Tips from the Podium

A Guest Conductor's Perspective of the Honor Choir

Jeffrey Ward

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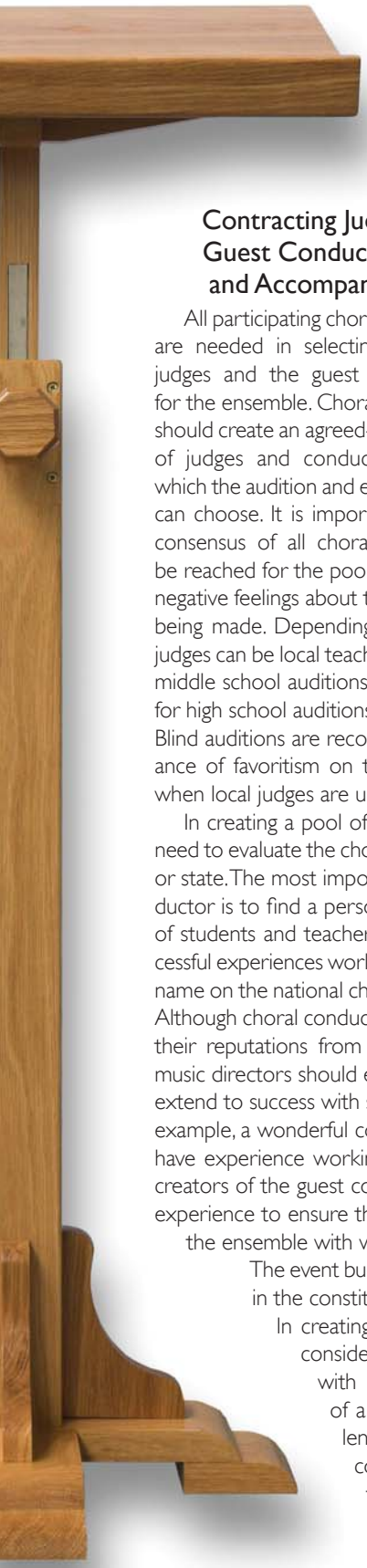
One of the most important and yet challenging duties of choral directors is coordinating an honor choir. The chair of such events addresses an inordinate amount of details. For students, these events are mountaintop experiences that inspire them in their study of music. For teachers, these are opportunities for learning and growth as they work with guest conductors who offer various ideas and strategies. This article is written from a variety of perspectives: the students who found a love for music and the aspiration to pursue careers in music education through wonderful all-county and all-state events; the music educators who prepared their students for event auditions, rehearsals, and performances; the chairs of the all-district events who found great help from the colleagues of their school districts; and, currently, as the guest conductor, who worked with all three of the above roles to facilitate mountaintop experiences in both the rehearsal process and the concert product.

Organizing these experiences is a big job—a job not effectively done by one person. It takes the collective efforts of many individuals to make these events successful. Many thriving events occur when there are three chairs: events, audition, and site (for audition and/or events) chairs. Although there are logistical advantages to the chairs hosting these auditions or an event at their own school (knowledge of school schedule, equipment, and volunteer resources), the large responsibilities of the event and audition chairs may require that additional choral directors serve as hosts of the auditions and the event. Ultimately, it takes all participating choral directors to be a part of the process.



Contracting Judges, Guest Conductors, and Accompanists

All participating choral directors are needed in selecting audition judges and the guest conductor for the ensemble. Choral directors should create an agreed-upon pool of judges and conductors from which the audition and event chairs can choose. It is important that a consensus of all choral directors be reached for the pool to reduce negative feelings about the choices being made. Depending on the size of the event budget, judges can be local teachers (high school directors judge for middle school auditions and middle school directors judge for high school auditions) or hired from outside the district. Blind auditions are recommended to eliminate any appearance of favoritism on the part of the judges, particularly when local judges are used.

In creating a pool of guest conductors, choral directors need to evaluate the choral programs in their county, district, or state. The most important thing in selecting a guest conductor is to find a person who will best support the work of students and teachers. The conductor should have successful experiences working with student groups. The biggest name on the national choral scene is not always this person. Although choral conductors of national notoriety have built their reputations from past examples of excellent work, music directors should examine whether their experiences extend to success with students of their demographics. For example, a wonderful conductor of college choirs may not have experience working with middle school singers. The creators of the guest conductor pool should examine that experience to ensure that it matches the demographics of the ensemble with which they will be working.

