



## Music theory for choir students: They *like* it

I can't tell you how many times I've been rehearsing with a choral ensemble or music theatre or opera chorus and heard the announcement, "Singers, this is our last rehearsal together before we do our Sitzprobe with the musicians." Why are vocalists "singers" and instrumentalists "musicians?" I suspect most people operate under the perception that instrumentalists are more musically literate than singers, and I would venture to say that's all too often true. Of course, it's also quite possible that the perception arises from the fact that it is impressive to observe a virtuoso performance on an instrument, something that is impossible to observe by watching a singer.

I had lofty goals when I got hired to teach high school choir. My students would be musicians; they would not only learn how to read pitch and rhythm notation, they would be able to interpret all the symbols and Italian terms used to indicate repeats, articulation, dynamics and tempo. They would sight read grade-level appropriate literature in 2-4 parts. They would show up everyday for class with organized music binders and sharpened pencils.

Then I met Greg and Ben, two talented but obstinate tenors who insisted, "We don't need to read music; we're good singers and can learn our part by hearing it." Their binders never left the numbered slot in the classroom cabinet. I spent that year spoon-feeding each vocal part, line by line by rote. My choirs sounded great at concerts, but they couldn't learn a measure of music without my help. As you can imagine, I worked my tail off providing that help.

I love this quote by Tammy Campbell, Spokane Public Schools' Executive Director of Instructional Programs, "Whoever is doing the work is doing the learning." I was doing all the work, and I was also doing all (or at least most) of the learning. I learned that unless I held them accountable, students would allow me to teach and teach while they learned little to nothing; they would master the art of what I call "split-second echo singing." I learned that I had to lay a strong foundation of music literacy for my choirs, and after trying and failing with several different method books I discovered a gem: *Music Theory for Choirs* by Laurel Larsen published by Masterworks Press.

*Music Theory for Choirs* is brilliantly designed with scaffolded lessons in two volumes, basic and advanced, that teach note and rest values, treble and bass clef notation, time signatures, counting rhythm, intervals, articulation and dynamic symbols, rhythmic and melodic dictation, key signatures, and scales. There are lessons, formative activities, summative graded assignments, quizzes, and tests with answer keys. The lessons can be completed at a pace that complements my choirs' rehearsal and performance demands as they change throughout the year. Some days my students complete one exercise as an entry task; other days I do direct instruction on an entire lesson. The materials are delivered in pdf format, reproducible as needed for my students.

You can imagine what I heard from my students when I introduced the series last year—groans, deep sighs, eye rolls accompanied by comments like, "Do we have to do this?" "How will it affect my grade?" "Can't we just sing?" (Not that your students would ever make comments like that, right?) That was last year. This year my two advanced choirs are working on the advanced level lessons. Just this week we had really short class periods due to HSPE testing, so I didn't include music theory in my daily targets. Believe it or not, several of my students complained about that, saying, "We like music theory! We're getting really good at it." Honestly, they did!

Remember my first year of teaching when I was doing all the work and doing the learning? My, how things have changed! My sing-

ers are musicians. They are doing the work. Their minds are engaged in reading to learn and interpreting the composer's intent. Since they're able to read everything on the page, they are more actively engaged in figuring out how all the parts work together, listening critically and problem solving when they don't work together as they should. Don't get me wrong; I'm not sitting in my office drinking coffee. I'm still working hard, but now we're working hard together and everyone is learning.