Swagger, Gentlemanliness, & Brotherhood

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The Beginning
“Singing in a men’s choir is just special. There is a certain thing when a group of men get together and make music. We have a special bond.”

- Miles (12th gr.)
A different lens

• How do singers in a men’s chorus define their experience?

• What bearing, if any, does participation in a men’s chorus have on the identities of young men?
The Cedar High School
Men’s Choir*

• Spent 3 months with the ensemble

• Extracurricular male chorus; two 1-hr rehearsals per week; Midwestern state

• 41 members, grades 9-12

• Previously selected to perform at national & divisional ACDA conventions
Mr. Dover

• Student-selected pseudonym
• 22 years of teaching experience
• Enthusiastic, positive, motivational
• Student-centered, collaborative
• Respected within school & community
the “Big Ten”

Purposive sample of 10 current student members

Five participated through writing only:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>Jr.</td>
<td>Baritone</td>
<td>intelligent</td>
<td>loves science &amp; math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>social</td>
<td>friendly, likes to joke</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miles</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Tenor</td>
<td>competitive</td>
<td>composer/pianist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Jr.</td>
<td>Baritone</td>
<td>Eagle scout</td>
<td>swimmer/hiker</td>
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<td>Trent</td>
<td>Jr.</td>
<td>Tenor</td>
<td>lacrosse</td>
<td>takes voice lessons</td>
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the “Big Ten”

- Five participated by writing & interview:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Sr</td>
<td>Baritone</td>
<td>respected</td>
<td>will pursue engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>Tenor</td>
<td>energetic</td>
<td>plays soccer &amp; golf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>Tenor</td>
<td>charismatic</td>
<td>theatre &amp; student council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>“lone wolf”</td>
<td>guitar &amp; sailing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levi</td>
<td>Jr</td>
<td>Tenor</td>
<td>“all-American”</td>
<td>varsity basketball &amp; music theatre</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## alumni participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dan</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Member from 2002-2005</strong></td>
<td><strong>Member from 2008-2011</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Energetic, hockey player</td>
<td>Articulate, reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Council; Quiz Bowl</td>
<td>French Horn; marching band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>respected leader; friendly/outgoing</td>
<td>respected leader; openly homosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M.M. in vocal performance</td>
<td>Undergraduate student in music education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
two models

brotherhood
“who they are”

tightrope
“how they do what they do”
“We’re gonna be brothers here. We’re gonna support each other here…If somebody’s struggling with some pitches, we’re all gonna support that person. That sense of brotherhood is one that is so important. Safety. Comfort. You can be yourself.”

-Dan (alumnus)
brotherhood

support → pride → camaraderie
mentoring system

- Big brothers & little brothers
- Assigned within sections
- Mentor musically and behaviorally
- Respect is earned, not demanded
“We’re responsible for keeping each other in check…everyone understands that we’re not trying to be a jerk…you’re saving their butt from getting chewed out, you know?”

—Levi (11th gr.)
accountability & responsibility

- 1 hour rule
- No folder = solo
- Supportive environment
“If it’s an older boy [who has forgotten his folder] generally at that point, they have enough confidence that they’ll just get up and do it [sing the solo.] If it’s a younger boy, it’s an unwritten thing that their big brother will jump up and sing with them (cont.)…”
...so they’re not out there alone. We’ll _never_ hang a kid out to dry...because again, whether they’re terrible or whether they’re wonderful, the boys are gonna applaud for them and say ‘you did well.’“

-Mr. Dover
respect

- Is earned, not demanded
- Leaders gain respect by their example
“We respect each other... and the friendships we’ve developed by singing together and going places together and just doing things as a group together.”

-Al (10th gr)
“And I think we also respect each other’s musical abilities as well, because if someone’s struggling one day...then we can say “Look, this person’s struggling today—let’s help ‘em out.”

