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CHORAL JOURNAL

**MIDDLE AND JUNIOR HIGH
CHORAL MUSIC FOCUS ISSUE**



For some uniquely qualified educators, teaching choral music to students at the middle level is an extraordinary experience filled with wonder. These teachers experience success because they are able to relate choral music-making to the interpersonal and intrapersonal needs of the middle-level student.

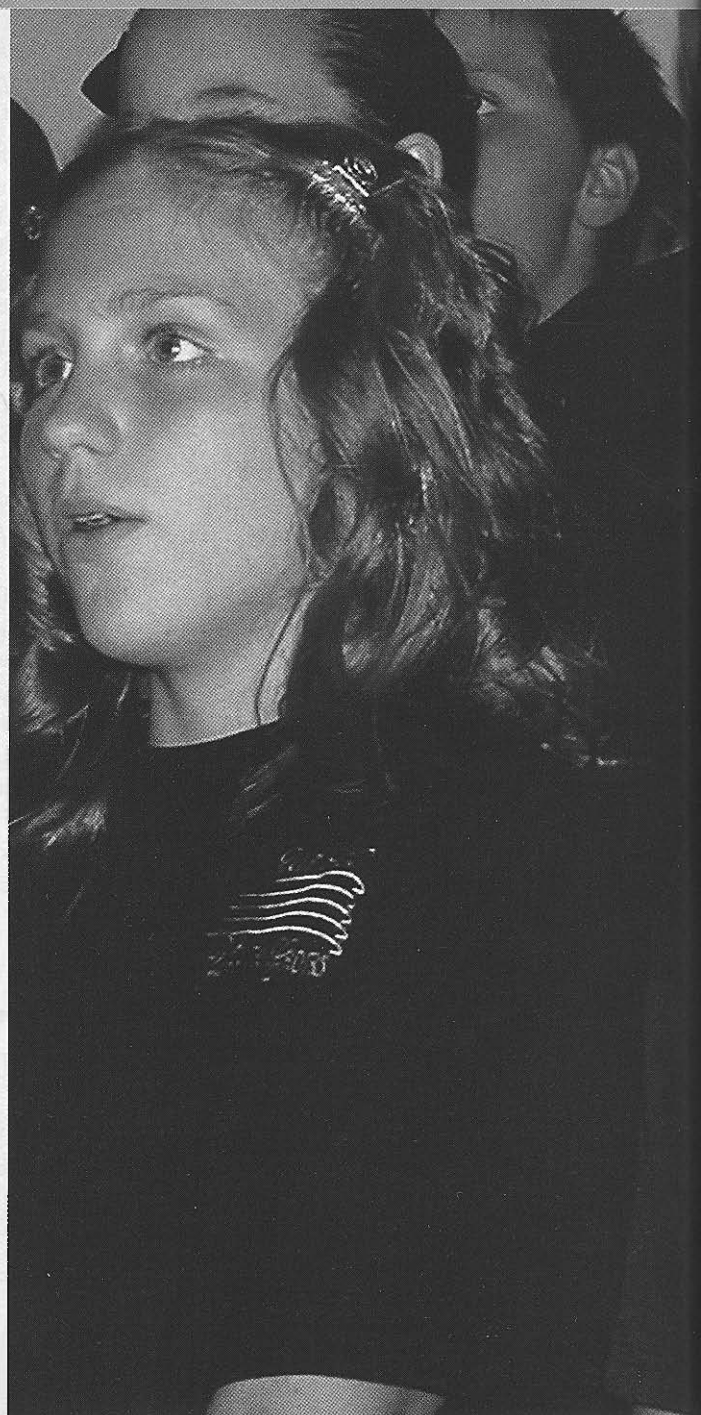
To identify the age group with whom we experience the greatest empathy is to determine the age group with whom we share the most laughter. Because early adolescents often use humor as a protective tool, they respond positively to the adult who can identify with and appreciate the complexities of their world. To appreciate middle-level students (ages 12–15; grades 6–9) is to acknowledge that their behaviors are consistently inconsistent. Early adolescents behave inconsistently because they are just beginning to learn how to respond to the personal challenges embedded in their fluctuating life perceptions.

