

**State of the Art: Examining Choral Culture During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Choral singing provides the opportunity to come together and work towards a common goal, even if the process can prove grueling at times. Therein lies the opportunity to deconstruct the collaborative nature between the choristers and choral conductor. How this concept manifests in rehearsal is the basis of my study, in which I investigate how the conductor navigates scores, investigates meaning, and transmits this information to the choir. In addition, I consider what choristers expect to occur in the rehearsal room, alongside qualities they wish to see in a choral conductor. The collaboration between choral conductors and choristers are examined via interviews and rehearsal observations. This is not a source to be treated as gospel, but rather as a mechanism to realize how versatile choral spaces, choristers, and choral conductors were during the COVID-19 pandemic. As this unprecedented event has had immense global significance, documenting these experiences provides a guide for future reference. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to shed light on what choral culture has been, is now, and could be.

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## **Preface**

I should like to give a hearty thanks to my advisor, James Cassaro, for his patience, magnificent research technique, and for never failing to give me hope about the potential of my project. I would like to dedicate this work to my dear friends of the Heinz Chapel Choir, for whom I am eternally grateful for their friendship, music-making, and inspiration to keep my love for choral-singing alive. Amen!



## 1.0 Introduction

Choral singing provides the opportunity to come together and work towards a common goal, even if the process can prove grueling at times. Therein lies the opportunity to deconstruct the collaborative nature between the choristers and choral conductor. To unravel the inner workings of choral culture, three foci for this study come into play: social, musical, and pedagogical. On a social level, it is critical to address mechanisms to promote inclusion, access, and belonging. I investigate the mutual expectations that choristers and conductors have for each other, understanding that such a bond is integral to the effectiveness of a performance.

The musical capabilities of a conductor are paramount. As such, a conductor, while immersed in the music, must live in three simultaneous tenses: past, present, and future. In the first tense, the conductor must remember what the choir has presented to them to provide detailed criticism as the rehearsal progresses. Similarly, in the second tense, the conductor must remain in the present moment with the choir. Singing is a *time art*, in which a mistake cannot be “written over” like a drawing would. What is crafted in that moment is the product: the notes occur, and the performance is finished. In the third tense, the conductor must consider where the music is headed – which may take the form of phrases or sections – to inform their current gestures to the choir.

Another question is: if we delve into a conductor’s mind, what is crafted there? In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, what is considered? Realizing pedagogical measures in the rehearsal room is the central matter of investigation. How does a choral conductor orient themselves in a room? How can they adhere to rehearsal techniques alongside the unique characteristics of their ensembles?

To explore all these factors, utilizing varying sources is critical. The collaboration between choral conductors and choristers is examined via interviews and rehearsal observations. The interview process was entirely virtual, in which conductors and choristers alike were asked to respond to several questions through the medium of an online form. As I selected these conductor-interviewees, it was my intention to speak to those who operate in varying choral cultures and environments (high school, collegiate, community spaces, etc.). Of the eight conductors that I interviewed, two of them allowed me into their rehearsal spaces to observe. The same interview format was presented to the choristers; I collected six interviews, in which each chorister-interviewee was from a different choral ensemble – this was done in hopes to gather experiences from various choral environments.

As for the rehearsal observation process, this was a format that I intended to keep rather broad. As a chorister myself, it was important that I take the insider-outsider positionality seriously, in which I would abstain from having my previous choral experiences color my expectations for how a rehearsal *must* go, and rather consider how a rehearsal *could* go. Thus, I operated under considerations of the following: what happens before the rehearsal begins? How does the conductor communicate with the ensemble (musically, emotionally)? How does the conductor lead the choir through warmups, and the rehearsal of a piece? To reiterate, these considerations were not determining factors for the level of success a rehearsal carried, but rather opportunities to break down what the conductor and chorister presented.

Before addressing the above inquiries, a literature review of choral culture and pedagogy is necessary. To do this, I employ online resources such as the American Choral Directors Association's *Choral Journal* and JSTOR. In the musical regard, I reference electronic resources such as Zoom, and live rehearsal observations.

In this thesis, I present a series of documentation and experiences alongside my analyses. This is not a source to be treated as gospel, but rather as a mechanism to realize how versatile choral spaces, choristers, and choral conductors were during the COVID-19 pandemic. As this unprecedented event has had immense global significance, documenting these experiences provides a guide for future reference. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to shed light on what choral culture has been, is now, and could be.

### **1.1 Literature Review**

For the purposes of this thesis, my literature review utilizes writings on choral conducting and pedagogy alongside current discussions of the choral field as a culture and art form.

*Choral Pedagogy*, edited by Brenda Smith and Robert Sataloff, discusses choral pedagogy in relation to two concepts: “Vocal Health and Pedagogy”, and “The Vocal Approach to Choral Music”. The first section included ten separate articles, either detailing different aspects of vocal technique or historical context. “Voice Disorders Among Choral Music Educators”, an article written by Smith, details mechanisms in which a choral conductor can avoid illness, vocal damage, and fatigue. As an example, Smith suggests that choral conductors should purchase an “amplification device”, such as a personal microphone, to help ease the pressure of over-projecting one’s voice<sup>1</sup>. The second section contains six articles, each considering different mechanisms to strengthen the choir. This includes, but is not limited to: diction, legato singing, *Messa di Voce*,

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<sup>1</sup>Brenda Smith and Robert T. Sataloff, *Choral Pedagogy*. 3d ed. (San Diego): Plural Publishing, 2013, 166, 247.

and how to present vocal technique to young singers. “The Value of Choral Singing”, another article written by Smith, explains that choral singing can be lifelong, so long as the chorister and conductor consistently “adjust their expectations of themselves and one another”. As this source was published in 2013, this framework provides pre-COVID perspectives on rehearsal technique, how to stay present with an ensemble, and anatomical considerations for vocal health.

*Conducting Music Today*, written by Bruce Hangen, discusses kinetic approaches to choral conducting, particularly regarding posture, style, and podium presence. Hangen places particular emphasis on three tiers of “Conducting Maturity”: “conducting only the beats”, “conducting some of the beats with character”, and “conducting the music, only rarely the beats”. He asserts that, when a conductor conducts less, a greater sound is produced. The attention the choir pays to the conductor during the music making is not lost; rather, the energy given back is more energetic<sup>2</sup>.

The first articles discussing the effect of COVID-19 on choral activities appeared soon after the beginning of the pandemic in March, one of the first being a report on the American Choral Directors Association’s 2020 Symposium in Choral Singing. Prior to COVID-19, the symposium was planned as an in-person event to take place at Georgia State University in Atlanta; due to the need to quarantine to keep their colleagues safe, ACDA leadership made the decision to create a “virtual exhibit room”. This international meeting provided the opportunity to review published abstracts, discuss scholarship methods, and hold conferences as planned<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Bruce Hangen, *Conducting Music Today* (Boston: Berklee Press, 2020), 46.

<sup>3</sup>Patrick K. Freer, “2020 Symposium on Research in Choral Singing.” *Choral Journal* 61, no. 2 (September 2020): 52.

An article by Jamila L. McWhirter, “Are You Zoomed Out? Dealing with Zoom Fatigue in the Virtual Classroom”, discusses what choir members and conductors had felt for the past three years: the debilitating exhaustion after a multitude of virtual meetings a day. Though virtual learning is a tool to maintain a safe community, McWhirter explains that this feeling of frustration might be because of such “sudden mass adoption of technology” in a short period of time, resulting in busier lives with smaller emotional connection. To overcome the exhaustion, McWhirter offers two methods: controlling the physical environment around you and setting specific times to be technology free<sup>4</sup>. Ironically, this article was written in September of 2020, when it was impossible to foresee just how long virtual learning would last. Nonetheless, this was an important beginning to guide performers at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, choral scholars published articles concerning classroom management, rehearsal technique, and concert programming ideas. “Planning Ahead: Five Considerations for Future Choral Music Classrooms”, an article by Andrew Lusher, asserts that human connection above all is the central part of music-making, and must be treated as such even in virtual circumstances. This was especially apparent in Lusher’s categorization of considerations for navigating choral instruction during a pandemic: “Heightened Ownership”, “Flexible Repertoire”, “Differentiated Instruction”, “Composition”, and “No Trophies”. Though Lusher discusses the merit of performance, the real focus was on what the students could do— outside of vocalizing on a screen— that would give them a sense of ownership in their musicianship. As an example, Lusher

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<sup>4</sup> Jamila L. McWhirter, “Are You Zoomed Out? Dealing with Zoom Fatigue in the Virtual Classroom.” *Choral Journal* 61, no. 2 (September 2020): 42.

suggests that students should learn how to write a simple verse/chorus composition, with the intention of allowing room for “an aural and aesthetic experience”<sup>5</sup>.

