

CONNECTION or PERFECTION: Can we have both?

By Tim Seelig, Choral Conductor and Teacher

Much has been written about the difference between “music for music’s sake” – **Perfection** and “music as a means to an end” – **Connection**. In four decades of singing, conducting and teaching, I have experienced the entire gamut of choral music, as have you. It is my hope that you will read this article as if we were having a conversation – even though this one is really only in my head!

Any connection we might have to this thing called music began long ago – longer for some than others. At some point in our youth, we connected with this art form and decided it was what we would pursue. Do you remember the moment? Do you remember the teacher or conductor or minister of music who brought you to that moment of decision? Have you thanked him or her?

Your initial decision to pursue the choral art most assuredly came about because of a connection, not because of perfection. Even more interestingly, it probably did not happen at one moment in an amazing performance, but rather through daily contact with someone for whom music was a complete passion. You experienced music as the driving force in someone’s life and thought, “If someone can feel that passionate about something, I want that in my own life.” It was this connection that brought you to pursue music and choral music as a life’s calling.

Everything we teach in singing and choral music is based on a wide-swinging pendulum. It is never black and white. While it has components of math that are rational and logical, it is driven at its very core by the gray of emotional response.



We arrive at our ultimate goal – somewhere in the middle – by experimenting with various ends of the spectrum. Some of the sometimes-confusing dichotomies we teach include:

Bright and Dark

Loud and Soft

High and Low

Intense and Relaxed

Vowels and Consonants

Vibrato and Straight-tone

Text and Music

Connection and Perfection

This very pendulum is why our singers and students sometimes

think we are a little “off.” One week we ask for a brighter sound, the next darker. One week we ask for more energy, the next for more relaxation. One week we emphasize the vowels and the next the consonants.

We certainly do ask them to be flexible as we find that perfect combination where the pendulum rests right in the middle – achieving the mysterious sound that resides only in our own head! We say things like, “I want you to sound like One Voice.” We just forget to tell them which one!

The question is, “How can we arrive at that perfect resting place, right in the middle, where we can have it all – Connection and Perfection?” Or can we?

My own career has straddled a fence between two worlds. I feel most fortunate to have had an entire lifetime of emphasis on the “music as a means to an end” through my work in church music and community choruses while simultaneously teaching in higher education where the opposite is most often the norm.

Thus the genesis of this article as we try to look at both sides of this sometimes troubling, but ultimately exciting coin. There is obviously a difference between musicianship and musicality. Musicianship is the craft we continue to hone throughout our entire lives. On the other hand, most believe musicality is innate. Can it be taught? That is the \$64,000 question.

In academia, the obvious focus is on achieving perfection – often to the detriment of the musicality or connection. Books, college courses and convention workshops are filled with the pursuit of music as something that is completely objective: math, if you will. Attention to the subjective nature of music-making – the things that drew us to it in the first place – the connection, the art, is virtually ignored. It is most often a by-product that is taught at the end of a course of study if there is time left over, which there never

is, or something we just expect our students to “get” on their own.

There is no question that it is our job as educators to teach everything inside the box called “musicianship.” Sometimes, however, we carve that box out of stone with walls so high our students can never see beyond or over it. We do this by didactic teaching methods – telling our students what to think rather than the critical method – sharing with them how to think. The result is a dry desert – attempting to achieve the unachievable: perfection.

Perhaps our job would be better viewed as teaching everything inside a box drawn for them with disappearing ink. In the beginning, the lines are clear as the students learn the rules and mechanics of making music. Then, as they begin to explore and discover their own creativity and musical expression, the lines begin to disappear – never far from their minds, but allowing their own artistry and voice.

My real concern is that in our rigid academic endeavors, we have lost our way: our connection. We have forgotten that it is our job to teach concepts not create clones. We have somehow lost the memory of those first moments when music moved us beyond description and we simply could do nothing else but become musicians ourselves.

