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Questions from the Choral Conscience

by Steven Zopf, R&S Chair for College and University Choirs

When I was in graduate school I came into contact with the legendary Howard Swan right at the end of his life. Though he was not teaching much at that point, his very presence made a great impact on how I thought about my profession. The questions of why we do what we do and how we think about what we do have framed my professional life ever since, and I often think about them as I start a new year of teaching. In that spirit of self-reflection and introspection, I offer them to you at the start of a new school year:

Why do you do what you do? Is it about recreating great music? Teaching others about the music? The joys of communal singing? Our connection to great universal truths embodied in the great choral masterworks? Exposing others to the art of choral singing? Or is it about applause? Singer adoration? Power? Your need to create and experience choral music?

Why do you choose the music you choose? Is it about choosing great music? Exposing your students to different styles, genres, and examples of quality? Or is it about your need to conduct a specific work or piece?

What are the rewards you experience as a conductor and teacher? Is it about the joy your students feel as they experience great art? Or is it about the applause and adoration of singers and audience members? Could you do what you do without the latter?

Do you refer to “your tempo, your singers, your choir?” or do you use inclusive language? Are singers there to fit into a choral “instrument” or are they individuals whom you guide into being collaborators?

Do you conduct or teach to mold individuals using music as your medium or do you teach music to individuals and incorporate their journey into the larger whole? Can you classify what you do as manipulation or guidance? Is it about your need to mentor or is it about your students’ needs?

Do you talk about other disciplines as you teach? Do you reference literature, art, poetry, history, architecture and the myriad forms of human expression? Do you go beyond technique?

Do you know the singers who sing in your choir and care about them as people? If the number one predictor of student progress is great teaching and the primary component of great teaching is the relationship between student and teacher, do you have a relationship with the singers whom you work with? Do you know what their interests are?

Do you model what it means to be interested in beauty and the creative process? Do you talk about it with your students?

Is it about the performance or is it about the process? Do you incorporate sight-reading, vocal technique, and teach towards producing independent musicians or are you training a group for the next performance only?

Are you interested in your own development as a musician, creative artist, and leader? Do you model being a life-long learner to your students?

In closing, may I offer you the words of another great conductor and pedagogue, Robert Page, who, when asked what advice he would give to young conductors said:

*Know and love the voice, know and love the singer, with all the eccentricities involved." Singers are lovely, caring, involved musicians. Don't take them lightly. The voices carry messages that make the listener dream, care, love, and react in awe and wonder.

*Robert Page in *In Quest of Answers*, Carole Glenn (Chapel Hill: Hinshaw Music, 1991), 126.