For an early adolescent, the most obvious challenge is learning how to respond to a changing body. Hormones related to physical growth and sexual development are coursing through their systems. In addition to puberty, adolescents experience a variety of more subtle challenges.

When middle-level students begin to redefine their values, it can be difficult to isolate the cause of certain behaviors. Their circle of friends, talents, school expectations, in and outside of school interests, family relationships, romantic interests, energy levels, and self-worth are all in a state of fluctuation and discovery. Exploring the best way to respond to uniquely individual and powerfully personal issues can challenge anyone, but especially adolescents. Middle-level students respond positively to an empathetic constant; a teacher who is perceived to be consistently firm, yet fair. The limit-setting, high intensity, fast-paced, engaging, empathic teacher, who combines meaningful and achievable musical objectives with clear behavioral expectations for the classroom is poised to make great music.¹

The Middle-Level School

Approximately 100 years ago, the dominate grade configurations for schools were primary grades (1–8) and secondary grades (9–12). At the end of the nineteenth century, in an attempt to lessen the shock from the elementary school's self-contained classroom to the system of specialty teachers in the high school, a gateway was created, the junior high school. By the mid-1950s and into the 1960s, educators complained that junior high schools merely mimicked the high school model and ignored the need for exploration courses, academic integration, and flexible scheduling for the early adolescent. Additionally, researchers concluded that students were reaching puberty



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Wonders of Choral
A Bit of Nature



*Music In the Middle-Level Grades:
and a Whole Lot of Nurture*

by Alan C. McClung

earlier than had been the case at the turn of the century and that desegregation would be better served by reorganizing the middle-grade groupings.²

Since the 1970s, the 7-9 grade and the 7-8 grade configurations have continued to decrease, and the number of middle school configurations serving the 6-8 grades and 5-8 grades have increased. The National Middle School Association Web site provides the following breakdown of grade configurations: grades 5-8 (10 percent); grades 6-8 (59 percent); grades 7-8 (17 percent); grades 7-9 (5 percent); and other (9 percent).³

Smaller grade configurations group early adolescent students into schools comprised of grades 5-7, 6-7, 6, K-12, and one of the newest to receive attention is a return to the original grade configuration, K-8. Although some rural areas have maintained K-8 schools for some time, several large urban districts have recently converted their middle schools into K-8 elementary schools. The rationale for change includes the hope for higher

test scores, smaller student populations, staff familiarity with students and parents in neighborhood schools that produce greater parental support, lower operating costs, and the opportunity to begin with a new slate.⁴

Although study results vary in their conclusions, middle school expert, Joan Lipsitz offers the following insight:

This is another attempt at a magic bullet, which is much easier than getting down to the really hard work of preparing teachers to work with this age group, having strong curricula for this age group, and having personalized schools that hold high expectations for all kids and also meet their developmental needs.⁵