Could this lack of connection be the cause of shrinking audiences for choral concerts? I believe it is. The answer to audience growth and retention does not rest in dumming down our product or catering to the lowest common denominator. In fact, quite the contrary. I believe the answer rests in reaching our audience by connecting with them at every possible level, musical and emotional.

In most university settings, attracting an audience to a choral concert is not a priority. But it should be. Singers put in many, many hours to perfect the music you select for

them to perform. Why would they not want someone to hear the end result? What is wrong with this picture? Choir concerts become an academic exercise like taking a final. Then, the students go out to jobs – be it school, church, community or other – and they have no experience of connecting to an audience or even knowing how to get an audience in the door to try.

This must become a part of our curriculum. Branding, marketing, creative programming is essential to sustaining our art and not allowing it to go the way of the dinosaur.

How do we connect? It all starts with you. Do you remember the last time you laughed out loud, wiped away tears or simply experienced a transcendent moment of sheer beauty and awe – at a choral concert?

In life and in music, we connect with those exact three things: **TLC!**



Tear

L laugh

Chills Bump

And, of course, all three are created with much Tender Loving Care.

We have all studied the hierarchy of needs as put forth by Abraham Maslow. Did you know the entire list applies directly to the choral art? The first is physiological. We all agree that our physical nurturing and abilities are absolutely crucial to success in singing. More on that later.

The second is the need for safety or security. In the choral art, we must always be careful that we do not seek to create safety for our singers by making them into robots by stripping away all individuality. The real meaning of that safety lies in creating a space where singers can completely be themselves. Choral music must be a place where the singers/students are never belittled, embarrassed or made to feel less than they are. It is the very coalescence of a variety of human colors that makes choral music exciting. Otherwise, we will sound little better than a midi file. And we have all heard choirs that have worked so hard to obliterate any individuality that the result is just that.

The third area of human need is social. So we have:



There is no other endeavor I can think of that provides more of our human needs than choral music. It hits on all cylinders.

The connection falls into six areas. We are leading them to connect to the following:

The Voice.

The Music.

Themselves.

Each other.

Us.

The Audience.

Let's look at the six briefly.



Connection to the Vocal Instrument.

There is not enough that can be said about the connection to the whole instrument – body, mind, and spirit. For those of you working in schools, churches and community choruses, you may be the only voice teacher your singers will ever have.

Warming up your instrument is just like a 5 course meal! It should never be taken out of order nor should any one course be omitted because of lack of time or attention. Every single time the instrument is warmed up, it should include at least one delectable selection from each of the food groups – in this order! (Actual five course meals sometimes include other selections or even in a different order, but the exercises should never change!)



Appetizer – Posture

Soup – Breath

Salad – Phonation

Entrée – Resonance/Articulation

Dessert – Artistry

We will do our singers and ourselves a disservice by warming

up any other way!

Unfortunately for us, choral singing is actually an unnatural act in today's world. Most people have poor posture. We require excellent posture. Most people access 20% of their vital capacity or breath. We need 50% – 70% for good singing. Most people speak completely wrong. Reversing this for choral singing is one of our most difficult tasks. It is not longer "Come canta si parla."

The interesting thing about the five-course warm-up is that the first two of the five exercise food groups do not engage the vocal folds at all. The first course simply engages the body and mind. The second course accesses and exercises the breathing mechanism. ONLY THEN are the choir members allowed to engage the vocal folds. The third course is to help them understand the workings of the folds, easy onset, registers and on and on.

Once the first three have been accomplished, you are free to add exercises that explore resonance and exercise the articulators. Finally, we explore artistry – making magic with our vocal instruments – putting it together with others to make the choral art. This may or may not require singing at all, but the study of musical expression.



Connection to the Music.

Why did you select the music you are presenting? Your singers have no idea unless you tell them. There is no doubt you had good reasons. Tell them. Always start with the texts. Read them out loud. Talk about the meaning. Let the singers respond in kind. Ask them to research the authors, poets or lyricists.