-Levi (11th gr)
brotherhood

• Mentoring system

• Accountability/responsibility

• Respect
pride in musical excellence

• In rehearsal
• In performance
• In repertoire selections
“When we sing together, we have this suave—okay, **swagger**, I guess. Being in that tux with all those other guys, you carry yourself differently... You feel a little more, you know (switches into character voice and charmingly raises one eyebrow) ‘Hey, how *you* doin’?’”

-Levi (11th gr)
proude in membership

• Privilege
• Creating/being part of a legacy
“All the guys—we want to be here. It’s like a *privilege* …”

—Eli (10th gr.)
“He was on his deathbed. Very weak—very, very skinny and very sick looking and we went out and sang to him. And what did he say? … something to the effect of, “The legacy of this group carries on within you—you create and continue this legacy. Remember what’s actually important… (cont…)
“… ‘You’re gonna look back and remember this and it’ll be something profound for you.’ … The [next] Monday that we came to rehearsal, we found out that was actually his last night living. That was a very emotional experience for us.”
brotherhood

- Support
  - Mentoring system
  - Accountability/responsibility
  - Respect

- Pride
  - In membership
  - In musical excellence
  - Legacy

- Camaraderie
bonds, connections & friendships

- Unique to the brotherhood
- Inclusive
- Viewed as something that strengthened their music making
“We have a connection. We’re connected through this brotherhood thing.”

— Eli (10th gr.)
Al: The best part of men’s choir is definitely the **friendships** that come out of it. When I sing with these guys, I feel like I belong.

Jan: I almost think it’s a little **stronger** than friendships…
traditions

- The “circle”
- Themed rehearsals
- Menswear
- Annual water park trip
- The “campout”

camaraderie
Jan: My favorite part is when we set up the tents in the turn-around in front of Trent’s house (which involves great teamwork) and then we carry the tents down the street like a caravan all the way there.

Levi: We all put so much thought into it — thinking about how to be ghosts ultimately.
“Without hesitation, the three boys dove into the tent and squeezed in! All three of them slept in that tent that night. I don’t know what else speaks to the brotherhood of men’s [choir] more than three guys willing to spoon all night in one of the smallest tents I’ve ever seen! If that doesn’t speak to our brotherhood, I don’t know what does.

—Eli (10th gr.)
humor (sometimes crude)

• jokes
• innuendo
• “toeing” the line
“Quite frankly, if you’re going to ask them to be vulnerable, then you need to let them be honest, but within set boundaries. We never joke at anybody else’s expense. Somebody’s race, religion, never. [They] cannot tell a joke about somebody’s mother or sister. Totally not appropriate. There are clear lines.” -Mr. Dover
Student (raising his hand): How would you like us to say “Bah-sahm?”

Student Teacher: Bosom?

(laughter from the group)

Mr. Dover: (laughing) Did you just do that to hear him say “bosom?!”
rowdiness

• “all over the place”
• “bouncing off the walls”
• activity & movement
[Mr. Dover] keeps us in line, which is really hard…

I feel like it would be very similar to herding cats.

(laughs)

— Steve (12th gr.)
brotherhood

- Mentoring system
- Accountability/ responsibility
- Respect

- In membership
- In musical excellence
- Legacy

- Bonds/ friendships
- Traditions
- Humor/ Rowdiness
hard-wired differences

- Testosterone (Gurian, 2011)
- Brain stem (Gurian, 2011)
- Cochlea (Don, Ponton, Eggermont, & Masuda, 1993; McFadden, 1998)
- Sound sensitivity (McFadden, 1998; Velle, 1987)
emotional processing

• Existing stereotypes are false regarding males & emotion (James, 2007)

• Emotions experienced similarly; processed & expressed differently (Sax, 2005)

• Brain directs emotive content to different locations (Gurian, 2011)
“Males [are] more **emotionally fragile** than we tend to think. A boy who has had a crisis at home in the morning may be unable to learn for much of the morning, whereas his sister may quickly process and learn efficiently the very same morning. [This is] …not offered to take attention away from girls’ emotional needs.  