A few months after the publication of these articles, Cole Bendall’s article, “Defining the Virtual Choir”, discusses what it means to sing asynchronously. Most interestingly, Bendall provides two definitions of the choir under an environmental label: first, a synchronous choir, in which a choral community meets in-person, is “unified in purpose by principles of education and social development [...], perform in a venue to an audience”<sup>6</sup>, and utilize a music director or conductor to guide their overall sonic vision as a singular unit; second, a virtual choir, in which a choral community has a similar function to the definition above, without the opportunity to meet in person. This presents endless opportunities for the utilization of virtual concert mediums (i.e., video, audio, mixed media).

“Conducting During COVID: What is Possible and How has the Role of the Conductor Changed?”, an article by Rachel Carson and Scot Hanna-Weir, takes this definition of virtual choirs, and subdivides it into two categories: High Latency Video Rehearsals and Low Latency Live-Remote Rehearsal/Performance. In a high latency rehearsal through apps such as Google Meet or Zoom, the video suppresses outside noise to an extent where singers cannot sing at the same time (as it causes a sonic delay). Rehearsals would need to be spent with the choir members’ microphones muted, while the music director or conductor leads—as Carson and Hanna-Weir noted, this is more popular with large ensembles. In a low latency rehearsal through apps such as

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<sup>5</sup>Andrew Lusher, “Planning Ahead: Five Considerations for Future Choral Music Classrooms.” *Choral Journal* 61, no. 2 (September 2020): 71.

<sup>6</sup>Cole Bendall, “Defining the Virtual Choir.” *Choral Journal* 61, no. 5 (December 2020): 72.

SoundJack or Jamulus, musicians can perform at the same time. In this sense, rehearsals may be spent with live feedback on tone, posture, breathing, and virtual blend—though a grounding tool in production, this is most accessible to smaller ensembles, as the audio-rerouting software can prove to be too much for some electronic devices. The authors then discuss the virtual matters of the pandemic in relation to music education for up-and-coming conductors, particularly regarding gesture, musicianship, and how to cultivate the conductor-ensemble relationship. They offer several remedies, some of which involving the utilization of a pre-recorded virtual choir to practice gesture and utilizing “gallery view” or “pinning” the conductor to get a sense of the community around them. Ultimately, if nothing else, the intention was to encourage adaptability despite limited performance opportunities<sup>7</sup>.

During this time, conducting interview sessions were still very much an important part of maintaining a collegial community. “On Resilience: A Conversation with Darla Bair”, an article by Nicholas Sienkiewicz, discusses Bair’s experiences as a choral educator after she completely lost hearing in her left ear. Bair notes, “When I’m conducting, I find that I turn to listen with my right ear, so I can listen through my good ear. I also walk through my choir much more than I used to. Through this, I’ve had to encourage my choruses to be much more independent and do a lot more learning on their own”<sup>8</sup>. She goes on to explain that incorporating American Sign Language into her choirs was a part of her choral program for the Amadeus Youth Chorale far before she lost hearing in her left ear, but desires for there to be a greater initiative to incorporate sign language

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<sup>7</sup>Rachel Carson and Scot Hanna-Weir. “Conducting During COVID: What Is Possible and How Has the Role of the Conductor Changed?” *Choral Journal* 61, no. 9 (April 2021): 65–73.

<sup>8</sup>Nicholas Sienkiewicz, “On Resilience: A Conversation with Darla Blair.” *Choral Journal* 62, no. 2 (September 2021): 60, 61.

into their performances. She comments, “Let me be very clear: We are not teaching all that American Sign Language involves; we are only teaching vocabulary words, not syntax”.

In October of 2021, William Sauerland published his article, “Sound Teaching: Trauma Informed Pedagogy in Choir”, in which trauma informed instruction and care is defined for the choral classroom. Trauma informed pedagogy (TIP) is based on several factors: empowerment, collaboration, choice, safety, and trustworthiness. As Sauerland notes, “Trauma-informed pedagogy intends that a director need not only show care and empathy for members of their choir, but also care for their own well-being and health”<sup>9</sup>. He offers several positive habits to do so, including the practice of inclusive language, responding to trauma triggers, and practicing student-centeredness.

“We Hold These Truths: Defining Access, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Restorative Practice”, an article by Ahmed Anzaldúa, Noël Archambeault, Joshua Palkki, André de Quadros, Mari Esabel Valverde, and Arreon A. Harley-Emerson, takes a similar approach. In this work, each member writes a small section on a topic mentioned in the article’s title, detailing ways to incorporate improved methods of inclusion and access. In Anzaldúa’s section, “Access”, he notes that the field still has issues with reaching a large audience, primarily because of matters pertaining to relevance. As an example, if the choral community is so focused on providing the reasoning of why a certain manner of concert etiquette is relevant, the point of reaching an

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<sup>9</sup>William Sauerland, “Sound Teaching: Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in Choir.” *Choral Journal* 62, no. 3 (October 2021): 40, 41.



audience through the performance is considerably overlooked<sup>10</sup>. The call for a radicalization of choral culture is there, and it is our task as members of that community to listen to it.

This concept was taken further in Brandon Williams' book, *Choral Reflections: Insights from American Choral Conductor-Teachers*, which was published in 2022. Though Williams does detail his intentions with this work, most of his writings are identical interview questions, with varied responses. The questions detail nine different topics: "Objectives", "Creating Community", "Repertoire", "Rehearsal Preparation", "Tone Quality", "Gesture", "Qualifications", "Advice", "Representation", and "Looking Ahead". This piece includes the term *conductor-teacher*, which is a hybrid between the performative element of the field and the emphasis on pedagogy<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup>Ahmed Anzaldúa, et al. "We Hold These Truths: Defining Access, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Restorative Practice." *Choral Journal* 62 no. 7 (March 2022): 50.

<sup>11</sup>Brandon Williams, *Choral Reflections: Insights from American Choral Conductor-Teachers* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2022), 7.

## 2.0 Choral Conductor Interviews, and Rehearsal Observations

The following questions were given to the conductor-interviewees:

1. What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?
2. What qualifications do you value for a chorister?
3. How do you prepare yourself and the scores for a rehearsal?
4. In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, how do you orient the choir in rehearsal?
5. What do you think about when you conduct?
6. What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?
7. How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?
8. In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?

Though the interviewees were encouraged to answer the questions above, they were allowed to answer “Not Applicable (N/A)” to a question or to stop participating altogether by closing the online form. Eight interviews were collected from conductors, two of whom also allowed me to attend their rehearsals. Each interviewee was asked to provide a brief background on their experiences prior to the interview. As I selected these conductors, it was my intention to speak to those who operate in varying choral cultures and environments (high school, collegiate, community spaces, etc). This was particularly helpful during the rehearsal observations, in which I considered the warm-up sequence, the manner in which the choral members and conductor treated each other, and the rehearsal technique for a selected piece.

## 2.1 Conductor Interview 1: Kym Scott

Dr. Kym Scott is the Director of Choral Activities at West Virginia University (WVU) where she conducts the WVU Chamber Singers, Mountaineer Singers, Mountaineer Chorus, and Community Choir. She also teaches conducting, choral techniques, and choral literature, and oversees the choral conducting graduate program. She has directed choirs in Australia, Asia, Europe, the U.K., and the U.S., and regularly presents at state, regional, national, and international conferences. Scott is also the Artistic Director of the Renaissance City Choir of Pittsburgh. She is currently the collegiate honors choir chair for the West Virginia chapter of the American Choral Directors Association and a founding member of MASICA (Mid-Atlantic Southern Intercollegiate Choral Association). An Australian native, Scott has worked with all age groups and is particularly passionate about choral music in the community.

