

**Choral Pedagogy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:**  
Shared Control in a College Choir  
Can Autocracy and Democracy Coexist?



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The roots of choral conducting are firmly planted in the authoritarian tradition. Choir classrooms are set up with the director at the front of the room and the students sitting obediently in their seats. Behavioral expectations are transmitted to the students, lessons in time efficiency are aptly modeled, and assumptions about who deserves to be in control are agreed upon by teacher and student alike. But American education in our time is undergoing numerous transformations, the most notable of which is a shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered instruction. And even with its strong autocratic foundation, the choir classroom has not been impervious to this trend. Gisele Wyers, a member of the choral faculty at the University of Washington, shared in a recent interview with Jerry Ulrich, “As a conductor, I ask my students many more questions than I was asked in my own student days. I want my singers to see themselves as collaborators, and not simply recipients of a musical interpretation” (Ulrich, 2008 p. 38). Such conductors are still “in control,” but they’re providing creative opportunities for their students to be able to direct their own learning and discover concepts for themselves.

Many choir directors – and teachers in general – have taken the concept of student-centered learning to heart, but a great many have resisted. I recently performed a phone interview with one of my past professors, a retired college choir director, and when I asked him about student-centered instruction in his own rehearsals, he admitted, “I can count on the fingers of one hand when I’ve asked students for an opinion about something during rehearsal.” This is a remarkable admission coming from a man who directed college choir for nearly 40 years!

I’ve had the opportunity to perform under several conductors and observe a variety of rehearsal styles. I’ve also had a number of personal conducting experiences while serving as a graduate teaching assistant where students have voiced opinions about the music during rehearsal and even challenged my choice of repertoire. These experiences served as catalysts

for my decision to research the topic of choral pedagogy as it relates to student creativity and teacher control. Specifically, I'm wondering if there can be a harmonious co-existence between the *conductor who has control* of a rehearsal and the *student who has control* of his or her learning. In other words, can control be shared? Personally, I believe it can. After all, we're not limited strictly to the autocratic style or the democratic style of teaching. Critical feminist Patricia O'Toole writes, "There are many degrees of control between chaos and order (or democracy and autocracy) that might offer possibilities for rethinking choral pedagogy" (O'Toole, 1994 p. 30). And so, in light of my research, I've decided that an optimum choral experience for both teacher and student requires a hybrid of autocratic and democratic teaching styles. Furthermore, I've settled on two basic qualities (derived from these two teaching styles) which I believe to be essential elements of this pedagogical hybrid: *Rules* and *relationships*. This fusion, I believe, makes room for the creativity and freedom of student-centered instruction without sacrificing the focus and direction of teacher-centered instruction. And rather than every creative decision being made by the teacher, control can be *shared* by the teacher and students.

But before I could develop this "power-balancing" hybrid, I needed to understand the student/teacher roles in classrooms where autocratic and democratic methods reign. To this end, I interviewed two seasoned choral conductors, both of whom I've studied under. Professor A encourages student input, readily implements suggestions, and considers the students to be the ultimate "owners" of the choir. On the other hand, Professor B has a very autocratic approach to choral conducting. The students stand in awe of his expertise, submit to his leadership and vision, and very seldom if ever offer creative suggestions during his rehearsals. I've had the opportunity to create music with both of these men and have experienced, first-hand, their differing pedagogical approaches.

Traditionally, choral conductors have espoused an autocratic approach because it maximizes rehearsal efficiency and gives the conductor more control over the final musical product. According to Professor B, “The democratic approach takes up an inordinate amount of time. I’m usually so focused on what I want to accomplish that I don’t have time for student suggestions. I consider them to be a digression from my rehearsal plan.” The autocratic style of teaching can also bring necessary order to the classroom. As Ramona Wis argues, “Nothing can be accomplished in a chaotic, confused, or indecisive atmosphere” (Wis, 2002 p. 23). This is precisely the kind of atmosphere which began to develop this past semester when the group of Women’s Chorus members began to make frequent suggestions during rehearsals. I was eventually compelled to communicate to the class a bit of my experience with - and preference for- a more autocratic approach to choral instruction. I informed them that I would welcome their suggestions but requested that they share them with me outside of class. I also reminded them that time was limited and that we needed to learn the music before the concert. What I was aiming for, of course, was *control*.