The event budget will also be an important factor in the constituency of the guest conductor pool. In creating the pool, choral directors should consider a number of expenses involved with hiring a guest conductor. The fee of a conductor is usually based on the length of the event and the level of the conductor's reputation (the greater the reputation, the larger the fee). Besides the conductor's fee, the event chair must also consider the costs of travel, food, and accommodations. Travel expenses usually are the greatest of these expenses. An event chair should consider: (1) How far will the conductor have to travel? (2) Will the conductor drive or fly? and (3) Because of the distance, will the conductor need to spend an additional night in a hotel and have additional meals? The length of the travel distance of the conductor usually equates to a greater cost in travel, food, and accommodation expenses. Conductors should be responsible for making their own travel arrangements. The event chair should make hotel arrangements, since the guest conductor will likely be too unfamiliar with the area to know of an appropriate hotel in proximity to the rehearsal site.

Travel Arrangement Questions for Conductors

How far will the conductor have to travel?

Will the conductor drive or fly?

Because of the distance, will the conductor need to spend an additional night in a hotel and require extra meals?

Planning for the Guest Conductor

Because coordinating the busy schedules of guest conductors can be difficult, it is recommended that event chairs contract conductors at least one year before the event. When contacting a conductor, an event chair should be prepared to communicate to the conductor: the event schedule; repertoire of past programs; and repertoire selection guidelines. All of this information is vital as the guest conductor prepares for the event.

Regarding the event schedule, the guest conductor can determine how much rehearsal time will be available. In developing the schedule, the event chair should be realistic about the ability of students to maintain rehearsal focus for long periods of time. The schedule should have frequent breaks that can be scheduled by the event chair, or left to the discretion of the conductor. If multiple ensembles are rehearsing at the same site, it will be necessary for breaks to be determined by the event chair to prevent student congestion in restrooms and common areas.

By providing repertoire of past programs, the event chair can inform the guest conductor of the potential musical level of the ensem-

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ble and prevent the guest conductor from selecting repertoire recently performed by the ensemble. The amount of rehearsal time and ability level of the students will assist the guest conductor in selecting the repertoire for the ensemble.[1] Sending a recording of previous events is another way to help the conductor get a "feel" for the event.[2] Additionally, the event chair should communicate to the guest conductor any repertoire selection guidelines of the event, for example:

a. Does the conductor select all the music?

b. Do the music directors select the music?

c. Does the conductor submit a proposed program to the participating music directors for approval?

d. Is the repertoire limited by music already owned by the participating schools?

Repertoire selection is one of the most challenging tasks for the guest conductor. Honor choir conductors must select music for students and teachers that they may have never met. The right repertoire with the right ensemble can make or break an honors ensemble event. Although the event chair and choral directors can provide guidance for the guest conductor (such as voicing, ensemble size, and budget for music purchase), they should be careful not to impose too many guidelines in the selection of repertoire. Rarely do conductors like to conduct music they do not select. Conductors that do not select their own repertoire may not be artistically invested in the repertoire. The result could lead to an uninspired process and product. Additionally, conductors may often have an expertise about or insight into some repertoire that can be shared with the students. This repertoire awareness is particularly true of guest conductors who offer works that they have composed.

In addition to communicating the event schedule and repertoire information to the guest conductor, the event chair should be

proactive in maintaining a dialogue with the guest conductor. This is particularly important for deadlines of repertoire and program information, such as the conductor's biographical information. Once contracted, the conductor will need some time to select the repertoire for the event, but the event chair should give a specific music selection deadline. The repertoire deadline should be well before the event to allow sufficient time for music shipping and for students to learn the music. The conductor should also inform the event chair if the selected repertoire requires additional instruments besides the piano. The instrumentalists can be most easily found in the host school's instrumental ensembles, although, depending on the difficulty of the parts, more advanced players may be required.

Student Selection Process

Once audition judges and guest conductors are organizationally in place, the participating choral directors must decide how to select students to participate in the ensemble. Some event organizers may use a quota system to select the students. With this system, each program is given a defined number of students that can participate. These numbers may be evenly divided among the programs, based upon school enrollment, or enrollment in the music program. In the quota system, the choral director of each program selects the students to participate. The choral director may choose to bring a certain grade or experience level, or hold their own auditions as the basis of selection.