### **What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*I think that university qualifications are important as when studying choral music and conducting in this environment, you learn a great deal about gesture, literature, rehearsal skills, and every aspect of being a choral conductor. You also have the opportunity to sing a large amount of literature and learn from your student colleagues. However, university qualifications alone do not make you a great conductor, particularly when it comes to working with amateur ensembles. In addition to having the musical experience and skills that all conductors should possess, you also need patience, compassion, the ability to break down music into manageable pieces, humor, and ways to meet choristers where they are and take them to the next level. When working with a community ensemble, you have a huge variety of choristers from those with a great deal of experience and strong musical literacy skills, to those who have a great passion for choral singing*

*but have limited musical literacy skills. You need to find ways to keep the more experienced singers challenged while not leaving the less experienced singers behind.*

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*In an ideal world, choral singers should have great aural skills, good sight-reading skills, and a pleasant voice. I will always take a hard-working singer who always comes to rehearsal prepared over a singer with a stronger voice who is less prepared.*

**How do you prepare yourself and the scores for a rehearsal?**

*You must know the music extremely well. I need to be able to sing through all voice parts and have a very clear idea of how I want the music to sound. Any markings (breath, diction, changes to dynamics) should be marked in the score but I do not always mark anything other than the basic needs for most pieces I conduct with my community choirs. When preparing a more difficult score, such as an orchestral/choral work, I often spend more time studying the score and marking it up. This is more as a score study exercise than anything else. I have a clear rehearsal plan for every rehearsal I conduct.*

**In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, how do you orient the choir in rehearsal?**

*I try to always put things in a positive light. I use humor regularly. I understand that everyone has different learning styles and try to give more than one way to approach things. I try to be very clear with directions but never talk down to the choir.*

**What do you think about when you conduct?**

*When I am in rehearsal, I am usually thinking about what the choir just sang as I am constantly critiquing and correcting. I need to remember what I need to bring their attention to, or what I need to improve. When I am in performance, I am always thinking about what comes next as I do not have the opportunity to go back.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*Whether I am working with a university ensemble or a community group I believe it is very important to establish community within the ensemble. I believe that the ensemble always sings better when they feel supported by each other. Creating an atmosphere of community also encourages strong attendance and helps with recruitment of new members. My number one aim is to create an atmosphere and community where the choristers want to perform at their absolute best.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*During the shut-down back in 2020 I designed a singer's mask that was thoroughly tested (through the WVU Center for Inhalation Toxicology) for its ability to keep droplets from being spread when singing. The mask tested very well, and I began manufacturing it. While using the mask with my WVU singers, I was also able to provide approximately 12,000 singers with the mask throughout the US and beyond. My choirs used these masks when we went back to in-person rehearsals in August of 2020. We also stayed distanced (12 ft to 10 ft to 6 ft) and were limited to a small number of people in each choir. My community choir was not able to resume in-person rehearsals until*

*the Spring of 2021. While we were able to resume in-person rehearsals early in the pandemic, there were many restrictions. Joining via zoom has been an option since we resumed and remains an option both at RCC and WVU.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*While I believe that the basic format of choral singing will remain much the same over the next decade, I believe that the biggest change (that has already begun) will be regarding how we program and how we cater to transgender and non-binary choir members. I believe that there will be less single-sex ensembles and more focus on choir members singing the best voice part for them regardless of their gender identity. There has been a lot of focus over the last five years on social justice and diversity and equity. While there are still choir directors that are not interested in making changes, I believe that over the next decade there will be more diverse programming with consideration given to women composers, composers of color, and composers that represent the LGBTQIA+ community. I think that there is always room for choral classics and that they should be a part of our teaching, but there will be more room made for diversity and inclusion in programming.*

**2.1.1 Rehearsal Observation 1: West Virginia University Community Choir**

The table on the next page was used to document my experience observing the West Virginia University Community Choir on November 14, 2022. This group consists of current students, staff, faculty, alumni, and community members at WVU. At this time, the choir operated under a hybrid posture, in which choristers had the option of participating synchronously or

asynchronously. I stayed for the entire rehearsal, examined their warm-up process and rehearsal of “Sweeter Still”, a piece written by Eric William Barnum.

Table 1 – West Virginia University Community Choir

Event	Notes:
Pre-Rehearsal:	Dr. Scott makes a clear effort to speak with several members before rehearsal. Several members are preparing by adjusting their masks accordingly and looking over their music as they make their way to their seat.
Warm Up: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Stretches</li> <li>b. Breathing</li> <li>c. Musical Connection to the Pianist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Dr. Scott leads the choir in several physical stretches. She is not saying which stretches come next, perhaps implying that the order is one that both she and the choir know by heart.</li> <li>b. Dr. Scott leads the choir in various rhythmic breathing exercises to encourage diaphragmic inhalation – this is emphasized through a call and response tactic.</li> <li>c. Dr. Scott explains the vocal warm-up to the choir, and the pianist models the intervals on the keys. The first warmup encourages a nasal sound through usage of “mn” vocalization, the second on an “AH” down a pentascale, the third up and down on a major and minor triad (respectively), and the fourth on a “zee-ee-zee-eh-zee-ah” up and down on a major triad. She joyfully encourages the choir as they sing.</li> </ul>
“Sweeter Still”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Dr. Scott explains that she would like a serene yet energetic sound, in which the vowels are round and forward. She tests this out with a full run-through of the piece.</li> <li>b. During her notes, she often laughs with the choir when she asks questions. As an example, “Can you guess what the dynamic is? You’re doing something!”</li> <li>c. When she gives criticism, she first comments on what a section was doing well, followed by what needs to be reworked. As an example, the alto section had a solid sound together, but needed to listen to the rest of the choir</li> </ul>



	while they were singing on an “ooh” vowel.
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**2.1.2 Rehearsal Observation 2: Renaissance City Choir**

The following table documents my experience observing the entire choir on November 15, 2022. The Renaissance City Choir is a choral ensemble that promotes the unification of the LGBTQIA+ community and the choral community and is open to singers who are eighteen and older. I stayed for the majority of the rehearsal, examined the warm-up sequence and their rehearsal of “(I’m Spending) Hanukkah in Santa Monica”, a piece written by Tom Lehrer, and arranged by Bill Bowerstock. Like her COVID-19 safety postures with the WVU Community Choir, choristers had the option of participating synchronously or asynchronously. If a chorister elected to attend rehearsal in person, they were required to wear a mask (type of their choosing).

Table 2 – Renaissance City Choir

Event	Notes:
Pre-Rehearsal:	<p>There was an attendance table, in which choristers sign-in next to their name. Near the back of the hall, there was a large announcement board for choristers to write important events and notes. Just as with the WVU Community Choir, she makes a clear effort to speak with several members before rehearsal and treats them like her colleagues. As the choir members make their way to their seats, the choir culture is very welcoming and enthusiastic to learn.</p>
<p>Warm-Up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Stand and Stretch</li> <li>b. Vocalization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Dr. Scott leads the entire choir in several physical stretches. This included but is not limited to: stretching up and down, self-hugs, and twists.</li> <li>b. Dr. Scott performs the musical examples on the piano as she explains the exercises. The first warmup was a vocal warm up on an “oo” to an “ah” vowel; the second was an “ah” vowel, moving from Do to Sol (below the tonic) back to Do; the third was an “ee” vowel, in which they sang “Do, Re Mi” three times, went up the major pentachord, sang Do to Sol (above the tonic) to high Do; fourth was a “zee-ee-zee-eh-zee-ah” up and down on a major triad.</li> </ul>
“(I’m Spending) Hanukkah in Santa Monica”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Dr. Scott began a run-through with the choir but elected to stop mid-way through to review vowel formation, particularly on the word “whoa”. While the choir was singing, each section stood together, and were very excited to stand and sing in the same space. Dr. Scott radiates patience and calm while giving notes to the choir, making jokes all the while. As an example, she says, “Would you like to stand?” while winking to the choir and laughing.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>b. While reviewing tough rhythmic spots, Dr. Scott count sings through each line with the section to model what they should be listening for as they are singing. Regardless, the choir was evidently locked into her conducting, which was exemplified through their crisp diction and peppy cohesiveness in vocal tone.</li> <li>c. Dr. Scott conducted the choir with her right hand and cued various musical moments with her left. She took off her mask only while she was conducting, so they could see her facial cues.</li> </ul>
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## 2.2 Conductor Interview 2: Kevin Cornwell II

Kevin Cornwell II is a senior education major at Oakland University (Michigan) where he serves as assistant conductor of the Oakland Chorale and University Chorus. A graduate of Avondale High School in Rochester Hills, Kevin has played Hammond organ, piano, and drums in worship bands at numerous churches in the Detroit area. Kevin is the director of marching percussion at Avondale High School, where his students regularly receive first divisions at festivals. As a composer, his work has won several awards, most notably for his score for the 2021 film *Pharmacosm*.