A study of structural functionalism indicates that, in order for a choir to prosper, there *must* be a certain level of equilibrium and order. Any conflict must be short-lived or nothing can get accomplished. Furthermore, the success of a choir depends upon the ability of its members to work together in harmony (pun intended). As with the human body, if one member fails, all its members suffer. In no other class are students this interdependent. In fact, in a society of “rampant western individualism” (Crow, 2008 p. 374), “musical ensembles might perhaps be some of the last bastions of real community in our modern society” (Gluschkof, 2004 p. 185). The problem I see with equilibrium and harmony, however, is that they are traditionally achieved at the expense of the students. Equilibrium in a choir is often the result of a director asserting him or herself as the dominant authority figure. If the students wish to stay, they must accept the director’s authority *sine qua non*.

de Marrais writes, “By participating in these institutions, individuals accept their roles” (de Marrais, 1998 p. 5). Or in the words of O’Toole, “By inhabiting the role of “singer,” choir members agree to abide by the relations of power” (O’Toole, 1994 p. 23). A critical theorist might here point out the contradiction that, while choirs promise students creative opportunities, directors are usually the only ones making creative decisions.

Ultimately, a purely autocratic approach falls short in that it excludes students from much of the creative decision-making process. Even as I was sharing my philosophy with the Women’s Chorus, I knew something felt wrong. I was asking them, in so many words, to “shut up and let me work.” While I believe that equilibrium and a unified vision are essential for a positive choral experience, I don’t like the idea of vision originating solely with the conductor. According to Bennett Reimer, “When students are being involved in creating art, they must be involved in making artistic decisions” (Reimer, 2002 p. 69). Wis writes, “Members of a musical ensemble should be artists rather than artisans” (Wis, 2002 p. 18). More than just recreating the conductor’s vision for the music, students should in some way be allowed to create their own. Why? Because studies show that the more students are able to contribute creatively to a musical ensemble, the greater sense of pride and achievement they will experience (Kokotsaki, Hallam, 2007 p. 99). So is it possible for teacher and student to share control in the classroom? Yes, but it will require a blend of autocracy and democracy. By evaluating the teaching styles of Professor A and Professor B in light of scholarly writings, I’ve settled on two basic elements – rules and relationships - which I believe will give teachers *control* of the rehearsal while giving students *control* of their learning.

First, underlying any community are expectations for conduct, or *rules*. And while rules have traditionally been established by the director and transmitted to the students, it’s possible for them to be developed by consensus. But either way, a conductor must at least

oversee the formation of rules and be able to enforce them. According to Craig Arnold, choral conductor at Luther College, “the conductor must facilitate a safe environment and establish appropriate rules for engagement” (Ulrich, 2008 p. 40). Wis writes, “The conductor understands that structure, clear expectations, and consistent consequences combine to form a foundation for serving the needs of the ensemble” (Wis, 2002 p. 22). In her study on the therapeutic benefits of music, Laya Silber concluded that in order for a choir to have any chance of success, “impulsive behavior must be curtailed” (Silber, 2005 p. 264). The last two weeks of Women’s Chorus rehearsals (following my talk) were probably the most productive and enjoyable of the semester. I believe this is because everyone had a better understanding of what was expected of them.

Second, a choir director must make the development of *relationships* a priority. Rules alone may provide an adequate foundation for a dictatorship, but not for a choir. Music making is a social act and, as previously stated, students must feel like they are active contributors to the group outcome. David Brunner writes, “Students must never feel anonymous within the context of the larger group. . . They must sense that they play an important part and share responsibility as co-creators in the musical process” (Brunner, 1986 p. 39).