Responses from Choral Music Teacher Educators

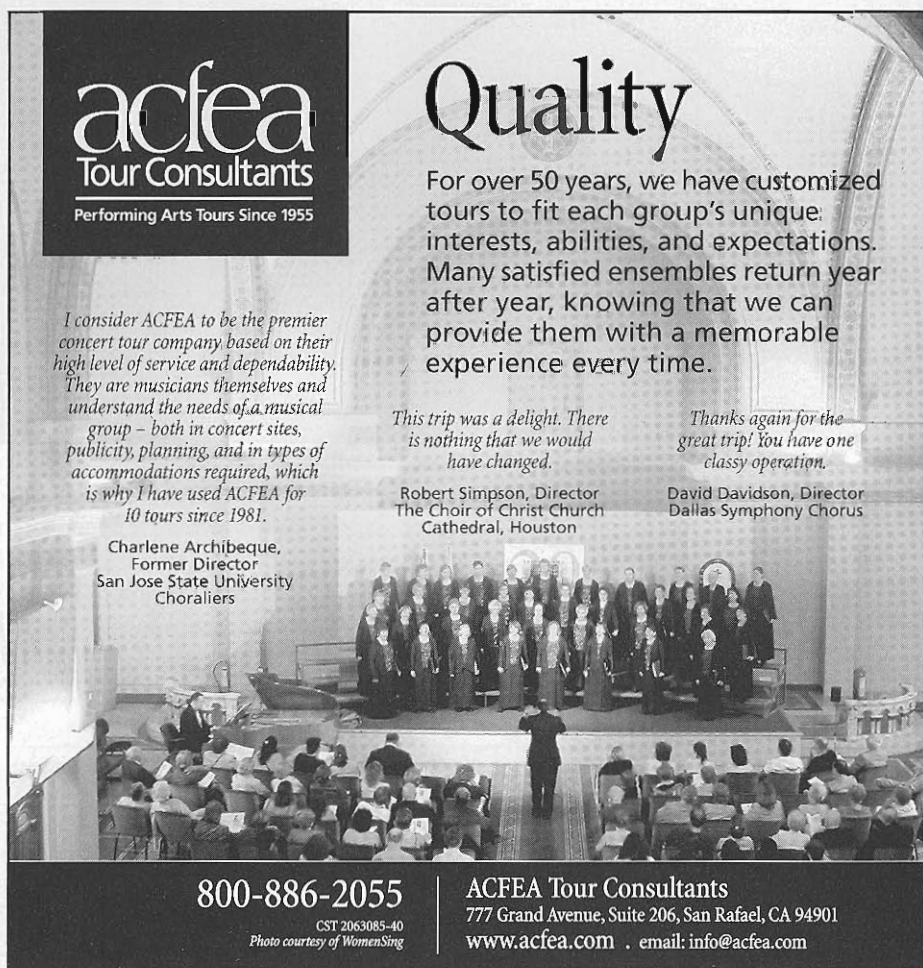
In October, 2005, a survey was mailed to 235 choral music teacher/educator

members of the College Music Society (CMS). Forty-nine surveys were returned completed, and one survey returned as misdirected. Although this response rate is too small to reflect adequately the population of the primary mailing, the data collected from the 49 useable responses (21 percent) provides a glimpse of the issues.

When asked to estimate the average percentage of middle-level schools in their area that offered choral music experiences led by a trained professional, survey respondents indicated that 83 percent of the schools in their area offered such experiences. Considering the variety of course configurations offered in middle-level schools, 83 percent could be viewed positively; however, the converse would leave an estimated 17 percent of middle-level schools without choral music opportunities led by trained professionals. To determine why some middle-level schools fail to offer such experiences would require additional research.

The second area of inquiry asked respondents about their choral music student teachers. Respondents indicated that the average number of choral music student teachers per year was eight. The lowest number of student teachers reported for an average year was 1 and the highest number reported was 30. When respondents were asked to indicate if all choral music education majors were required to spend an assigned portion of their student teaching experience in a middle-level setting, 35 percent indicated that their student teachers were required and 65 percent indicated that their college or university did not require student teaching placement in a middle-level school setting. Because the student teaching experience is typically confined to one academic semester, student teachers (sometimes referred to as interns preservice) are frequently limited to two choices: elementary school, middle-level school, or high school, requiring one choice to be elementary.