### **What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*The ability to tell and shape a story. Understanding of Theory, Harmony, and Aural skills. To collaborate with students to develop interpretations of text. Piano skills.*

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Willingness to learn and to be critical thinkers.*

**How do you prepare yourself and the scores for a rehearsal?**

*Understand why I have programmed the specific piece. Understand the text and find a way to relate to me. Then, look at the structure and form of the piece to understand the phrasing and how the text relates to the music. Then look for recordings to look for concepts to add to my performance.*

**In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, how do you orient the choir in rehearsal?**

*The rehearsal is tailored to the singers. Many times, its formative assessments of asking the singers how to improve, and what they think is going well.*

**What do you think about when you conduct?**

*How to connect with the singers to make music. It's essential to think as a singer many times as a conductor. The best conductors keep the singer in mind and approach concepts just as if they were the ones singing. If I talk about breathing in certain spots, I should demonstrate how I want them to approach the phrase and not just tell them where to breathe—the same thing about cutoffs and releases. Demonstrate and sing it for the choir so they know what you're looking for. Also, connecting with the singers is having open conversations about text interpretation, phrasing, dynamics, and more. Yes, the conductor should have a vision for every piece, but the ensemble is doing a lot of the heavy lifting as well. The singers must find a way to connect the text to themselves*

*somehow. Masterworks are a bit tougher but still can have a sense of reflection within the ensemble dealing with interpretation. More than anything, it's about putting the singers first and being open to new ideas.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*Vulnerability and being open to new ideas of interpretation.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*Revising my expectations for the choir and finding new methods and way to meet the students without losing the core values of the group.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*To truly become more socially and culturally aware of our world. Responding, advocating, and programming music that responds to the issues we face today.*

### **2.3 Conductor Interview 3: Margot Cohen**

Margot Cohen is currently in her third year of teaching and her first year teaching at the high school level. She teaches in the Montgomery County School district in Maryland following the completion of her BME in Music Education and her BA in Music from the University of Maryland and the University of Pittsburgh, respectively. In her current position, she directs the choir(s) at school as well as teaches sections of piano and guitar. She currently studies privately

with Mark Boyle and plans to move on to get a masters as well as a DMA in choral conducting and then teach at the collegiate level.

**What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*Vulnerability/transparency, passion, kindness, honesty, accountability, empathy, inclusive.*

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Vulnerability/transparency, passion, kindness, honesty, accountability, empathy, inclusive.*

**How do you prepare yourself and the scores for a rehearsal?**

*I spend time reading through each part on the piano as well as with solfège, I color code my scores using the score study techniques I've learned, I choose/craft warmups that serve the repertoire, and I do my best to take care of myself so that I can be my best self for my students.*

**In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, how do you orient the choir in rehearsal?**

*As with anything, I think balance is important. There's something to be said about being able to communicate non-verbally with your ensemble through gesture alone, however, sometimes verbal communication is necessary to successfully execute something in the music. I try to use a little bit of everything in my rehearsals because there are many different styles of learning as well as I want to expose my students to the different forms of communication that can occur in a rehearsal.*

**What do you think about when you conduct?**

*I think about all of the little things, of course, like rhythm, dynamics, what gesture to show where, etc. but I also try to think about showing the music with my hands and connecting with my singers as well as the audience through the music.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*Communication. I think communication is paramount in any relationship and it is no different for the relationship of an ensemble. Communication between myself and my students, my students with me, and my students with each other is what I put a large focus on. How we treat one another in and out of rehearsal directly affects, in my opinion, the overall sound. The more we can connect as an ensemble, the more that will come through in our execution of performance.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*During the early portion of the pandemic, I was teaching at an elementary school, so I had no professional choral experiences. I was, however, participating/directing a small virtual choir with some friends of mine at that time. In my second year of teaching, when we were physically back in school, I was directing a 4th and 5th grade chorus that I closely aligned with the county and CDC guidelines for mitigating the spread. That meant singing in masks at all times, limiting the amount of rehearsal time, as well as going on brief hiatuses when the transmission got too high. I additionally joined an ensemble, the 18th Street Singers, that also followed closely with CDC guidelines.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*I'm not sure if I necessarily have clear cut expectations, but I do have hopes for how the role will grow/change. I hope that we learn from this experience and take with us what worked and leave what did not. I hope we can move forward with compassion and empathy for one another, and that compassion and empathy goes beyond Covid-19 to other ailments. I hope that we can be kind to one another and continue to learn and take steps forward instead of back. Lastly, I hope that we can continue to advocate for ourselves, particularly women in the choral conducting space for fair and equitable treatment. The pandemic has taken away so many things from so many different people for different reasons, but that doesn't mean we can let that stop us, we must keep the momentum going and keep trying to be better every day.*

### **2.3.1 Rehearsal Observation: Wheaton High School Chorus**

The following table documents my experience observing the choir on November 21, 2022. I stayed for the entire rehearsal, and examined their warmup sequence, sight-singing practice, and rehearsal of “Thirty Second Fa-La-La”, a piece written by Donald Moore.



Table 3 – Wheaton High School Chorus

Event	Notes:
<p>Warm-Ups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Physical Warm-Up</li> <li>b. Vocalization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Ms. Cohen first led the choir in a series of physical warm-ups, including but not limited to, rolling the shoulders back and forward, leaning the head in all directions, and stretching the arms and legs.</li> <li>b. Ms. Cohen performs the vocal warm up as she plays on the piano. The first warm up included trilling a descending major pentachord; the second warm-up was speaking “when will the weather be cold” with energy and without aggression in diction; the third warm-up was the act of throwing three sirens (vocalizing as high as you could muster) and singing straight tone on a “nee-neh-nah-noh-noo” vocalization.</li> </ul>
<p>Sight-Singing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Ms. Cohen utilized an online application to produce a D Major sight-reading example in <math>\frac{3}{4}</math> time. Prior to practice, she played the major triad and encouraged the choir to practice aloud. After the choir sang their first attempt, she discussed ways to consider a dotted quarter-note rhythm, particularly through exemplifying what it sounded like.</li> </ul>
<p>“Thirty-Second Fa La La”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Ms. Cohen utilized an online application to play a track for the choir to rely on as they sang, so she could focus on giving critique for intonation and blend. After the first run-through, Ms. Cohen first encouraged a heightened sense of vowel shape on “fa” (she preferred an “ah” vowel over an “uh”). After the second run through, Ms. Cohen then moved onto musicality though dynamic emphasis (as they were only singing three different words at the same time, this aspect would have the most effect in their future performance that December).</li> </ul>

## **2.4 Conductor-Interview 4: Rachael Demaree**

Rachel Demaree is currently in her first year as a graduate student at Michigan State University (MSU), where she is pursuing her Masters of Music in Choral Conducting. Before coming to MSU, she taught high school choir and show choir for three years at Cedar Rapids Jefferson High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She received the BME and BA degrees from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa in 2018.