Someone might think at this point, “It all sounds great, but *how* can rules and relationships coexist in my choir? When I emphasize rules and order, relationships are squelched. And when I let students have input, the rules of conduct often get trampled.” This leads me to what I like to call “scripted spontaneity.” Even with rules of engagement limiting student input, a director can *plan* moments for creativity and discovery into his or her rehearsal. In this way, conductors can maintain overall control of the rehearsal and students can have control of their own learning. Some ideas for “scripted spontaneity” include asking convergent questions – questions leading to a particular answer – and

divergent questions which are designed to elicit multiple responses, none of which are considered “correct.” These questions can address such topics as how to sing a musical phrase or the meaning of a particular text (Silber, 2005 p. 266). Most directors feel the urge to *tell* students what to think about the music, but even just reading a text aloud before singing it (avoiding the urge to comment or expound) can give students an opportunity to discover meaning for themselves. Other creative ways of sharing creative control with the students can involve sight-singing exercises, music analysis, and discussions of musical style. A professor can even have students pair up and identify the most difficult passage of a piece of music, brainstorming ways to master it (Mallonee, 1998 p. 37). Basically, there are limitless ways to invite creative input from students. Personally, I always ask myself, “What do *I* do in order to better understand the music?” Then I find ways to include the students in these same exercises. The point is to *share control* with the students, because the more students are involved, the better they learn.

As part of my research, I issued a survey to all 38 members of the Women’s Chorus at the end of the semester. Their responses to two questions in particular brought some interesting sociological issues to light. For the first question on the survey, I asked, “What was your general response to my ‘talk’ a week ago?” While I expected adverse reactions to this question, I was astonished that all 38 students expressed relief that I had said something (even the students who offered suggestions). One student wrote, “I wish you’d said something earlier in the semester!” This made me wonder: “Why did the students feel compelled to share in the first place?” The most obvious reason that came to mind is that I’m teaching in a building where a democratic style of choral conducting reigns supreme. Furthermore, several of the Women’s Chorus members sing in choirs with Professor A and appear to prefer his more democratic approach. On the other hand, when I conducted one of my own choral compositions in 2004 with one of Professor B’s choirs, it was nearly

impossible for me to get students to contribute to discussions. This is because, unlike Professor A's students, they were used to a more autocratic style of leadership. The second reason might be that whenever there is a "vacuum" of leadership in a classroom, assertive students often speak up. The most opinionated Women's Chorus member is a music major and the times she spoke up were often times of uncertainty. The third reason is that I'm quite close to the girls in age. Furthermore, I'm not even a professor at the university. So in their minds, I might still be "proving" myself to be a capable leader. And finally, the most plausible reason in my mind is that, while students want to have creative input in the choral rehearsal, they never want their voice to rise above or "trump" the voice of the director. The reason the Women's Chorus members were relieved is that students actually *prefer* submitting to a director's leadership.

Why then, we might ask, should we even bother giving students control of their own learning? The answer is that making students active participants in the classroom is, simply stated, good teaching. Wyers shares, "I use much more student input for my rehearsals than in my own training, *because I see how it enables student-learning and how quickly it produces results*" (Ulrich, 2008 p. 40). Professor A shared an experience with me about when he was on tour in Vienna with one of his choirs. He communicated to the students that they had "plateaued" in their performance of a particular song and needed to figure out a way to "take it to the next level." He asked them questions and let the group discuss ideas on how to improve. Later on that day, however, two students approached the professor and asked, "Why don't you just *tell us* how to make it better? We're wasting time." They were apparently frustrated with Professor A's Socratic approach. This seems to indicate that *even if students prefer that their teacher take control, it might not be in the best interests of their education.*