The respondents were asked to estimate the average percentage of recent choral music education graduates to accept a first teaching position in a middle-level school. The average response was 43 percent. The size of this percentage proposes important questions. Is the over-



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all choral music experience influenced by having a substantial percentage of first year teachers at the middle level? Are education courses designed to prepare preservice teachers for the rigors of the middle-level classroom? Are choral music teacher education curriculae designed to prepare pre-service teachers appropriately, to guide and develop students' musical skills and students' interpersonal skills?⁶

When the survey respondents were asked to indicate the choral music education method-based course offerings at their college or university setting, two dominant designs emerged. Sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated a two-course design, one course for elementary and one course for secondary (middle level and high school level combined). Seventeen percent of the respondents indicated a three-course design: elementary level, middle level, and high school level. Only 6 percent of the respondents indicated a two-course design with one course combining elementary and middle-levels and one course specific to high school. An even smaller percentage, 4 percent, indicated a two-course design with one course for elementary and one course for high school, with the middle-level receiving cursory attention in either the elementary or high school level courses. Eight percent of the respondents indicated the option, "other." Three of these respondents indicated that their setting provided only one course that was specific to choral music. "Birth-to-death" was how one respondent described this singular course setting.

In many instances, the method-based courses offered at the university level are decided by factors outside the control of the music education faculty.⁷ Commendations go to the faculties of colleges and universities who have creatively and successfully designed the three-course music education offerings that rightfully reflect the divisions of our schools (elementary, middle, and high). No matter how much time is allowed, one-third of a semester, one-half of a semester, or one complete semester, the tasks required to prepare preservice teachers with the specialized skills for success in the middle-level choral music classroom remain unchanged.

A Checklist of Specialized Skills

To create positive learning experiences for middle-level choral music students, the preservice teacher needs a repertoire of specialized skills. Six primary categories have been identified: (1) pedagogical skills in sight-singing; (2) group voice building techniques; (3) choral rehearsal techniques; (4) classroom teaching and management skills; (5) repertoire knowledge; and (6) organizational skills.⁸ Each skill listed is a topic unto itself.

Pedagogical Skills in Sight-Singing

The ability to sight-sing and the ability to teach sight-singing are two different skills. To teach sight-singing effectively the teacher must be prepared to separate pitch skills from rhythm skills and facilitate sequential learning events that merge the two skills, fostering musical independence.

The preservice middle-level choral music teacher should be prepared to:

- model, teach, and establish in-tune diatonic pitch relationships—steps, skips, and leaps, using an established pitch system and a variety of

teaching techniques and strategies. The two most widely used pitch systems use a movable tonic. One is based on movable pitch syllables (solfa) [do re mi fa so la ti do], the other movable pitch numbers [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, (pronounced sev) 1]. Fixed-do (C is always a "do") is a third pitch system used by a much smaller percentage of teachers.⁹

- model and teach duration symbols and rhythm, using an established rhythm system and a variety of teaching techniques and strategies.

When choosing a rhythm system, there are many choices: Orff-Schulwerk rhythm syllables, Chev  (Kod ly) rhythm syllables, Froseth/Gordon rhythm syllables, and the Traditional Beat-Based Counting System of which there are four types. The four types of traditional beat-based systems include Eastman; Type A (subdivision of each beat); Type B (partial subdivision of duration symbols); and Type C (limited subdivision of duration symbols).¹⁰

- model and teach melodic sight-singing in major and minor modes.

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Should a movable tonic system be chosen to develop pitch, the minor mode used most often in the secondary choral music classroom is the natural [relative] minor (6, 7, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6) or (la, ti, do, re, mi, fa, so la, ti, do).

- model and teach chromatic (altered tone) relationships—steps, skips, and leaps [1, ♯, 2, ♯3, 4, ♯, 5, ♯, 6, ♯, 7, 1, 7, ♭, 6, ♭, 5, ♭, 4, 3, ♭, 2, ♭, 1] or [do, di, re, ri, mi, fa, fi, so, si, la, li, ti, te, la, le, so, se, fa, mi, me, re, ra, do].
- use a variety of rote-teaching techniques to facilitate sight-singing skills and to support melodic/harmonic note-learning procedures.
- apply the information listed in the above bullets to the musical repertoire studied in class.¹¹

Group

Voice Building Techniques

The middle-level choral music teacher must be able to teach group vocal skills that are pedagogically sound. The successful teacher understands the physiological and psycho/social dimensions connected to the singing voice of the early and middle adolescent.