All too often, we dive right in the deep end and begin with

the details of the music. We get completely overwhelmed and never come up for air. Often, when we do, it is too late. We have “count-sung” ourselves beyond the point of no return. The text can never be resuscitated. The potential for connection is gone.

Work on prosody – the natural rise and fall of language. Tell the singers which words YOU feel are the most important. Ask them to put a small dot above those words in the very beginning. Speak the text together. Finally, after you have put the music together with the text and worked and worked on the music side of the equation, go back and read the text one last time before taking the stage. Remember, understandability on the part of your audiences rests at least 50% on the intent of your singers to help the audience understand! If they do not care whether the audience understands or not, there is not enough diction, pronunciation, articulation in the world to counteract their indifference.



Connection to each other.

One of the most difficult tasks we have is bringing a room full of wildly divergent personalities together. And singers do have “wide emotional palettes.” We need to provide leadership that allows our singers to be open, to be vulnerable with each other, grow together and learn from one another. Through this, we will all be able to create art as one single unit.

This cannot happen when there is rancor in the midst.

We must be peacemakers, healers, counselors, parents, pastors, therapists and more!

Where was that in the Owner’s Manual?



Connection with themselves.

Learning to sing in a group provides life lessons like no other activity. It encompasses all of the other needs in Maslow's list: Self-Esteem, Confidence, Achievement, Respect of Others, Respect by Others, Creativity, Spontaneity, Problem solving, Lack of Prejudice, Acceptance of Facts; Spirituality or Giving of One's Self.

Music is the most healing of all art forms. It is nothing short of transformative. This is probably one of the most challenging aspects of our profession. We have all experienced the best and worst of watching our singers discover and uncover deep emotions through the music we make when we are together.



Connection to the Conductor.

Your singers simply must connect with you. There is one and only one key to this: Authenticity. Everyone on this planet can ferret out a fake. This does not mean sharing with your singers your personal issues or details of your life. It does mean being the same person on the podium and off. Do your singers hang around after rehearsal? Do your students hang out in or near the choir room? Then you are doing your job!

There is another area that is ignored in our education – how to lead and nurture and allow our singers to be vulnerable and grow and risk. Every time they stand on stage in front of an audience with you as their leader, they take a risk. They put themselves in your hands – in front of an audience. If they do not trust you, there will be no magic.



Connection with the audience.

As in the previous point, there is also a crucial key to connecting with the audience: Intent. Again, this begins with you and your music selection. What is the reason you have selected specific repertoire? Have you told your singers why? The reasons can run the entire gamut – even “because it’s good for you” or because “the music was on mark-down.” But there has to be a reason for them to understand why they are spending so much time perfecting this particular music. Tell them!

The connection your singers will have “through you” to the audience is one of the most magical experiences of their lives.

There is an emotional line – exactly half way between the singers and the audience – where they will meet. Finding that place can be a very precarious road. If your singers “over-emote,” the audience will pull back. No audience member comes to a concert to watch your singers have a catharsis on stage. If, on the other hand, your singers pull back emotionally from their connection to the music, the audience also pulls back, disengages and becomes uninterested. This will result in several things. One is the comment, “It was pretty good.” No one wants to be “pretty good.” Another is the fact that they will not soon be returning to hear your chorus!

CONCLUSION

Well, there is really no conclusion. In the beginning, I stated my hope was to have a conversation. If I have succeeded, you have been talking back to me – at least in your head if not out loud. You have pondered your own journey and

how you have been taught to make music and how you are teaching others. Have some of your own students gone on to pursue choral music because they “caught the bug” from your passion? If not, it is not too late.

When all is said and done, most audiences don’t really care about the details. Most audiences do not care about perfection. They do, however, care whether or not they feel a connection. Most of the greatest artists and ensembles in history have achieved their status through connection, not perfection.

Can we have it all? Yes, we can. But how wonderful it would be to have the connection as our main goal and perfection the by-product. Now, that’s a concept!

Always remember this wonderful slogan:

**They may not remember what you sang,
but they will never forget how they felt.**