### **What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*I value a conductor's musicianship, communication skills, and gesture. I appreciate conductors with a sense of humor that make rehearsals enjoyable. I also like conductors that respect their singers' time and make rehearsals productive. Showing passion for the music and prioritizing ensemble members' needs as people (vs. as musicians) are also important skills in my book.*

### **What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*I value willingness to learn/improve and the ability to work with others. I also look for rhythmic accuracy, intonation, and vocal tone/technique.*

### **How do you prepare yourself and the scores for a rehearsal?**

*I like to put some markings in the singers' scores when possible—mostly breaths and translations. I mark a lot more in my own score, such as tempo changes, notable dissonances/unisons,*

*translations, breaths, important motives/imitative entrances, etc. I think about what I want to accomplish during the rehearsal and then write a lesson plan/sequence to use as an outline.*

**In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, how do you orient the choir in rehearsal?**

*I like to do warm-ups that prepare the voice, breath, ears, and brain before beginning work on the repertoire. When we get to the repertoire, I often let them sing through a section before giving them much feedback to allow them to remember the things we've worked on previously.*

**What do you think about when you conduct?**

*Everything! I am constantly listening and evaluating the sound coming at me, while also trying to use my gesture clearly and effectively. I try to organize the things I want to work on by priority, and make changes to what I'm doing in real time to provide the ensemble with more/better information. At the same time, I'm also taking the emotional temperature of the room so I'm aware of how singers are feeling—are they getting frustrated? Are they up for a challenge? Do they need a slower pace?*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*I think it's important to have a culture of mutual respect and kindness. Not everyone will be best friends and that's fine, but we have to be able to acknowledge our reliance on each other and work together to make the music happen. A big part of my job is to make sure that every person feels valued and supported by me and by others.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*I've had a wide range of choral experiences during the pandemic. I taught "choir" completely virtually, then I taught in a hybrid format, then in-person but masked and distanced. It's been difficult, and I'm glad to be back to more "normal" music making.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*While we will still strive to be experts in what we do, I think conductors will (should) continue to become more of a facilitator. We are beginning to recognize the value of giving singers ownership over the music and the rehearsal process, and I hope that continues!*

**2.5 Conductor Interview 5: Amanda Quist**

Dr. Amanda Quist is the Director of Choral Activities for the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami. She directs the graduate program in Choral Conducting and is conductor of the award-winning Frost Chorale. Dr. Quist has served as Chorus Master for the Philadelphia Orchestra and Spoleto Festival.

Dr. Quist was previously Chair of the Conducting, Organ, and Sacred Music Department, and Associate Professor of Conducting at Westminster Choir College. She is the recipient of Westminster Choir College of Rider University's 2014 Distinguished Teaching Award, the 2018 Mazzotti Award for Women's Leadership, and the Carol F. Spinelli Conducting Fellowship. Her ensemble, Westminster Kantorei, won first place in the 2018 American Prize for College &

University Choral Performance. The choir released its first commercial recording, *Lumina* in 2017, distributed by Naxos.

Dr. Quist's other honors include the James Mulholland National Choral Award and the Audrey Davidson Early Music Award. She regularly conducts high school and collegiate honor choirs across the U.S., and is invited to headline conferences and serve as a guest lecturer in the U.S. and abroad. Dr. Quist's choral series are published through Walton Music and Gentry Publications.

**What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*The ability to lead, and the ability to serve. I feel that choral conductors should value people and have a passion for the impact of music on the growth of the human spirit. We should be deeply informed as scholars and artists, and well-equipped to inspire singers toward a collective resonance of sound and expression.*

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Dedication, openness, willingness to learn, willingness to take on leadership roles, passion for their craft, someone who engages in the process.*

**How do you prepare yourself and the scores for a rehearsal?**

*I use a process of score study that leads me through the score in a systematic way. This includes score marking (barline, phrase, harmonic analysis), creation of charts if appropriate, coloring the score, and making interpretive decisions based on my research of the piece, its place in time, and the composer.*

**In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, how do you orient the choir in rehearsal?**

*I like to set the choir up in a variety of ways. We rehearse in sections, mixed, sometimes in a circle, sometimes in small groups. When teaching, my goal is to create independence and autonomy with the singers, so they feel empowered to make artistic decisions based on their understanding of the music, and our collective expression. In terms of modes of teaching, I like to use gestures, kinesthetic learning, call and response, and written indications to reach a variety of learning styles.*

**What do you think about when you conduct?**

*Breathing, listening, staying open to what I am hearing, and assessing how I may need to adjust my gesture to aid the singers in whatever is needed. I also think about releasing the singers into their own music-making, so I'm hoping to more of a guide or conduit for the music, rather than a dictator.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*That all members of the choir understand they are valued, and that the singers find a level of safety and respect with one another.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*We used Zoom to facilitate learning and connection, rehearsing and performing in small groups, special projects, masks, social distancing, the creation of videos rather than live performance,*

*reorganizing rehearsal time (taking breaks to allow for air cleaning) and other means of teaching and learning.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*Primarily, I see changes happening that are requiring conductors to be more socially conscious, which I think is a good thing. I think conductors will need to continue to be well-informed in a variety of genres, but conductors are being asked more and more to be responsible in performance practice elements, so the learning required will continue to deepen.*

## **2.6 Conductor Interview 6: Ron Frezzo**

Ron Frezzo was raised in Mt. Vernon, NY and studied accordion from age eight to eighteen with a tutor with various degrees in music. He went to Catholic University in Washington, D.C. for a Music Education degree although he did not see himself as a career teacher. He switched to piano which he says he did not practice enough. While at Catholic, he sang in many choirs under a master musician who was an expert of Italian opera. After college, Frezzo taught for fifteen and a half years in two different schools; took a university administrative job for one and a half years where he realized how much he enjoyed working with kids. He ended up at Richard Montgomery for thirty-two years, where he was privileged to work with many students with excellent skills and musical backgrounds. He conducted a wide variety of choral music and learned from his peers and students. Upon retiring in 2017 he had worked forty-seven and a half years in the vocal classroom.

**What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*BM in Ed. MM in Choral Conducting; many in-service classes, singing with excellent conductors.*

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Match pitch! pleasant vocal quality, willing to work hard to learn the music, sight-singing ability, commitment.*

**How do you prepare yourself and the scores for a rehearsal?**

*Look & mark phrasing and breath spots; analyze text for meaning and emphasis; decide dynamics (if different from composer's), play parts at the piano, and today of course you can hear so much on YouTube.*

**In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, how do you orient the choir in rehearsal?**

*Because of a church sitting issue, I have always had sopranos to my right; altos to the left; tenor and bass in the center...usually basses behind the tenors.*

**What do you think about when you conduct?**

*Myself being accurate; where I want a climax; what the dynamics and tempo should be at a particular moment; given that most of my work was with high school, are they looking at me!*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*Try to make each rehearsal an enjoyable time, yet keep the learning going - meaning correct notes, rhythms, tempi, dynamics, and understanding of text.*



**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*I was - thankfully - retired by that time. However, I sing with a large community choir and our conductor ran Zoom sessions during most of the season where he brought in guests to discuss music, talked about pieces we would be doing and played them, which kept the group intact.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*At my level, it's convincing people that there is still a reason to sing Mozart while exploring the many fine contemporary works and bringing them to the public and building the audience.*

## **2.7 Conductor Interview 7: Blake Rosser**

Blake Rosser is a graduate assistant in Choral Conducting at Western Illinois University in Macomb, IL where he studies with Dr. Brian J. Winnie. Blake currently serves as the Director of Choirs at First Christian Church in Macomb. Prior to moving to Macomb, he taught seventh and eighth grade choral music at Novi Middle School in Novi, MI. In addition, Blake founded the Oakland County Chamber Choir, an auditioned twenty-four-member chorus focusing on bringing music throughout music history to life. Recently, he joined the Beyond Choral Ensemble, a professional chorus with the goal of bringing music to life in Southeast Michigan.