The preservice middle-level choral music teacher should be prepared to:

- model a variety of vocal skills and vocal qualities using appropriate singer's posture;
- model and teach diaphragmatic breathing skills and breath management skills;¹²
- model and use vocal sounds experienced in everyday life to nurture tonal freedom and to discover tone potential;
- demonstrate head voice and chest voice. Create exercises that encourage students to bring the head voice down rather than allowing the chest voice to move up;
- model and teach students how to maneuver the *passaggio* portion of the voice effectively, the passage or bridge between the head voice and chest voice;
- model and teach for "tall, forward mask" resonance;
- model and teach for an open throat, a relaxed larynx, and a dome-shaped lifted soft palate;
- male teachers should be able to demonstrate, female teachers should understand, and both genders should teach for and value the male *falsetto* voice;
- model and teach students to sing on the breath;¹³
- explain the stages of the voice-change in both genders. Place each voice in an appropriate vocal range that responds to and acknowledges the

various stages of vocal change encountered by students in their early and middle-adolescent years;¹⁴

- develop a variety of strategies to help the uncertain singer discover the singing voice, and¹⁵
- discuss vocal care and vocal health.¹⁶

Choral Rehearsal Techniques

Sometimes choral rehearsal techniques are referred to as the conductor's tool kit. To choose the appropriate tool, the conductor must use listening and observation skills to assess and pinpoint specific challenges. People receive information through different receptors, and the successful conductor should have a variety of solutions to address the same challenge. It is pedagogically advantageous to have a hundred ways to communicate the same thing.¹⁷

The preservice middle-level choral music teacher should be prepared to:

- use clear nonverbal conducting gestures to reflect expressive music-making objectives;¹⁸
- work from a marked score that pinpoints musical concerns and objectives;¹⁹
- research the composer, the characteristics of the musical style, and the text;
- support the music reading and music learning process with appropriate piano skills;
- combine music reading techniques with a variety of rote learning techniques that complement the music reading process;²⁰
- require accurate pitches;
- require accurate rhythms;²¹
- encourage well-shaped vowels and thoughtfully enunciated consonants;
- encourage a resonant, vital, focused, and blended tone quality;

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- encourage horizontal line and arching phrases using rhythmic and dynamic motion;²²
- encourage text communication with appropriate syllable inflection and musical articulations;
- encourage vertical pitch alignment with an awareness for harmonic tension and release;
- encourage dynamic balance among the individual voices and group sections; and
- use kinesthetic group gestures to encourage an external physical involvement in the interpretation of music's technical and expressive qualities.²³

Teaching and Management Skills

Having a thoughtful, detailed plan and communicating classroom expectations to students, parents, and administrators are essential skills. The image of teachers and teaching should portray the a multifaceted realm of influence.²⁴

The preservice middle-level choral music teacher should be prepared to:

- develop formal and precise goals for each course. Infuse course curricula with state and national standards.²⁵
- develop formal precise learning objectives for daily classes/rehearsals. Engage students in opportunities for higher level thinking skills, including critical thinking and problem solving.²⁶
- develop individual learning assessment strategies (informal and formal) that match and complement the learning objectives.²⁷ Determine specifically what students should be able to demonstrate. Demonstrate the value of a skill by teaching and testing for it.
- pace organized lessons/rehearsals effectively, using appropriate se-

quencing techniques. Delivery of learning segments should be stated clearly, paced quickly, and planned thoroughly, remembering that good teaching and high intensity teaching strategies require flexibility and the ability to improvise on a theme.²⁸

