

Silver Linings: Connections in Choir During Hybrid Learning

By Edward Norris



Teaching choral music in a hybrid model: How do I do that? How do I make this work? How will I feel? How will the kids feel? Will we be productive? These are some of the questions that made our hearts race in September when this journey began.

For all of us, the 2020-21 school year will certainly be one to remember. It has been a year filled with struggle, loss, civil and political unrest, depression, anxiety, and uncertainty. Our students' minds are saturated with images of negativity each and every day due to the current world that we live in. When I stepped back into the choral room at Glen Cove High School in September, I vowed to have our program be a beacon of light in their lives; a place where they could forget about what is going on in the world, even if it were only for 45 minutes a day. I let go of a lot that I had focused on in the past musically, and decided that the theme of this year would be connection.

I know that sounds pretty silly since on most days, I have anywhere from two to ten kids in front of me and everyone else on Google Meet, but that was my thought nonetheless. I decided to focus on what we have, as opposed to what we have lost. Yes, we have lost things like in-person rehearsals, lessons, concerts and trips, but we still have the ability to connect through music and make a difference in each other's lives.

For much of my career, my students have talked about how our choir family has made a difference in their lives. I would beam with pride knowing that our group gave them a safe space to be who they are while appreciating some of the world's finest choral music. I've always known how much I adore my students, but it wasn't until March of 2020 that I truly learned what the choir meant to both myself and to them! During quarantine I realized that this upcoming year would be about fostering and maintaining the connections we have to one another within our choir family.

This year I have talked to my students about "stopping to smell the *musical* roses." Yes, we still rehearse choral music, we still sight-read, we still learn good choral and vocal technique, but without the pressure of preparing for performances. I am able to dive very deep into things that I normally wouldn't have as much time to do. For example, we have been talking a lot about music theory in choir. I often talk about theory during my rehearsals but this year I am really

able to go into great depth about the chord structure of a piece or phrase or, perhaps, how the alto II's have the 9th of the chord, which has to be treated differently. This has given the singers a greater understanding of the music that we sing. Another thing that I have been able to do is work quite a bit on text analysis whether it be poetry or the text to a piece of music. We have taken text and really gotten into the meaning of each section and, once again, it has given the singers great comprehension of how to interpret . . . we have to tell the story! Spending the extra time with this aspect of music making will surely pay dividends for years to come.

I know what you are thinking. Where is the “connection” piece you were talking about? All of the “stopping to smell the musical roses” is great, but how do we connect over Google Meet? How do we connect the kids who are in person to the kids who are at home? For me, the answer has been simple; just talk to them, have a conversation. Take the time to find out how they are, how they are handling all of this, and let them know that you will be there for them every step of the way. Early on in the school year I showed my choirs a video of my dear friend [Dr. Jason Max Ferdinand and the Aeolians of Oakwood University doing a virtual performance of Robert T. Gibson's "We Shall Overcome."](#) The in-person students cried, the virtual students cried, I cried. It was a moment. We were connected! We were apart, but we were doing the same thing and feeling the same feelings at the same time.

My colleague at Glen Cove and I work very closely with one another and a mission that we take on each and every day is to connect to every single student, be it in-person or online and we have noticed that it makes a difference. Maybe it's a little story, a comment on their dog that's on their lap, a comment about their LED lights on their ceiling (boy am I tired of seeing LED lights), a comment about their favorite sports team, a comment about how great that student did in their virtual lesson. With each comment comes a smile or a wave from them. So many of them tell us that it makes a difference to them, and equally as important; it makes a difference to us! It makes us feel closer to them!

A few weeks ago, I was taking virtual attendance and said “Hey Kevin, it is so great to see you with us today!” He unmuted and responded “Hey Mr. Norris, thank you for being so cheery today. I need it because I am having a really tough time mentally and emotionally.” I couldn’t let that comment go. I had to talk to him, but I couldn’t pull him into the hallway as he was a virtual student. So, I talked to Kevin and the entire class about how it’s okay to feel these feelings and the best thing that you can do is talk about it. We talked about how the choir is a safe space and that’s why Kevin chose to say what he said. With Kevin and the group, I shared some of my personal struggles since the pandemic started, as well as with the civil unrest that has been happening. The chat was filled with comments to pick Kevin up, as well as students saying how grateful they were to be in class that day to hear what they heard. I received several

emails from students (and their parents) about how that particular session struck a chord and made a difference with themselves or with their child.

This year, it's not about perfect intonation and phrasing. It is not about having a fantastic concert. For me and for my students it is about connecting with one another and doing our very best to impact each other's lives. It is about continuing to learn great choral music, but taking time to smile and laugh each day. I would like to leave you with this video: it is the [BYU singers directed by Andrew Crane performing Elaine Hagenberg's "Alleluia."](#) Together with our students, we can stay connected and make music in the midst of all of this.

Stay safe my friends.

Edward Norris is the director of choral music at Glen Cove High School (Glen Cove, New York) where he conducts the 75-voice mixed chorus and the 40-voice Select Chorale. He also teaches music theory and AP music theory. Outside of Glen Cove, he is an adjunct professor at Long Island University Post Campus and at the Aaron Copland School of Music (Queens College). Ed serves as the Division V Choral Vice President for the Nassau Music Educators Association and is a proud member of the New York State School Music Association and the American Choral Directors Association. Lastly, Ed was a contributing author of Dr. Jason Max Ferdinand's book Teaching with Heart.