Blake holds a Bachelor of Music degree in education from Oakland University where he studied under the baton of Dr. Michael Mitchell and Dr. Gregory Cunningham. Blake is a member of the American Choral Directors Association, the National Association of Music Educators, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Fraternity.

As a soloist, Blake has a passion for bringing twentieth and twenty-first century art songs to audiences. In recent recitals, he has explored the music of Dominick DiOrio, John Luther Adams, and Benjamin Britten with collaborative pianists Larissa Verley and Denzel Abarquez. Blake enjoys singing in other non-classical styles, such as vocal jazz and musical theater.

### **What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*Expression – Every phrase has microphrases within themselves. A clear understanding of expressive intention (i.e., dynamics, agogic and textual stress, overall texture, phrasing, etc.) can help better evoke understanding to the audience.*

*Mind-Body-Voice Connection – I believe every conductor is a holistic musician. To have what the modern conductor calls 'ideal', I think the choral conductor should aim to connect full body movement of gesture to vocal technique to an understanding and preparation to intention of the given score. Of course, these ideals should change with every piece.*

*Gestural Intention through Score Study – The gesture is much more than pattern. We need to consider what we are displaying to the singers, such as onsets and offsets, vocal technique, dynamic changes, and phrasing. Incorporation of Laban, Alexander, and Dalcroze movements allows the conductor to find freedom in tensions to better demonstrate changes in effort, size, and plane shift.*

*Vocal Technique – To truly teach and rehearse the techniques you want as a conductor, we as conductors need to be able to model these. If you cannot model your intention, either work on said techniques/styles for another concert cycle or hire vocalists who can display these concepts.*

*Rehearsal Technique – No one is the perfect teacher. We can, however, continue to grow through masterclasses, self-reflection of recordings, and well just doing the thing more. The most important*

*(and frankly still challenging at times for me!) concepts in the rehearsal are gestural intention matching the vocal technique, and pacing. These get better the more we are in these situations.*

### **What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Someone with a strong work ethic – I believe some of the best singers are the most reliable. Not everyone has to be the 'best' at their given voice type to be the best chorus member.*

*Versatility – A singer who is comfortable singing in multiple styles (opera, musical theater belting, vocal jazz, Gregorian/Ambrosian chants, etc.) is an individual who has broader horizons, and potentially more experience.*

*Passion – Singers who have an affinity for their work and are excited to come to rehearsal.*

*Vocal Technique – At least a basic understanding of vocal production and health. Bonus points (at least in my book) on modern vocal technique pedagogy, vocal acoustics, and vocal anatomy.*

*Score Background – Both as a vocalist and a conductor, I value someone who researches their scores before a call. This could look like composer/lyricist historiography, identification of intonation issues (and non-traditional intonation systems), and necessary vocal technique.*

### **How do you prepare yourself and the scores for a rehearsal?**

*I begin by listening to the piece and what type of vocal style it is in. I then procure the score and practice each of the vocal parts in a comfortable range to be able to model for the vocalists. If it is a style I have not performed often prior, I will seek out colleagues to discuss appropriate means of vocal technique and rehearsal technique. I will then work on conducting through the piece while singing my most comfortable vocal part to work on connecting gestural and vocal intentionalities. Once I feel comfortable with these methods, I will do an in-depth score analysis, both in score and*

*written. Then I will find the best pedagogical 'in' to introduce the piece (rhythm, harmony, melody, familiarity if it is a pop tune or a musical theater arrangement) for the tech-up. You can only introduce a piece to a group once, so you have to really sell it on the initial go at it. This also should include positivity in facial expression and feedback.*

**In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, how do you orient the choir in rehearsal?**

*I encourage my choirs to conduct with me as we sightread the pieces. This inclusion into our community helps connect a kinesthetic element of expression to the voice. I also model often and have singers and sections model throughout the rehearsal to encourage a safe space. Verbal instructions should be warm and encouraging, but also direct as to keep a consistent and thorough pacing throughout the rehearsal.*

**What do you think about when you conduct?**

*It depends on the piece and my rehearsal goals. But often I find myself audiating what I want the piece to sound like while conducting to guide my expressive goals.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*Positivity and inclusivity! Know your singers and create an environment that fosters encouragement, exploration, and growth.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*A mixture of small group/individual online rehearsals that coincided with recordings as a check-in. I also engaged my chamber group in a mixture of non-standard rehearsal spaces – large spacings in churches, barns, and even in fields with microphones.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*I think as we continue to explore new auditory pedagogies and vocal techniques, the conductor's goal becomes a marriage of vocal and gestural.*

## **2.8 Conductor Interview 8: Kody Pisney**

Kody Pisney is a first-year master's student studying Choral Conducting at Oklahoma State University. He has an undergraduate degree in music education from the University of Houston (2016) and taught in public school choral classrooms for five years.

**What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*I value patience, vulnerability, enthusiasm, empathy, and an ability to determine the capabilities of an ensemble, in a choral conductor.*

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*I value vulnerability, determination, and enthusiasm for others in a chorister.*

**How do you prepare yourself and the scores for a rehearsal?**

*I spend time analyzing scores (its structure, harmonic palette, technical demands, historical context, text, and poetic/literary themes), but I never feel that I have "finished" sitting with a score for a rehearsal: each piece and situation (group, concert cycle, where we are in the performance/rehearsal schedule) is different, and I will continue my study throughout the entire process. For day-to-day planning, I try to find divisions that make sense for myself, and "chunk" as much of the learning and group acculturation process as possible that fit the long-term plan.*

**In matters of somatic, verbal, and musical communications, how do you orient the choir in rehearsal?**

*I value "less is more" for my communication with an ensemble. It is important to me that we maximize efficiency in a rehearsal, because my singers deserve that from me every time I have the privilege to be in front of them. As an example: somatically, I make my best educated guess as to what my ensemble needs from me. This may be me prioritizing metric patterns in my gesture to communicate meter and tempi. At other times, it might be to show the natural rise and fall of the rhetoric in a musical phrase that would be "out of time". It is always dependent upon who I am standing in front of, and what they need to be the most successful in that moment.*

**What do you think about when you conduct?**

*I think about the sound that I am receiving from the singers in front of me. I also make an effort to consider and adapt to the ensemble sound if there are ways that I can get different colors or address specific faults in technique: either with a different gesture or investing in rehearsal work for that particular excerpt.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*I want to always ensure that the group feels empowered to sing. This cannot happen if a singer does not feel safe, invited, and welcome to sing in the space with their colleagues. Our art form does not work with conductors. Our art form works because of singers giving of themselves to make art.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*The pandemic took a heavy toll on my mental well-being. My situation was not one that I could manage, and I stopped teaching because of the hardship I was facing after the '20-'21 school year. Since then, I have found myself focusing more into my identity as a choral singer and conductor/scholar by seeking out more opportunities that are different than my classroom teaching experiences.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*I expect that the heart of the role of being a choral conductor will still be a matter of facilitating musical situations for people. I think that future choral conductors will orient themselves towards repertoire that resonates with marginalized populations, and that they will prioritize the consideration of historical/cultural contexts for repertoire.*

### 3.0 Chorister Interviews

The following questions were given to the chorister-interviewees:

1. What qualifications do you value for a chorister?
2. What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?
3. How do you prepare for rehearsal?
4. When you attend rehearsal, what do you expect to occur?
5. How do you interpret conducting gestures?
6. What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?
7. How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?
8. In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?

Just like the conductor-interviewees, the interviewees were encouraged to answer the questions above, and were allowed to answer “N/A” to a question if they so choose or stop participating altogether by closing the form. I collected six interviews from choristers, each from a different choral ensemble. This was done to gather experiences from various choral environments. Each interviewee was asked to provide a brief background on their experiences prior to the interview.



### **3.1 Chorister Interview 1: Lloyd Stamy**

Lloyd Stamy has sung in choirs since elementary school, spanning six decades. He has been a singer and occasional soloist in the Shadyside Presbyterian Church chancel choir since 1967.