Other events that are more competitive may have an audition process. An audition can be frightening to students and their teachers. Students may avoid participation in these types of events because of "audition fright." Choral directors may avoid auditions because of fear of scrutiny from their colleagues or insecurities in their teaching ability. Many fears can be alleviated if the audition process is transparent, and includes clearly stated procedures. Audition organizers should design an audition in the same way a test would be designed. The goal of a test creator is to assess specific knowledge or skills, rather than a student's ability to take a test. Students, who are poor test takers may have the ability to demonstrate the requisite knowledge or skills, but have difficulty following the procedures of the test. Teachers may prepare their students for tests by giving them sample tests to practice the procedures of the testing instrument.

The audition organizer should clearly communicate in writing the audition procedures so students can take a sample audition with their own choral director. If students are well practiced in the audition procedures, there are less likely to be surprises that can cause anxiety to a potentially nervous student. The goal of the audition is to find those students that have the best musical skills, not the student who can best adapt to surprises in a tense situation. It is the responsibility of the audition organizer to communicate clear audition procedures to all participating choral directors so they can prepare their students for the audition. An example of how to communicate audition procedures for a choral audition is seen in Table 1. The audition can consist of many skill tests, but be conscious of the time allowed for the audition (the more skills tested, the more likely the audition will run over time).

Depending upon the students participating, it may not be feasible to have a centrally located audition site. This limitation is particularly true of state and national events, where a large number of students audition from a wide geographical area. In these cases, multiple days of auditions in multiple locations may be necessary, or audition recordings could be made by the students and choral

Table 1: Audition Procedures

The audition consists of three components:

1. Range
   a. Sing 1-3-5-3-1 (do-mi-sol-mi-do) on syllable "noh" (this exercise will begin in E-flat major and modulate by ascending half steps)
   b. Sing 1-3-5-3-1 (sol-fa-mi-re-do) on syllable "nee" (this exercise will begin in E-flat major and modulate by descending half steps)
2. Performance: Sing "America" (*My Country 'Tis of Thee*)
   a. Soprano I/Tenor I: B-flat Major
   b. Soprano II/Tenor II: G Major
   c. Alto I/Bass I: F Major
   d. Alto II/Bass II: C Major
3. Sight-singing
   a. You will be asked to sing a short sightsinging exercise
   b. The key will be the same as the performance piece voicing
   c. The exercise will consist of:
      i. Range: low la-sol
      ii. Rhythm: eight, quarter, half, and whole notes and rests
   d. You may sing it on any syllable your prefer.

Table 2: Part-Study Recording Companies

Choralia: www.choralia.net

Educational Enterprises Recording Company: www.eercmusic.com

Hammond Music Service: www.songlearning.com/index.php

Note Perfect: www.note-perfect.com

Part Predominant Recordings: www.partpredominant.com

Rehearsal Arts LLC: http://rehearsalarts.com/

directors and sent to the judges. In either case, it is important that the same judges participate in the multiple day auditions and/or the judges listen to all the recordings to maintain judge reliability.

Preparing the Students

Choral directors should not only be involved in preparing their students for the auditions, but also be responsible for preparing the students for the event. The process of an honor chorus should be about sophisticated musical refinement, not teaching pitches and rhythms. If music is ordered well in advance of the event, choral directors should ensure that their students go into the event with the ability to sing the correct pitches and rhythms of the repertoire. When this form of preparation occurs, the event is about conductors teaching their interpretation of the piece and fine-tuning the musical performance. The conductor can help choral directors by providing interpretive notes: tempo, dynamics, phrasing, diction considerations, divisi, and any score changes.

Teachers can lead students through in-class or before or after school preparation sessions. The students can also rehearse with teachers in their district or state as a means of team-teaching the choral selections. The repertoire could be divided among the participating choral directors, with each director conducting one piece. The accompanying duties for such a rehearsal could rotate among the choral directors to decrease the work-load of teachers.