- plan for the needs of various learning styles: visual; aural; and kinesthetic.²⁹
- apply instructional principles that value extrinsic, intrinsic, individual, and group motivation.³⁰
- project a personal enthusiasm for music and students and create a positive learning atmosphere that reinforces specific valued behavior with genuine encouragement and sincere praise.³¹
- talk less. Use a variety of non-verbal cues to promote desirable behavior.
- use listening and observation skills to distinguish behavior prompted by academic challenges from that which is prompted by sociological and interpersonal challenges.³²
- employ a variety of management techniques to nurture valued behavior and to eliminate unwanted behavior.³³

• discuss, develop, and distribute, a code of conduct—a short list of what students are expected to do, including clear and consistent consequences for unmet expectations.³⁴ Foster the approval and support of your plan with the principal, parents, and students. Document specific incidents.

• develop, distribute, and maintain a grading system that connects grades with the student's ability to demonstrate individual learning and musical achievement.³⁵ Foster the approval and support of your plan with the principal, parents, and students.

• guide and nurture all students, including at-risk students and students with special needs.³⁶ Consult with other school personnel for insights into the needs of individual students.

Repertoire Knowledge

The musical repertoire chosen for the classroom should complement students' voices and learning potential.

The preservice middle-level choral music teacher should be prepared to:

- voice-check each student. Identify the appropriate singing range and the ability to match pitch and sing in tune. If applicable, identify music-

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- reading skills. Determine the appropriate section and ensemble;
- describe and recognize the difference between range and *tessitura*;
 - choose literature that attends to the needs of a wide variety of voice combinations (soprano, alto, *cambiata*, tenor, baritone, bass): unison; two-part (CB, TB, SC, SB, SA; three-part (CCB, CTB, TTB, SSC, SAB, SSA); four-part (CCBB, CTBB, TTBB, SSAB, SACB, SATB); five-part; six-part; and even eight-part combinations can be a valid choice in certain settings. Matching quality literature with various voice ranges can be one of the most challenging aspects of teaching the middle-level chorus;
 - develop skills in composition, arranging, and editing;
 - edit pitches or passages that extend beyond the comfortable range of a section. No matter the written key, rehearse and perform a work in the key that fits the vocal ranges;
 - determine the level of music complexity (easy-intermediate-advanced) as related to melody, harmony, rhythm, meter, diction, and language. Use score analysis techniques, supported with piano skills, to select and prepare performance scores;
 - determine if a work is appropriate to a group's music reading skills, vocal ability, vocal ranges, and vocal forces;
 - determine if a text is age- and gender-appropriate and culturally sensitive;
 - select quality music that includes principal composers who represent a variety of acknowledged choral styles and choral genres; and
 - determine if the chosen repertoire includes a variety of keys and modes, meters and time signatures, tempi, dynamics, and timbres.

Organizational Skills

Each school has personalized procedures related to budgets and spending. Every professional organization has specific rules and procedures related to sponsored activities. Budget time and plan in detail, not only for the lessons and rehearsals that take place during class time, but also for those events and responsibilities that take place outside of class time.

The preservice middle-level choral music teacher should be prepared to:

- complete, in a timely manner, all paperwork related to school admin-

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istration requests and professional organization memberships, including conference registration, choral festivals, solo festivals, ensemble festivals, honor choir, and all-state auditions;

- identify and attend to all rules and procedures that govern events sponsored by a professional organization;
- learn budget guidelines, deadlines, and purchase prioritization to appropriately utilize allotted financial resources. Learn to use a spread-sheet program, such as MS Excel to keep track of funds. Maintain financial records that are above reproach;
- consider concert attire carefully, perhaps with the input of the students.
- organize presentations and concerts, both on- and off-campus presentations effectively. Create and work from a detailed check list;
- demonstrate appreciation of school staff, including administrative assistants, school custodians, and cafeteria workers;
- learn the rules for fund raising activities, if they are even allowed;
- communicate with students, parents, colleagues, staff, and administrators in a clear, timely, and professional manner. All written documents should reflect a professional writing style, including correct grammar and spelling. Maintain back-up files of these documents;
- identify, promote, and attend school-related events: arts; academics; and athletics;
- identify, promote, and attend arts-based activities and events within the community;
- be acutely aware of the legal ramifications of your actions when working with children.

