

# Studying Choral Conducting Around the Globe: The Americas, The USA

*By Christopher D. Haygood, conductor and teacher*

*And Jo-Michael Scheibe, conductor and teacher*

*Edited by Shekela Wanyama, USA*

Choral music migrated to North America with the arrival of European settlers to the New World. These colonists brought choral traditions with them and established a culture in the United States that encourages and values the Choral Art. Nineteenth-century singing societies populated by the middle class aided in the development of sight-singing methods, elevated the quality of church and concert choirs and provided the impetus for concentrated instruction in choral music in the United States. This movement gained momentum in the twentieth century as a result of pioneers like Elaine Brown, Harold Decker, Julius Herford, Charles Hirt, Roger Wagner and Howard Swan, to name just a few. Swan's delineation of the distinct approaches to choral music in the U.S. in the mid-to-late twentieth century contributed to the nation's collective choral culture.

Most American public schools (elementary, middle and high school) embrace choral music as essential to the educational experience and offer music classes as a regular part of the student's school day. Because of this, a high school student could conceivably graduate with several years of experience singing in choral ensembles which incorporate instruction in various elements of musicianship into the curriculum. All levels of higher education offer the study of choral music providing high school graduates various options as they pursue

a music degree. The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) accredits music programs at institutions of higher education in the United States. NASM seeks to provide a standard of academic integrity through degree guidelines and monitors institutional adherence through periodic formal reviews. NASM highlights vocal training and consecutive participation in choral ensembles throughout undergraduate studies as vital to education in choral music.

Two-year community colleges serve as an educational bridge between high school and four-year college, and grant associate degrees in more generalized fields of study. Typically, these institutions offer courses in music theory, musicology, basic conducting and voice lessons as components of the Associate of Arts in Music. Community college prepares students to transfer to a four-year college with many required classes already completed toward a bachelor's degree. Course credits transferrable to a four-year institution vary according to institutional discretion.

The Bachelor of Music Education (BME) with a choral or vocal emphasis prepares students to teach elementary and secondary choral music in public or private schools. Courses in educational methods, special learners, and childhood and adolescent development occupy a significant portion of credit hours for the BME and several institutions now include a rehearsal practicum in the curriculum. Prior to teaching internships, rehearsal practicum courses place undergraduates in the position of conductor in supervised rehearsal situations over the span of a semester. The practicum combines practical experience with a classroom seminar designed to assess, solve and strategize, thus increasing the effectiveness of choral music educators as they enter the classroom.

Generally, undergraduate degrees related to choral music include one to four semesters of conducting class, with a limited number of institutions offering private conducting

study at the undergraduate level. Frequently, first semester courses survey basic conducting gestures suitable for both choral and instrumental ensembles, while additional semesters focus on gestures and language specific to the choral rehearsal and singing. At this time, the University of Southern California is the only program to offer the Bachelor of Arts in Choral Music. This degree provides the opportunity for undergraduate students to pursue comprehensive choral studies including additional courses in choral conducting, choral development, choral arranging, and diction, in conjunction with general education classes.



**Helaine Brown**

For graduate study in choral conducting in the United States, teacher preference may at times be more important than the institution. The philosophy of a single teacher or collective faculty regarding choral sound and gesture shapes the process and product of an institution. Students may subscribe to a specific conductor's philosophy, gestural language, pedagogical approach, or combination of these. Similarly, some graduate programs place greater importance on either performance or academics, while others seek an optimal balance. Competitive teaching assistantships and fellowships are awarded to graduate students based on merit and academics. These financial awards range from a portion of tuition to full tuition and additional stipend depending on the policies of the respective institution. Each of these factors influences students as they select a graduate program in the United States.