Part-study recording companies can supplement the work of the participating teachers with recordings, customized to the event repertoire. Many companies (Table 2) create part-study recordings that assist students who may not have the musicianship or keyboard skills to independently learn complicated music. Some companies create these recordings entirely with digital technology, using a synthesized sound. Other companies may record singers performing the parts, which is especially helpful with text in a foreign language.[3] An individual part may be sung alone or all the parts and accompaniment are recorded with the isolated part more prominent than the others. Many companies will create a master for each voice part and grant a license to allow the master to be copied. Part-study recordings can be expensive because the customer is charged for the creation of the master and a fee for each copy of the CD made (Choralia has a limited catalog but is available for free downloads www.choralia.net). Using software such as Cake Walk Music Creator, choral directors can make their own part-study recordings with many of the same features as commercially-made recordings. Although this rehearsal format can be a great way for students to work by themselves, it should be done to supplement preparation sessions with the participating choral director, not in lieu of those sessions.

Finding a Site

The event chair and colleagues must find a suitable site for the event. There are many considerations in selecting a site.

- Is the performance hall large enough to accommodate the anticipated audience?
- Is the hall acoustically conducive for the type of event? (Some halls work well for instrumental ensembles, but not for choral ensembles and vice versa.)
- Is the rehearsal space adequate for the event?
- If there are multiple ensembles participating in the event, are there enough rehearsal spaces or will one ensemble have to rehearse off site?

- If an ensemble has to rehearse off site, where can it rehearse and still be close enough to the site so choral directors can observe all the ensembles in which their students participate?

Event organizers should also consider the available equipment of the venue.

- Does the venue have enough chairs and stands?
- Are there enough pianos of adequate quality?
- Are there enough choral risers for the concert?
- If the venue is lacking any of these things, can they be transported to the venue?
- Does the performance hall need acoustical shells for the ensemble? If so, are acoustical shells available?

The location of the event venue is also important. Is the venue centrally located for participating schools and concert patrons to avoid excessively long drives? Is the venue located close to hotel and restaurant facilities, if applicable to the event?

Last Minute Details: Concert Program and Guest Musician Needs

Another pre-event task that is often overlooked but very important is the concert program. For many students and their parents, it is the keepsake for the event. The concert program for an honor choir event is often more complicated than other concert programs because of the many schools, students, ensembles, and choral directors who may participate. The most difficult aspect is making sure all the names are printed and spelled correctly. There is nothing more deflating to students and their parents than to see their names misspelled on their potential keepsake. The fewer names you have to type, the fewer mistakes you will find in the program. To reduce the typing of names, event organizers should create a form that allows teachers to electronically register their students. A Microsoft Excel file is ideal for this registration. Teachers type the names into the Excel file that the event organizers provide and then send the file via e-mail to the audition or event chair. The chairs can simply cut and paste into a table for the program. If the event has an audition, the audition chair can create an Excel file that only contains those names of the students who passed the audition and then e-mail it to the event chair or creator of the program. There are many layout and design software packages available such as Adobe InDesign and Microsoft Word and Publisher, which can assist the program creator. When programs have been printed, be sure that all students and teachers receive one. Additionally, be sure that the guest conductor and accompanist receive a program. These musicians may need the program for a portfolio for future use.

Shortly before the event, the event chair should contact the guest conductor and, if applicable, the accompanist. The event chair should inquire about dietary needs if meals will be provided for the guest conductor. Event chairs should also ask conductors how they would like the ensemble to be seated, because this will make the process of seating much easier when students arrive. Finally, event chairs should review the schedule with the conductors and notify them of any changes that may have occurred.

The Big Day Finally Arrives

Finally, the big day arrives and so do the ensembles. The event chair should notify their school administrators and parking security

Key Tips

It's a big job: Divide up responsibilities
- Event chair
- Audition chair
- Site host

Create a pool of potential audition judges and conductors

Give guest conductor information about the event
- Event schedule
- Repertoire of past programs
- Repertoire selection guidelines

Proactive in communication with guest judges, accompanists, and conductors

Clearly communicate audition procedures

Choral directors prepare students for event

Find a site that meets the rehearsal and performance needs of the event

Create concert program

Registration and seating of ensembles

Event meals

Concert preparation
- Set up the stage
- Introductions

in advance that many buses and/or cars will be arriving and where they should be directed. Large, clear signs should be put on the school grounds for bus drop off, registration, rehearsal locations, and bus/car parking. A central location for registration should be close to the site entrance, where the bus or cars drop off students. At the registration table, packets should be prepared for every participating school. In these packets, the event chair should include name badges for each student, director, and parent/chaperone. If meals are provided during the event, meal tickets may be issued in the packets to ensure that only one meal is given per person. Choral directors should inform registration workers if there are any expected students who did not attend, so their name-tag and meal tickets can be removed. Additionally, if appropriate to the event, choral directors should show proof of membership of the sponsoring professional organization e.g., MENC or ACDA.

