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What is musicianship and how do you teach it to the church choir?

by Matt Strauser, R & S Chair for Church Music



What is musicianship? Once, when I sought advice from a respected colleague he replied that I should always be certain to “teach musicianship”.

Consequently, this has been a persistent question in my mind. On Friday, March 8, 2002, at the NWACDA convention in Tacoma, Washington we had a roundtable discussion about the question: What is musicianship and how do you teach it in the church choir?

Here are some of the participant statements.

Musicianship is:

- interpreting what is on the page and making it relevant.
- skills.
- expression.
- larger than the sum of its parts.
- combination of what is on the page and what is not on the page.
- going beyond and being independent.
- selling the song.
- no two consecutive notes being the same.
- ability to make music without making other people cringe.
- expressing things that are beyond the dimension of the music itself.
- being able to interpret and understand the musical language - to discover the implied part.
- combination of musical knowledge and musicality that will illicit a response from the listener.
- the desire, the sensitivity and the skill to interpret and communicate the essence of the music.
- interpretation and communication of the music.
- the ability to express.
- the skill's necessary to communicate the art of the song.
- creating music that is intrinsic to the performer as well as the audience.
- a good thing.
- using technical skills as tools to get to the complete expression of the music.
- what transcends from the page.
- the physical, spiritual and mental tool box the musician uses to make art.

- knowing music.
- a mixing of music literacy, interpretation and history.
- musicianship has three facets: desire, sensitivity and ability.

When asked to image a diagram or what musicianship looked like the participants agreed that a circle was best because they saw musicianship as a continual process or cycle of processes. People resisted the idea of drawing a “musicianship triangle”.

Here are some other discussion threads: How does the listener’s response relate to the musicianship of the performer?

What about the performer who has more “heart” than “skill”?

Can choir members who do not read music (well) have good musicianship?