(cont...)
(cont...) “…It is offered to inspire us to a new vision of males. Males are simply not as tough as we think; often females are emotionally tougher (though it may not appear so when they overtly show distress in tears and in talk more than do boys.)”

(Gurian, 2011; p.31)
“I am afraid every day before men’s [choir]. Before I walk into men’s [choir] every day, I am afraid. There’s a part of me that says, “Don’t brick it, because you don’t want to lose them. Don’t ruin this. Stay on top of this. Keep them engaged. Give them what they need. Get them working ...and it’s such a tightrope.

- Mr. Dover
tightrope model

- Teacher
- Student
- Work
- Repertoire
- Trust
- Sensitivity
- Play
- Student ownership
- Strength
- Authority
“I was so jacked from that performance because it just—like, I felt more manly from that performance.”

— Levi (11th gr.)

“A good performance in men’s choir makes you feel powerful, passionate, and manly. These powerful and manly feelings occur in rehearsal sometimes too.”

— Trent (11th gr.)
Al: There’s another kind of manly that you feel when you sing a song like “Mary Anne” [Ginsburg] and it’s just a sweeter, more beautiful sound, and that sound also makes you feel manly, but it’s just a different side…

Andrea: Maybe a type of gentlemanliness? (laughs)
Al: (excitedly) Yeah! The *gentle-manliness*! I mean, on the strong forte songs you feel like a superhero more, and then on the other side, you feel more *sweet* and genuine and—(pauses, searching for the word) *beautiful*. Well, in a *handsome* beautiful way.
“Tell My Father”

From “The Civil War”
by Frank Wildhorn

Arr. Andrea Ramsey

TBB, piano & violin
tightrope model

- Teacher
- Student
- Teacher authority
- Work
- Sensitivity
- Student ownership
- Play
- Trust
- Repertoire
- Vulnerability
“There’s that tightrope of ‘how much do you let them define the rehearsal or what they’re going to bring to it to give their identity and own it’ versus how much you’re going to steer them [as the teacher]?”

—Mr. Dover
teacher authority

• Expectations for personal responsibility; questioning

• Direct & clear instructions

• Structure!
  • 10 succinct rules- one page
  • Clear guidelines for sharing
Rule No. 9

Returning guys: Be encouraging, be positive, be quiet. Lead by example. There’s nothing worse than a hypocrite.

New guys: Be sure you want to be here. Be aggressive in your music learning. Be aware of the leaders around you who will show you how to behave.
student ownership

• Praising independent thought
• Values & applies student input
• Questions, questions, questions:
  • Can you give me three things we need to work on?
  • Why did the composer choose to set these words twice?
  • Listen to this accompaniment. What does it make you think of?
“I guess I don’t think I’m that smart. I need them. [With their input,] the performance feels warmer to me—more collaborative.”

—Mr. Dover
“Fellas, you’ve done a great job of **sharing**. You don’t need Mrs. Freeman [pianist] and I [sic]. You need **yourselves** to solve these problems. Tomorrow when you come to rehearsal, would you be prepared to solve your problems like this? Because you are **amazing**. You just said everything we need to get done.”

—Mr. Dover
“The Roof”

Andrea Ramsey

Available SSAA, TTBB, or SATB

with piano & violin
tightrope model
“Mr. Dover does a really great job of having times where he allows the joking... but then he gets serious and it’s time to work. By slacking off, you get work done. It’s kind of a paradox.”

-Al (10th gr.)
other considerations

• Some boys may actually learn better while standing than sitting (Noble, 2007; Sax, 2006)

• Make learning relevant: “Boys have a hard time...if they do not see the reason for the exercise.” (James, 2007, p. 120)

• Have clear learning objectives; keep lessons sharp & finite; vary activities (Noble, 2000)
repertoire

• Create connections between repertoire and student interests

• Appropriate vocal range… yet NOT dull or overly-simplified

• Difficult, yet attainable; allows for success

• Balance & variety: work/play; strength/sensitivity

(Abrahams, 2012; Stamer, 2009; Freer, 2010)
“We would know when we were doing something cheesy…which we all loved. I think the audience always knew we would do something really profound, and right after it, do a fluffy one.”