It is the responsibility of the event or site chair to give some opening remarks before the event begins. Introductions of the guest conductors and accompanists should be made at this time. The speaker should inform the students and their directors of restroom locations, where they go during rehearsal breaks or meals, and where they cannot go. Depending on the number of participating programs, all participating choral directors should be introduced, especially those who serve as rehearsal and break monitors. It is important to let students know that all choral directors are responsible for maintaining an orderly rehearsal environment during the event, and they should be respectful of all choral directors who may correct behavior (not just their own students).

If the event occurs in a school, students should be reminded of applicable school rules. Since events often occur during the school day, students should be respectful of other students and teachers who are not affiliated with the event. If available, the school principal should be asked to offer welcoming comments.

Rehearsals

Students are now ready to be ushered to the prepared rehearsal space. A participating choral director should be assigned to serve as the guest conductor's assistant. The event chair can serve in this role, but events that have multiple guest conductors and ensembles may pull the chairs in too many directions. The assistant is charged with assisting the conductor in whatever way is necessary for a successful event. The first task is to seat the ensemble. The event chair should share with the assistant the conductor's seating desires in advance. Choral ensembles are

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often divided into voice sections and are seated in those sections based on height. The schedule should allow for the time it will take to line up all of the students of each section by height.

Many ensembles rehearse on the stage of the performance hall. These rehearsals should be done in chairs rather than on choral risers. It is difficult for singers to maintain a high level of concentration for an extended period of time as they stand. By providing seats, the conductor has the flexibility to have singers stand when appropriate, but work can be done with singers sitting tall as well. It should be stressed that portable chairs on the stage be used rather than the audience seats in the hall. Seats in a performance hall are not usually conducive to sitting up straight and may limit the conductor's ability to seat the choir as appropriate. Additionally, if the rehearsal piano is on stage, it is an awkward situation for the singers who are on the floor (where does the conductor stand?). In order for conductors to save their voices in a large rehearsal space, and have the flexibility to move around the rehearsal space, the host should provide a wireless lapel microphone for the conductor in a large rehearsal space.4

Finally, the best feeling in the world for event chairs is when the rehearsals begin! Although the performance product is an important learning opportunity for the student musicians, the rehearsal process is often more important in honor choir events. It is through the rehearsal process that students and teachers learn from the guest conductor. For a successful rehearsal, the participating ensemble directors have to be a part of the process as rehearsal monitors. There is nothing worse for guest conductors than to be left in front of 200 children they are meeting for the first time. Choral directors need to be visible monitors throughout all rehearsals. This means that rehearsal monitors are not in the back of the auditorium listening (or chatting among themselves), but standing in and among the ensemble. The choral directors know their students and are vital to maintaining discipline in long rehearsal sessions.

The other advantage of choral directors as rehearsal monitors: the opportunity to closely observe the work of the guest conductor. Choral directors have a marvelous chance to learn

The Robert Shaw Choral Award

The Robert Shaw Choral Award will be given to a choral leader who has made unusual contributions to the art of choral music. The recipient shall be chosen by the ACDA Past President's Council. The Robert Shaw Choral Award will be presented during each National Convention.

The following criteria for selection were approved by the Past President's Council in November, 1990.

- The recipient should be a member of ACDA (though there may be exceptions).
- The recipient should be someone whose primary career is/was in the United States.
- The recipient has made a significant contribution to the cause of the choral art in America.
- Such contributions made may have been through teaching, conducting, or leadership.

Past Winners

1991 Charles C. Hirt
1993 Roger Wagner (presented posthumously)
1995 Howard Swan
1997 Harold A. Decker
1999 Weston Noble
2001 Colleen J. Kirk
2003 Warner Imig
2005 Paul Salamunovich
2007 Dale Wareland
2009 Gene Brooks

from the teaching and conducting approaches the guest conductor takes, especially with music that the choral directors have taught their students. The guest conductor is not there just to teach the students, but to inspire and provide new ideas for choral directors too.