Because of specifications set by NASM and additional parameters governing graduate degrees, it is not uncommon for the Master of Music to be the highest level of degree granted by an American university. Some institutions have strict limitations on the number of graduate admissions for both master and doctoral programs. At some institutions, the Master of Music offers students a degree that includes instruction in choral, orchestral and wind ensemble conducting as part of the curriculum. Some programs place more emphasis on music education while others offer a master's degree with Teaching Certificate called a Master of Teaching in Arts. These degrees usually require 30 – 36 credit hours and are a mix of courses in choral literature, conducting, vocal pedagogy, research methods, voice lessons, instrumental conducting, music history and participation in ensembles. The MM can be completed in two full academic years or two summers and one academic year at some institutions. Students who also teach or work in other fields can elect to attend school part-time.

Choral conductors employed in schools, churches, or other entities during the regular school year who wish to complete graduate studies in choral music may elect to enroll in a summer master's program. A few institutions in the United States offer a Master of Music Degree in Choral Conducting, Master of Arts Degree in Music Education with choral emphasis and a Master of Education Degree in choral music that can be completed over three summers. Florida State University, California State University Los Angeles, Michigan State University, and the University of Oregon all offer such programs. These can be advantageous to international students who prefer to remain abroad for limited periods of time.

Universities granting doctoral degrees in music number far fewer than those offering MM degrees. The Doctor of Musical Arts and Doctor of Philosophy in Music Education both allow study in choral music. The PhD in Music Education leans more heavily toward courses devoted to educational methodology

while incorporating choral conducting and choral literature on a more limited scale. By comparison, in a Doctor of Musical Arts program, choral literature requirements span one to four semesters with some institutions specializing focus through compositional era, liturgical practice or world music. The duration of DMA programs varies from two to five years, dependent upon the curriculum requirements of the granting institution. Programs may require qualifying examinations, projects or dissertations, while others may require more than one of these components plus course work and recitals to fulfill the degree requirements.

Doctoral students in DMA programs in both Choral Music and Choral Conducting devote up to three years of concentrated study of choral conducting beyond the master's degree. This takes place in classroom settings, private lessons and in ensemble conducting assignments usually culminating in one or more recital projects. While recital choirs do exist, many institutions expect graduate students to assemble their own choir for each recital. In addition, orchestral and instrumental conducting components, voice lessons, courses in vocal pedagogy and diction are becoming frequently included as core components for the graduate degree. Doctoral studies at several institutions, particularly those with a higher number of required units, ~~make it compulsory~~ for students to complete studies in one or more supplementary area. Fewer institutions offer a MM or DMA in Sacred Music, but curricula in these programs include more intensive analysis of the sacred canonical repertoire in conjunction with choral conducting concentrations.

Summer provides a multitude of opportunities for conductors who wish to further their education. Choral workshops address tone building, choral conducting, preparation of major works, and serve as resources for choral conductors of varying abilities with a desire to strengthen their technique and pedagogy. The Oregon Bach Festival, Westminster College of the

Arts at Rider University, Rene Clausen Summer Institute, and Eastman Choral Institute are a few of the many notable summer workshops available in the United States. In addition to marketing by the hosting institution, the *Choral Journal* of the American Choral Directors Association publicizes summer workshops held in the United States and globally throughout the year.

Diversity and breadth of approach mark the study of choral conducting in the United States. Each institution and its faculty determine the focus of their own program providing choral musicians with countless options for study. Universities across the country encourage international students interested in developing their skills as choral conductors and educators to explore degree options. International students for whom English is their second language are required to receive a passing score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Most institutions have an application deadline of December 1 for fall admission of the following calendar year. Readers are encouraged to thoroughly research options to determine which programs might best suit their individual needs.

**Dr. Christopher D. Haygood**, Associate Director of Choral Studies at Oklahoma State University, teaches undergraduate and graduate courses, conducts University Singers, Statesmen, and the OSU Vocal Jazz Ensemble. Christopher has conducted choirs across the United States, Europe, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. He appears as guest lecturer on Intelligence Theories and Rehearsal Strategy and specialized topics in Choral Literature. He received the DMA in Choral Music from the USC Thornton School of Music. E-mail: [christopher.haygood@okstate.edu](mailto:christopher.haygood@okstate.edu)