnuts of tomorrow. Whatever the outcome, the process is worth the effort;

- stay attuned to the need for educational variety for the singers and audience. Strive to represent a wide range of historical musical periods in the program. I have made it a goal to specifically search for literature composed for women;
- endeavor to include a wide variety of styles that will appeal to a broader group of individuals. Introduce pieces that will musically and aurally challenge audiences. Such programming may prove risky, but will provide an exciting educational opportunity. Periodically highlight different musical periods and genres, including jazz, Broadway musicals, chant, pieces with non-standard notation, etcetera; and
- work to include world music that represents a variety of heritages and cultures reflective of singers in your ensemble. Attempt to expand the ensemble's World-View and aural experience. Search for cultures that represent a rich tradition of women's music, i.e., Eastern-European traditions.

## FOSTER SENSITIVITY TO THE INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND ABILITIES IN THE GROUP

Just because a selection worked well with a choir five years ago does not mean it will work with the current ensemble. What are the particular strengths of your present ensemble, soloists, ranges, flexibility, memorization ability, language skills, and attitudes? How can these strengths and known weaknesses guide the repertoire selections process?

## HAVE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN VOICE AND VOCAL HEALTH ISSUES

These issues are critical. Communicate often with your singers. Carefully monitor their vocal and musical progress. Discuss range and tessitura issues. Consider moving singers to different sections to alleviate possible vocal tension and to accommodate and solve blend issues.

## BELIEVE IN THE VOCAL AND MUSICAL ABILITY OF THE CHOIR

A positive attitude goes a long way to achieving performance success. The first step is creating a vision for the ensemble followed by describing the vision and speaking of it. Set benchmarks to measure achievement. Initiate a goal that is slightly beyond what they believe is possible to achieve. Do your best to intellectually, vocally, and musically stretch each individual in the ensemble, including yourself. Be convinced your choir is able to reach this goal. If you believe the purpose and end point of the goal, you will be an unstoppable, driving force for the success of the ensemble.

## BE A COURAGEOUS RISK TAKER

## DO THOROUGH PREPARATION AND ADVANCED PLANNING

Know your ensemble, audience and community standards, and literature. All this preparation is critical, but not very useful unless you are willing to take risks. There are no 100 percent guarantees, but to achieve great things, you must step out in faith, and trust your planning and preparation.

## BE PERSISTENT

If the vision is in place, don't be discouraged or give up. You will encounter numerous obstacles along the way, such as: ensemble members, colleagues, community members, administration, limited budgets, and time. However, there are usually creative solutions to these roadblocks. Be willing to make adjustments to your plan, without compromising your vision.

## LOOK FOR EDUCATIONAL AND ENTERTAINMENT VALUE IN YOUR LITERATURE CHOICES

We do a good job of emphasizing the importance of the educational aspects of our programming. However, is there some type of entertainment value in the program? Is the program too "heavy and preachy," containing too much material that is "good for you," but lacking something light and enjoyable? Does the program contain elements of joy?

## ENGAGE THE AURAL AND VISUAL SENSES

Consider visual and spatial awareness when you are entertaining programming ideas. How can the performers and audience members engage their aural and visual senses? Have you considered using the element of surprise? What if the singers begin the concert in the balcony? What if someone begins singing in the audience? How can lighting be effectively used? What is the effect on the audience if one candle is lit or a flashlight (or several) are included for the performance of a work? Is it possible to incorporate dance, a dramatic reading, or a guest soloist to tie portions of the program together? All these elements help to present a cohesive story that will culminate in a memorable production.

## KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The greatest success comes when one is able to engage an audience through musical familiarity and interest, combined with elevating and educating them throughout the performance. Never think of musically underestimating the audience; gently elevate your programming to a newer, variety-filled, more sophisticated level that leads the audience to a new musical awareness and appreciation.

## BELIEVE IN THE INDIVIDUAL

Place a significant amount of importance on maintaining a positive attitude and believing in each individual in the ensemble. Strive to celebrate the beauty of the individual qualities inherent in every ensemble member. Yes, this is a choir and the focus is on the group effort; however, believe these characteristics combine to enhance the group effort. It is critical to invest in the individuals that make up the collective whole. The special and diverse qualities of each individual's vocal and personal traits weave together to form a much more interesting and complex tapestry. Strive to nurture the individual, and work toward the development of broadly educated, well-rounded ensemble members. Participation in musical events will be your core activity, but I strongly encourage research, conversations, and participation in non-musical



interests such as reading, movies, and sports. Attempt to show your support for ensemble members by attending as many of their personal, non-choir activities as possible e.g., sporting events, plays, art exhibitions, lectures, and recitals.