—Dan (alumnus)
“… in my freshman year. It was a profound moment when we talked about “forgive my iniquities.” [in Si Iniquitates] It’s funny—I’m 25 now, and I was probably 14 then—that was a long time ago…but I still remember how deep we went into that piece…”

—Dan (alumnus)
tightrope model

- Teacher
- Student
- Repertoire
- Work
- Play
- Strength
- Sensitivity
- Teacher authority
- Student ownership
- Trust
“There was just that comfort that we can **open up** and pour our hearts out and nobody’s gonna think, ‘Oh that **wuss**!’… it’s this **safe** place where we can be ourselves and talk about girls, or farts, or whatever…but **also** talk about the sides of our souls that men a lot of time **don’t** discuss…” — Dan (alumnus)
“When you sing, you’re in a very **vulnerable** spot because... when you’re singing that’s all you have. That’s very personal. That’s very **close** to you. And when you can build that trust to sing in front of anybody in that men’s choir... you’re pretty much telling them I trust you with one of the most **personal** things I have.”

- Levi (11th gr.)
trust & vulnerability

• Define the safe space; revisit and redefine every few months

• Celebrate everyone’s answers

• Put on your artist hat; put away your smart aleck
“When you use your good, smart thinking caps, your sensitive thinking caps, your artist thinking caps… what does the text mean to you?

‘About the woodlands, I will go to see the cherry hung with snow.’ What does that mean to you? — Mr. Dover
men’s chorus
and
identity
**men’s chorus & identity**

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<tr>
<th>Challenged stereotypical views of male gender roles</th>
<th>Increased self-confidence; social interaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased leadership skills</td>
<td>Provided outlet for emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided a sense of belonging/acceptance</td>
<td>Increased personal artistry, sensitivity &amp; expression</td>
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</table>
challenged stereotypes of gender

“It’s okay to be sensitive and say what you feel and all. Just because we’re guys doesn’t mean we have to be these macho men all the time…there’s always been this stereotype… I mean, you see TV commercials [it’s] always beer and chips and football, you know? And you never see those guys singing [in a choir.]”

- Levi (11th gr.)
challenged stereotypes of gender

Max: I learned a lot about who I am through that group. That group had a profound impact on my identity as a man. I mean, it impacted me with my relationships with other men. I wasn’t comfortable with straight men.

AR: Until that experience?
Max: Until that experience. It never occurred to me that the guys would be okay with my homosexuality… then I realized, “No, they’re okay with this.” It kind of gave me more trust in humanity (laughs) — More faith in my fellow man.
increased self-confidence

“I feel a lot more comfortable with my own actions and what I say based on the comfort of this choir... I feel a lot more like myself... [men’s choir] has really opened me up and made me a better person — more confident.”

— Al (10th gr.)
“I think deep down we all knew that one thing we really loved about it was that we got to talk about deep poetry and be vulnerable. And as a high school guy, that’s not something I think we found anywhere else— that vulnerability and ability to talk openly about emotion. —Dan (alumnus)
closing thoughts
Intertwining the *musical* with the *social* can enhance the male chorus experience.
High school males view singing as an act of vulnerability, therefore trust and safety are important.
Teachers who trust and are vulnerable can create a learning atmosphere that fosters similar trust & vulnerability among his/her students.
Quality *repertoire* can provide a context for empowerment, exploration of self & emotions, and connections with others.
Men’s choir rehearsals may be more active & noisier than mixed or all-female ensembles.
High school male chorus students respond positively to clear **structure** and **expectations** to maintain order and achieve success.
Being instructed by a teacher who is supportive, genuinely invested, and who believes in students is important to male chorus members.
“That Which Remains”

Text by Helen Keller
Music by Andrea Ramsey
Available SATB & TTBB
Thank you

www.andreararamsey.com

>> resources