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Vocally skilled and musically prepared.*

**What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*The gift of interpreting a given composer's score and the ability to convey and demonstrate what the conductor is after, and then coax that desired result from the choir.*

**How do you prepare for rehearsal?**

*Read the lyrics; review how the various vocal parts are connected and rehearse (vocalize) any sections that may provide pitch (note reading) problems.*

**When you attend rehearsal, what do you expect to occur?**

*Overall shaping (tempo, dynamics) by the conductor.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*I strongly believe that social interaction is essential in any musical ensemble.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*I continued performing, though at times masked.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*I really don't see a need for good conductors, like those I have been privileged to sing under, to change their approach to getting the most (and best) out of their choirs.*

Stamy elected to answer “N/A” to “How do you interpret conducting gestures?”.

### **3.2 Chorister Interview 2: Sarah E. Scherk**

Sarah E. Scherk has sung with Renaissance City Choir since 2015 and served on its volunteer Board of Directors since 2017.

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Love of singing! Not afraid to try, sing "strong and wrong," take feedback / corrections. good listening. attempts to expand skills during rehearsal, especially listening / blending sounds.*

**What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*Good sense of humor! Compassionate leadership. ability to teach/reach multiple levels. orientation towards inclusivity. familiarity with and respect for a variety of musical styles and traditions. ability to clearly explain artistic vision and welcome others into it. open to feedback, collaboration, and change.*

**When you attend rehearsal, what do you expect to occur?**

*Schmoozing! warm up exercises, conductor leads us through practicing different sections of our musical pieces / pieces in their entirety, feedback / encouragement, jokes and anecdotes, announcements, a brief break, sense of camaraderie, comfort, and community.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*Letting folks know that I / we / the choir / the Board is happy and grateful that each individual is there, sharing their time, talent and love for singing. Also maintaining and improving accessibility to choir participation (for singers and audience members) towards maximum inclusivity, vis-a-vis disability justice.*

Scherk elected to answer “N/A” to “How do you prepare for rehearsal?”, “How do you interpret conducting gestures?”, “How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?”, and “In what ways do you expect the role of a choral conductor to change over the next decade?”.

### **3.3 Chorister Interview 3: Michael Creeger**

Michael Creeger has been singing in various choirs since 2014. He currently sings with the National Philharmonic Chorale at Strathmore in Bethesda, Maryland, the Harmonic Introductions,

an overtone singing group based in Rockville, Maryland, and the Montgomery College chamber choirs.

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Shared passion for music, ability to work with others, basic understanding of music whether through sight reading, keeping in tune, blending, etc.*

**What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*Shared passion for music, understanding of music, communication/transparency with what they are trying to accomplish is key.*

**How do you prepare for rehearsal?**

*Vocal warmups and looking over previous notes in order to prepare for the current week.*

**When you attend rehearsal, what do you expect to occur?**

*Going over notes/struggling parts, going over new parts, perfecting what is known.*

**How do you interpret conducting gestures?**

*A lot of it is done through familiarity whether by seeing certain gestures in the past or watching what the conductor is doing and see if it matches with the notes either on the sheet music or notes they had previously communicated.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*Shared passion for music, communicating with each other whether it's helping others out or getting to know one another outside of rehearsal.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*Since I moved to a new area at this time I had to essentially start over from scratch. I had to be more selective with groups I was involved in but I was still thankful for the process regardless of circumstances. I think my experience would've been different out there if I had music as an outlet. I might've actually stayed and finished at my previous college if I had it. I realized music in a way kept me sane. Without it, I was incredibly depressed.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*Coming out of a pandemic, different conductors will have different ways of presenting music. I expect more conductors to become more tech heavy by having some potentially implement zoom/online rehearsals, concerts, etc.*

### **3.4 Chorister Interview 4: AJ PrestoGeorge**

AJ has sung in acapella choirs for nine years, including the Heinz Chapel Choir at Pitt. He is a current member of Voces Solis, which is homed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Choristers should ultimately have a high sense of responsibility and self-efficacy which drives independence in their work and ability to sing in their choir.*

**What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*A good choral conductor should not only have a high knowledge of musicality and theory, in which they can know when their choir is achieving the best they can be or not, but also the ability to manage time well and rehearse in an effective and communicative and positive manner that drives the choir to always end a rehearsal in a better place than they were before. They also build a positive and welcoming community in their choir that keeps choristers wanting to come back, rehearsal after rehearsal, season after season.*

**How do you prepare for rehearsal?**

*Preparations for rehearsal can range from going over all the pieces of music that are to be rehearsed, to finding problem spots in the music and really honing in personal rehearsal time on those spots so I am not behind when the full group comes together.*

**When you attend rehearsal, what do you expect to occur?**

*I expect the director/conductor to manage our short time efficiently and spend valuable rehearsal time on working out problematic parts in our music. Once the choir is singing the pieces correctly then I expect the conductor to spend a similar amount of time and energy shaping the music with artistic elements of their choosing that makes the music sound less like people singing notes on a page and more like, well, music.*

**How do you interpret conducting gestures?**

*A conductor usually has universal gestures that anyone can follow, but really, a chorister has to learn their conductor just as much as they have to learn their repertoire. Every conductor is different and has different quirks in their gestures that the choir is expected to interpret and execute. But the trick is most conductors will not tell you how to translate their gestures. Perhaps it's an artistry thing...*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*It is incredibly important to me, as a chorister, to feel like I am part of a community instead of just a choir. It drives much of the motivation to continue to be a part of musical ensembles. And I tend to think that beautiful music is made far easier when the members of an ensemble feel like they are part of something a little more than just a choir.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*Much of the high peak parts of the pandemic left us very music-less, but as things began to loosen, the Heinz chapel choir began singing again, albeit in a very unorthodox way (masked, 10 feet apart, split choir, etc) So I'd say we navigated singing during a pandemic the best we could but it certainly was missing something and I think a large part of it was the community aspect that you just couldn't have during a pandemic.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*I think the choral conductor's job will remain the same as it always has been—bring people together to produce beautiful music and build a positive community. And if anything changes, there will be more of an emphasis on the latter, as adult singers do not just want to be told to act as if they are in a strict classroom. An adult chorister will treat the rehearsal space with respect when they feel motivated to, through belonging to an uplifting and fun community and yearning for an end goal of beautiful music.*

### **3.5 Chorister Interview 5: Justin Knarr**

Justin Knarr is a freshman at Mansfield University (Pennsylvania) studying Music Education and vocal performance. He has been in choir since elementary school and sings with his church choir.

#### **What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*Someone who has an open mind and is willing to take risks with their singing; a person who is committed and ambitious.*

#### **What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*Accountability, passion, knowledge, encouragement, high expectations.*

#### **How do you prepare for rehearsal?**



*Usually before rehearsals I try to go over my part on my own. If it is a piece that has more intricate part, I'll take a little more time and see how my part works with the others. Then in the rehearsal space before we start, I try to look over what we are doing that day.*

**When you attend rehearsal, what do you expect to occur?**

*We are going to warm up, then dive into 2-3 pieces that day. We don't plunk out notes but rather we try to relate our parts to each other. Then if there is an evaluation on a piece, we may do that as well.*

**How do you interpret conducting gestures?**

*They are meant to keep time and also show dynamics. If we are doing a piece that is more complicated than conducting gestures to new are to keep entrances in time.*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*I feel that the most important thing is that everyone in the ensemble at least knows a little bit about each other. If they know at least the ensembles members names, then they can then have respect for everyone their and realize that they are a team that is all working for a common goal.*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*It was kind of difficult. Since I was in high school when Covid first started, we then were shut down for about 2 years. And honestly, I did not sing during online choir because it just was not as fun as singing with everyone together. It was then building up the chops that I had started then honing*

*them. Since then, I have found myself just trying to keep going and getting back to the way choir was before. But I don't think it will ever be the same.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*I see the role of the choral conductor going in two ways. One: the choral conductor will be seen as a very important person in the school and community and music will be seen as something that helps children immensely as I feel that that was proven in my school district during Covid. Or two: the choral director will be seen as basically a glorified babysitter for a class period in the day. And as someone who doesn't really do anything for student and the community. These are two total opposites, but I feel that as the world recovers from Covid, the world will either try and value the arts since they were taken away or they will learn to live without them. I hope the outcome is one of appreciation and not dismissal.*

**3.6 Chorister Interview 6: Shannon Kelly**

Shannon Kelly is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh where she sang in the Heinz Chapel Choir for four years, acting as the choir's President during the 2020-2021 school year. Currently, she is a member of the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh.