Although each ensemble has its own special characteristics, I have observed three specific challenges when working with women's choirs. The first is the awareness of a heightened emotional barometer. It may seem politically incorrect to address these characteristics, especially by a male, but one must be aware that with this collective estrogen level, cycles are evident that will necessitate allowing space for emotional moments (not to use this as an excuse, but a conscious awareness that one must be prepared for the unexpected moments). With this, I have developed a heightened sensitivity to the overall mood of the group, often the need to allow room to be flexible in the rehearsal process. I have also learned the value of vulnerability, warmth, tenderness, compassion, and honesty. Most important, I have discovered that an even temperament and personal availability, providing a listening ear and compassionate shoulder to lean on, are the most effective tools in helping to maintain a sense of stability.

Communication style is also essential in the gender-specific setting. Women, alone, seem more at ease and free to express themselves. There are great benefits to this sense of ease, but the consequence is: it tends to produce a more talkative atmosphere. I have discovered it is important not to squelch this enthusiasm and freedom, but rather to devise strategies that will allow each individual to be heard by contributing in a productive manner. One new way we have dealt with the talking issue is by creating a virtual chat room where ensemble members can share their discoveries and insights between rehearsals. Ideas and questions are shared online and highlights are discussed and incorporated during future rehearsals, thus allowing for shared communication without interfering with the rehearsal process.

Frequent struggles with self-image and self-worth are evident. Personal comparisons run rampant and the level of sensitivity to this subject, within the group, is extreme. Consequently, supportive, nurturing actions must be practiced on a consistent basis by both the conductor and ensemble members.

By doing so, an indefinable level of comfort is established that impacts rehearsals and performances. Fostering the key component of teamwork, by establishing an atmosphere of safety, security, and refuge will help to ease the anxiety over mind and body image issues.

#### TEAM-BUILDING STRATEGIES

Finally, the overwhelming key to our success has been the development of the team or group-bonded experience and attitude. I have a true passion for my ensemble and attempt to instill that passion in each of the participants. Time is the least available and yet, most important gift needed for team building. I do my best to spend time with the group members outside of rehearsal, stopping to chat in the hall, on the street, or with personal appointments. In fact, we have created regular social gatherings to foster interpersonal relationships. Examples of activities include a weekly dinner meeting where we gather and interact on an informal level, monthly social activities such as movie night, cookie baking, and our annual, three-day choir retreat.

#### A FIRESIDE CHAT

During the retreat, an annual tradition was established where I outline my team-building philosophy through, "A Fireside Chat with Professor Swan." This chat focuses on five lessons about teamwork we can learn from geese (adapted from an Internet discovery written in 1972 by the former associate superintendent of the Baltimore Public Schools, Robert McNeish).<sup>1</sup>

**First**, as each goose flaps its wings it creates an uplift for the birds that follow. By flying in a V formation, the entire flock adds seventy-one percent greater flying range than if each bird flew alone. Consequently, lesson number one teaches us that people who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.

**Second**, when a goose falls out of formation, it immediately senses the drag and resistance created by flying alone and quickly moves back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front of it. Lesson two teaches us that if we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those headed where we want to go and be willing to either accept or give help to others as needed.

**Third**, when the lead goose tires, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies to the point position. As with geese, it pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing leadership. We are interdependent on each other's skills, capabilities and special array of gifts, talents and/or resources.

**Fourth**, when a goose gets sick, wounded, or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again and then launch out with another formation or catch up with the flock. This lesson reminds us that if we have as much sense as geese, we will stand by each other in difficult times and when we are strong.

**Fifth**, why do those geese make so much noise? The geese honk to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. This lesson teaches us that we need to be sure our honking is encouraging. In groups where there is encouragement, the production is much greater. The power of encouragement to stand by one's heart or core values and encourage the heart and core of others is the quality of honking we seek.<sup>1</sup>

This annual chat has become a cornerstone of the ensemble and has helped to solidify our goals and foster a sense of bonded community—even spawning the creation of our ensemble name. As e-mails are exchanged throughout the year, closing salutations are often accompanied by, “Honk!”

## CONCLUSIONS

The concepts presented throughout this chapter demonstrate ideas any conductor can put into practice. The skills needed to accomplish the task are not gender specific. Successful conductors should:

- possess a willingness and ability to identify what makes a women's choir special together with a strong belief in the ensemble and its members;
- push members to new levels of accomplishment;
- invest time in quality programming; and
- foster a supportive, healthy, and nurturing environment that will lead to a strong sense of teamwork within the ensemble.

The opportunity to lead a group of healthy, empowered, musical women will clarify why conducting a women's choir can be the most satisfying and rewarding accomplishment of a man's or a woman's conducting career.

## —NOTES—

<sup>1</sup> Robert McNeish, “Lessons from the Geese,” 1972. Sue Widemark on the Web. Copyright 2009. <http://suewidemark.com/lessonsgeese.htm#mcneish>. (Accessed August 3, 2011).