Event Meals

As previously mentioned, the event chair may be required to coordinate meal or break refreshments over the course of the event. The host school cafeteria or catering services may be contracted to provide meals for all the students. If catering services are not available, an outside caterer could be found. Pizza is usually a popular choice for students. Keep in mind that some students may have special dietary needs; the event chair should solicit such information from the participating choral directors. Some event chairs leave it to each individual ensemble director to provide meals for their students. This approach works if students are local such as an all-county or all-district event. Students can either bring box lunches or go off campus to find food. If students leave campus to eat, be sure to plan the extra travel time in the event schedule. If students come to the event from out-of-town, it is too much to ask choral directors to provide these meals. Box lunches do not travel long distances well, and choral directors may not know where to find a restaurant without proper guidance.

The Performance

The last major duty of the event and host chairs is the concert preparation. The event chairs should find help from other choral directors in setting up stage equipment such as choral risers, chairs, music stands, acoustical shells, conductor podium, and piano. Additionally, the host chair can decorate the stage or speaking lectern with floral arrangements to add more formality to the event. Finally, the event chair should prepare to introduce the guest conductors and accompanists, administrators, school board members, and other special guests.

Usually, biographical information of the guest musicians is included in the program, so it is unnecessary to read the information word for word. Instead, give biographical highlights and anecdotes of the weekend. At one honors choir event, the event chair asked the participating students their perceptions of the conductor and the event during meals and breaks. These quotes were shared during the concert as an introduction of honor choir conductors, and reveal more about the conductors and their impact on the students than any long list of educational and professional accomplishments could ever express.

Administrators, school board members, and other special guests, such as legislators

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As director of choral activities, Deanna Joseph conducts the University Singers, teaches conducting and choral literature and supervises the master's program in choral conducting. She previously served on faculty at Smith College, UMass Amherst and Hobart and William Smith Colleges. She holds degrees from Duquesne University and the Eastman School of Music, where she served as instructor of undergraduate conducting and assistant conductor of the Eastman Chorale and Eastman-Rochester Chorus, and was a recipient of the Walter Hagen Conducting Prize.

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Carroll Freeman, *Classical Singer*'s "2010 Stage Director of the Year," most recently served as director of opera at the University of Tennessee School of Music and artistic director of the Knoxville Opera Studio. He previously served as artistic director of Mississippi Opera and Opera in the Ozarks and co-director of the Des Moines Metro Opera Apprentice Program, and is artistic director of the Harrower Opera Workshop and resident stage director at La Musica Lirica (Italy). He holds degrees from the University of Southern Mississippi and Oklahoma City University.

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or government officials, should always be encouraged to attend honors choir events. There is no better advocacy for music education than for policy makers to see the results of a great honor choir with a fine music educator/conductor. These guests should be recognized so all patrons can see the support they lend to the music education program.

During the concert, the guest conductor should take the opportunity to address the concert audience and share his/her perception of the rehearsal process. He should be careful not to be long winded; after all, the audience is there to hear the students perform, not to hear the conductor talk. Additionally, the conductor should show appreciation for the work of the ensemble directors who prepared the students for the event. Often, the most difficult work is accomplished before the conductor walks in the door and the guest conductor should acknowledge that fact. The conductor can take a moment to advocate to the audience for the importance of music in the lives of the participating students and the vital role all the participating choral directors play in developing the "whole child."

Honors choirs, whether an all-city, all-county, all-district, all-state, all-region, or national honors event, are once-in-a-lifetime social, emotional, intellectual and best of all, musical experiences that inspire students to learn and love music more deeply. There are many music teachers and conductors across the country that can point to such events as the spark that started their fire for music. These events, however, can be very complicated, requiring time, effort, and money to make them successful. When it is all done, and done well, the students who come back to their home schools with renewed energy and a larger perspective of music make all of the hard work well worth it.

NOTES

[1] Rottsolk, Rebecca, "Repertoire & Standards Committee Reports: Children's Choirs—Conductor Courtesies: What Every Host Should Know (A Chapter from the ACDA Honor Choir Handbook, available April 2002)," *Choral Journal* 42, 4 (2001): 52–54.

[2] Glosser, Karen, "Working with Guest Conductors," *Teaching Music* 13, 3 (2005): 38–41.

[3] Rottsolk, 52–54.

[4] Wis, Ramona, "Redefine and Redesign the Choral Festival Experience," *Music Educators Journal* 89, 3 (2003): 47–51.

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