Nurturing Success

Although many master teachers may indeed possess some genetically predisposed tendencies, the instructional and musical skills required to be a successful middle-level choral music teacher are learned. Researchers, music educators, and in-service master teachers share the responsibility of providing inexperienced teachers with the pedagogical means to facilitate successful teaching. Prior to student teaching, pre-service teachers should engage in multiple opportunities to observe and practice music teaching skills. To create an awareness of the issues faced in the middle-level classroom, pre-service teachers should build a common language by engaging in group discussions of relevant readings. They should experience on-site observations in a variety of middle-level choral music classrooms, to discover and compare real-life classroom responses. They should participate in guided peer teaching opportunities to initiate music teaching skills. Pre-service teachers will benefit from participating in guided on-site instruction in local middle-level schools. The following example describes an on-site collaborative program between the students in a university, (secondary) choral music education methods course and a local

secondary choral music program.

The present schedule for this on-site collaboration includes six choral music classes taught in a middle school setting and six choral music classes taught in a high school setting. Instructional time is specified; a fifty-minute class/rehearsal can be equally divided among a five-member team, limiting each pre-service teacher to one teaching segment on a predetermined topic. Topic examples include voice building, pitch development, rhythm development, melodic sight-singing, and rehearsal and conducting of the classroom repertoire. Prior to a teaching segment, each pre-service teacher meets with the course instructor to refine learning objectives and discuss teaching strategies. During each teaching segment, the on-site teacher and the course instructor are available for immediate input to guide instruction if necessary. Following the video-taped teaching segment, each practice teacher meets with the course instructor for reflective assessment. The focus question is: "So tell me what you learned?" The move from talking about teaching in the classroom to actually teaching is very powerful. These collaborative pre-service teachers learn to plan in detail, lead effectively, respond positively to the unexpected, laugh read-

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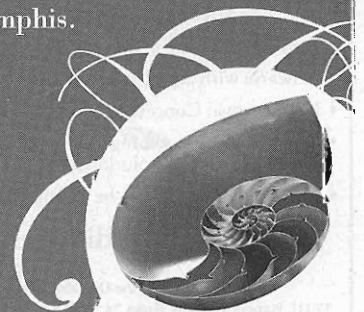
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ily, and enjoy teaching, rather than merely surviving.

The intention of this *Choral Journal* issue has been to gather information that supports middle-level choral music on a national scope. In the February, 2006 issue of *Choral Journal*, a new column was established: "Choral Music in the Junior High/Middle School," Janeal Krehbiel, editor. This forum offers teacher educators and on-site master teachers an opportunity to submit useful information on a consistent basis, information that guides, instructs, stimulates, reflects, and advocates for middle-level choral music-making.³⁷ Every middle-level choral music teacher and the students of every middle-level choral music teacher deserve the support and resources to achieve their potential. The impact of contributing to this growing knowledge base should be thoughtfully considered by a variety of stake-holders. Only our imaginations will limit the creativity of our contributions and the potential of this column.

The imagination and creative energy required to solve the challenges associated with teaching middle-level choral music are unique. Middle-level teachers, who solve these challenges successfully, experience a special sense of fulfillment because of the opportunity to combine

the joy of artistic singing with the thrill and empowerment of achieving a challenge at a time when students' emotions are raw and inexperienced. It is time to acknowledge middle-level choral music-making for the wonder that it can be and often is. When a bit of nature is combined with a lot of nurture, the teachers and the students who excel in our middle-level choirs can experience wonder on a daily basis.

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