**What qualifications do you value for a chorister?**

*It's important that people in any sort of ensemble are dependable because it will not be the same sound without everybody present. They should also be attentive to both those singing around them and the conductor, so everything is cohesive. It's great when a person comes into an ensemble with*

*an awareness of vocal technique, but it's better when someone is adaptable and willing to try new things!*

**What qualifications do you value for a choral conductor?**

*It's important to me that choral conductors are knowledgeable about the music that is being sung and the ensemble that is singing it. An important job of a choral conductor is making sure that the ensemble understands the music; both technically and emotionally. I also think that it's important that a choral conductor is patient and encouraging. If any leader of a group is negative and getting frustrated, the ensemble will feel the same way.*

**How do you prepare for rehearsal?**

*I go over my music at some point in between rehearsals, typically right before if I can. I also try to do my best to keep hydrated throughout the day and not eat any foods that I know aren't great for my voice if I can help it. If it's winter or I have a sore throat, I also like to drink tea!*

**When you attend rehearsal, what do you expect to occur?**

*I expect to sing through music with the ensemble and for the conductor to pick out any sections to work through further. Often, this involves doing exercises to enhance the ensemble's understanding of what the conductor is envisioning. I expect to do this with others who are attentive and taking notes!*

**How do you interpret conducting gestures?**

*I am currently singing under Manfred Honeck as a conductor who has the clearest conducting gestures that I have ever experienced! The easiest gestures to interpret are in regard to dynamics—but there are many other emotions that can be conveyed through a conductor's face or body language such as strength, fear, awe, happiness, and sadness. If the ensemble is being attentive and present in the moment, these kinds of emotions are easy to get from a conductor. It's exciting to be able to put these emotions behind singing!*

**What is most important to you when it comes to maintaining the community aspect of the ensemble?**

*A sense of community within an ensemble will always make it stronger. Choirs are focused on making many voices one beautiful sound, and that can't happen without teamwork. It's important that, an ensemble can get along, including the conductor or it won't be cohesive!*

**How have you navigated your choral experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

*I love that so many choirs attempted to keep singing during the pandemic in whatever way they could- singing is so important to so many people! The end of my college choral experience was tainted by COVID-19 and not being able to sing with my ensemble the way I wanted to was absolutely heartbreaking. It was nice to be able to do something during that time, but I am so incredibly relieved to be back and singing in a choir like normal. Not being able to sing in a traditional choral ensemble for so long made me realize how important that is to me, and I know now that wherever I end up, I will always make being in a choir a priority.*

**In what ways do you expect the role of the choral conductor to change over the next decade?**

*I'm not sure if I expect the role of a choral conductor to change in the next ten years, although I'm sure choral music itself will. Choral conductors will just have to continue to be adaptable!*

## 4.0 Conclusion

Upon my first read of the responses, it was quite easy to understand what the interviewees were describing in response to my varied questions. The only setback of formatting the interviews through an online form was limiting the ability to ask the interviewees follow-up questions. If I needed an interviewee to embellish on what they had initially written, I needed to reach out via email. Though this was not an often occurrence, this unforeseen circumstance did add on to the time I needed to analyze their responses.

When I initially conducted this study, I intended to expand my search inside and outside the state of Pennsylvania. After attending the American Choral Directors Association National Conference in February, I successfully recruited interviewees who are based in West Virginia, Michigan, Maryland, Florida, D.C., Illinois, and Oklahoma. Though this is rather spread out across the United States, the study garnered significantly parallel responses from the interview section.

From a conductor's point of view, the environment, choir culture, musical background, and performance objectives are all significant factors towards a conductor's adaptability. The expectation to maintain a firm sense of self on and off the podium, especially in front of one's choir, may also be a component for making or breaking their consequent success. From the eight interviews I collected, there is a great similarity of musical qualities that a conductor should possess, particularly regarding the ability to break down complex concepts for the choir, maintaining consistent aural skills and piano proficiency, and a confident mind-body-voice connection.

Where some opinions differ is in the level of preparation required prior to rehearsal, particularly regarding score study. For some, looking at the general overview is most helpful as

they analyze their score section by section. For others, marking at the minute details first – such as barlines, measure numbers, individual vocal lines – informs them on how to proceed with breaking each concept down further. On a social level, the ability to remain present with one’s ensemble, informed gestural intention, and confidence on one’s vocal technique were the trifecta of qualities that were most similar between the conductor-interviewees.

Though there were differences in opinion on the level of academic qualifications a conductor must possess, there was a consensus that experience outside of academia was necessary toward musical development. This was especially interesting in Kody Pisney’s interview, as he worked in public school choral classrooms for five years before attending graduate school. Similarly, Blake Rosser taught middle school choral music prior to his graduate work in Macomb, Illinois.

Out of eight interviews, two of the interviewees hold doctoral degrees, three are graduate students, two have or currently serve as public high school teachers, and one is an undergraduate student. From this angle, there is an array of training and expertise modelled in their responses. Though this may not influence the emotional elements of their answers, this may inform their opinions on how their score study resonates in the rehearsal room. As an example, Dr. Quist places an emphasis on kinesthetic learning during rehearsal (after she examines the historical context, marks each barline, and conducts harmonic analysis). Kevin Cornwell II, on the other hand, prefers to tailor the rehearsal to what the singers think they should do to improve (after he examines structure, phrasing, and conducts textual analysis). In his words, he places importance on “thinking like a singer”. To reiterate, one form of rehearsal technique is not “better” or “more successful” than the other, it is simply a matter of preference. Ultimately, conductor interview responses carry

a clear intersectionality between the region they reside in, and the academic standpoint at which the conductor-interviewee is at in their career (professor, student, graduate, etc.).

From a chorister’s point of view, the role of a conductor has expanded its socio-cultural status, in that there is a heightened expectation for them to care about the community more than the scores they study, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Michael Creeger emphasized in his interview, “transparency with what [the conductors] are trying to accomplish is key”. From the six chorister-interviews I collected, there is a large emphasis on compassionate leadership skills, in which the conductor guides the choir based off of extensive musical knowledge of the piece they are rehearsing, a high level of ambition for their musical vision, and the patience to give and receive feedback from the choir. The final quality was the ability to leave the rehearsal better than they were before, in spirit and in musicality. Though that factor is subjective in that each choir culture is different, the consistent intention to meet the choir at the level they are at is apparent – this was especially true in reference to virtual rehearsal experiences, where many had to readjust their own expectations of how much they could accomplish.

As we can see, there is still work to be done to ensure inclusion, access, and a sense of belonging in choral environments. As Dr. Scott suggests, a helpful way to ensure this is to model diverse programming with “consideration given to women composers, composers of color, and composers that represent the LGBTQIA community”. This coincides well with Anzaldúa’s article, asserting the call to reassess what it is that limits certain communities from accessing the choral world. This may feed into future conversations about relevance, a reassessment of musical etiquette, and providing forums of access (regarding informational and compositional resources)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>An example of a resource would be the Institute for Composer Diversity.



In the future, this documentation could serve as a reference of the mutual expectations choral conductors and choristers alike had for each other, otherwise referred to as choral culture, during the 2020s. Most importantly, this study was not conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, it sought to capture how the community is recovering.

As the interviews from choristers and conductors alike suggest, the core of choral performance is the reliance upon the community that it creates. In this sense, as time marches forward, a community does not stay the same. People change, new music is written, and whose voice is brought to the table changes. History does not end after Viennese Classicism, nor does it end after March 2020. The choral community is still here, however changed. Thus, it is part of the conductor's and chorister's responsibility to continually check-in, ask questions, and discuss what it is that strengthens the *whole* of the community. As the conducting and singing fields grow and adapt to the world around them, so too will the choral art form inspire us to remember how critical it is to share our voices with each other.



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