Another question I included on the survey was whether or not a conductor's opinion should be valued over the opinions of the students. Almost all of the girls answered "yes," and when asked why, they cited the professor's experience, formal training, hours spent studying the music, and optimal position in the room. This brought up yet another important sociological question: *Who defines what information is most important in a classroom?* Foucault made the connection between "knowledge" and "power," and this still seems to be the reigning paradigm. In terms of symbolic interactionism, higher education, degrees, and titles have come to automatically stand for power and authority. We live in an age where institutional knowledge is king, leading personal experiences to be de-valued. One girl justified her affirmative answer by saying, "The director knows everything there is to know about the music." True, conductors generally do possess more knowledge than the students, but by no means do they "know everything about the music." As Professor A shared, "It's unfair to think I'm the only one who knows about the music – especially when there are talented kids in the choir. Sometimes student's comments are miraculous!" Ultimately, I think many choir directors prefer having total control because it assures that their interpretations will be the most highly valued. As soon as directors allow students to take control of the class and share their experiences, students begin to realize that a director's training and expertise is only a small part of a choir community. This style of teaching will mean, of course, that the roles of student and teacher won't always be clearly defined. At times a director may wonder, "Did I come up with that or did my students? Who's *teaching* here and who's *learning*?" Professor A admitted that this process takes more time and that it can be risky. But he then added, "This is also where *discovery* happens!"

I'd like to respond to a couple criticisms of the choir structure in general which I encountered. First of all, Patricia O'Toole wrote in her paper *I Sing in Choir but I Have No Voice*, that "the conventions of choral pedagogy are designed to create docile, complacent

singers” (O’Toole, 1994 p. 1). This statement falls neatly in line with critical theory, and like other critical and reproductive theories, it “over emphasizes the idea of domination” (de Marrais, 1998 p. 5). Students are as docile (or as active) as they choose to be. Just because students aren’t directing the choir doesn’t mean they’re not active participants in the music-making process. In fact, there are a whole set of creative responsibilities which only students can perform. The conductor can’t sing in the concert. The conductor can’t be expressive. Only the students can do this. When I asked the Women’s Chorus how students can contribute creatively to a choir, they gave the following responses: “Sing your part...” “Be expressive and let creativity flow through you...” “Let your face and body show how you feel...” “Practice outside of class to master your music...” Interestingly enough, only a couple students wrote anything about offer suggestions during rehearsal. O’Toole is so focused on the power inequalities of choir that she misses the big picture: Choir is really a collaborative partnership from the start.

Second, reproduction theorists claim that “the status quo is reinforced by the fact that dominant groups control...and they ensure that their power is never threatened” (de Marrais, 1998 p. 12). But this is precisely what I’m intending to counteract with “scripted spontaneity” and shared classroom control. Again, we see an over-emphasis on power struggle. A good-willed, proactive teacher (of which there are many) isn’t merely trying to hoard power. In fact, such a teacher is able to “shift the focus from conflict or power struggle to a focus on the common goal” (Silber, 2005 p. 254).

I did more research for this paper than I’ve done for any other paper, and while there appeared to be an abundance of material written for middle school and high school teachers, I saw a complete lack of material addressing the dynamics of control in a college choir. I also encountered the functionalist assumption that, because no one’s complaining, choir classrooms must be structured properly. Proof of this assumption is that, in all my research, I

didn't come across a single case study testing the idea of sharing control in a college choir. It's my hope, then, that more and more music scholars will begin to address student/teacher roles found in a college choir, question assumptions about control, and explore better ways to involve students in the learning process.

Several final considerations should compel choir directors to be intentional about involving their students more in the learning process. First of all, the history of choral music (and teaching in general) shows us that the default mode for most educators is some form of teacher-centered instruction. Therefore, we must be aware of our tendency to relegate students to passive learning roles and be proactive about providing opportunities for creative learning. Second, psychologist Jean Piaget argues that, as children grow up, morals which were once regarded as fixed and absolute gradually become more flexible. By age 10 or 11, children begin to look more to social consensus than to authority figures. So by the time students reach college, they're well-acquainted with the ability to make decisions for themselves. Therefore, reverting back to solely autocratic methods will only alienate these students. Ruth Wright wrote,

*“In order to allow for the multiplicity of musical identities inhabited by our pupils to flourish, we need to empower our pupils and afford them increased autonomy over curriculum and pedagogy. But this will require a new type of teacher possessed of the empathy to ‘kick’ their dominant habitus” (Wright, 2008 p. 400).*

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