CHOIR IS: __________

The Meanings of the Choral Experience, Grades 7-12

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How did you get here?
Life

Moments

People

Decisions

Opportunities

Journey
Why Singing?
What is the meaning of choir?
230 written responses

Choral music students (grades 7-12) from:

– Auditioned choirs
– Non-auditioned choirs
– Mixed choirs
– Female choirs
– Male choirs
– Public school choirs
– Required-tuition community children’s choirs
Emergent THEMES

Expression - Awareness
Enjoyment - Relaxation
Encompassing - Unifying
Inspirational - Transformational
Friendship - Social Value
Learning - Understanding
Hard Work - Reward
Priority - Identity
Expression - Awareness

I. Express feelings, emotional release

II. Opportunity for self-awareness

III. A means of creating something beautiful and artistic
“If a conductor can bring out the FORCE of the human personality of his singers... it’s like firecracker.

If harnessed and brought out, the human personality is so powerful.”

- Howard Swan

The Journal of Choral Conductors Guild (1970)
1. Express feelings, emotional release

“Singing fills my soul with sheer happiness, as it should everybody. Whenever I get really angry or just feel terrible, I sing. Everyone should, and everyone can.” (8th grade male)
“...the stress, anger (and) sadness you hold inside disappears. You not only have fun, but at the end of each class something about you is different.”

(7th gr. female)
II. Self-awareness

“Choir is a way where you learn who you really are and what you have to give the world.”

(11th gr. female)
“It lets you throw up your guts and see what you really are. For dudes, it’s a great emotional release.”

(10th gr. male)
III. Creating beauty, artistry

“What choir means to me is to make something beautiful.” (9th gr. male)

“It is a place to make art come to life through our voices.” (8th gr. male)
“Music was my refuge.

I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.”

- Maya Angelou
ENJOYMENT - RELAXATION

I. Fun, enjoyable experience

II. Relaxing or calming, a means of relieving stress or frustration

III. Escape, refuge or sanctuary
I. Fun, enjoyable

“Choir = fun!!!!!” (7th gr. male)

“Being in choir is the bomb! It’s something I enjoy and cherish.” (9th gr. male)
ENJOYMENT - RELAXATION

III. Relaxing, calming, relieves stress

“Choir is time to be free of everything that is troubling you. That’s what choir is, relaxing with a group of people you enjoy being with, releasing your voice into a beautiful piece of art.” (9th gr. female)

“It’s a great way to relieve stress.” (10th gr. male)
III. Escape, refuge, sanctuary

“Choir is how I get away.” (11th gr. female)

“I think that choir is a place where you forget about everything that’s going on and you just sing and make your own world with peace and love.” (7th gr. female)
I. A sense of family

II. Acceptance, a place to belong

III. Work together as a ‘team’

IV. Part of ‘something bigger’

V. Unites people
I. Family

“Choir is like a big family. Everyone knows each other and works together to make music... choir is a way of connecting cultures into one.” (8th gr. male)
“My entire adolescence I have been a member of a choir. It gave me an emotional outlet as my home life endured some hardships. As the relationships between my family members gained weight and strain, the relationship between my fellow choir members grew stronger. Choir is a family when your own family is not enough.”

(11th gr. male)
II. Acceptance

“Choir is where everyone learns to be appreciated by the way they put feeling into the music, not by what they look like or how they dress.” (7th gr. female)
III. Working together as a team

“To me choir is teamwork. We need everyone to give it their all” (8th gr. male)

“All the kids work together. If one of them messes up, the whole team messes up.” (9th gr. male)

“You can have fun singing and be a team like in football, but in choir, everyone ‘starts’” (10th gr. male)
IV. ‘Part of something bigger’

“When you get to perform with people who share your love of music and your passion, you experience a really awesome feeling. Choir is a chance to be part of something big. Something much bigger than you.”

(11th gr. female)
“Choir isn’t just about the singing. It’s about putting away your personal struggles and burdens to open up to something greater than yourself. It’s feeling like part of something. It’s belonging.”

(9th gr. female)
V. **Unites people**

“Choir is singing together as one. You leave your problems at the door and sing as one choir.”

*(7th gr. female)*
“One understands that S O N G
sometimes can do much towards
working a vital transformation
in the lives of men.”

- Howard Swan
“The Conscience of a Profession”
(1987)
“If I’m having a bad day I can always come and sing and everything is better.”

(8th gr. male)
I. Changes lives, affects personal character

II. Helps students cope with difficulty

III. Inspires singers and audience members
I. Changes lives, affects personal character

“Choir is the best thing that has happened in my life. Singing can change a person...”

(9th gr. male)
“Choir has changed my life big time. I used to be bad, but when I sing, I believe I can do whatever I want.”

(8th gr. male)
II. Helps students **cope** with difficulty

“Choir is something that helps people make it through hardships. It helps people overcome their emotions of any kind whether happy, angry or sad.”

(9th gr. male)
“Choir is a nearly therapeutic experience for me. Each day I reluctantly make my way from class to class waiting for the rehearsal in which all my problems will fall away. Music helps me cope. Choir helps me heal.” (11th gr. male)
III. Inspires singers, inspires audience

“Choir is inspiring to people because it is something majestic.” (9th gr. female)

“When we sing, I believe that we make someone feel just a little bit happier, and knowing that feels good.” (7th gr. male)
III. Inspires singers, inspires audience

“Choir can make you laugh, cry, smile, or gaze in awe. It’s wonderful to be a part of something like that.” (8th gr. male)
Choir is an **AMAZING experience** that makes you feel good about yourself, but only because *all of your friends are singing* with you. *(8th gr. male)*

Choir is not just for singing, but for **friendship**. *(7th gr. female)*
Friendship - Social Value

I. Valued time spent with friends

II. A means of making new friends

III. Builds self-confidence
I. Valued time with friends

“I look forward to choir each day. It is a great class with really great guys.” (11th gr. male)
II. A means of making new friends

“Choir is a place where friends are made, jokes are shared, and lives are changed.”

(7th gr. female)

“As a member of a choir, I have made friends of all races.”

(8th gr. male)
III. Builds self-confidence, increases extroversion

“Choir made me open up and made me feel not afraid to sing out.” (7th gr. female)

“Choir is where self esteem is built, where friendships are made.” (9th gr. male)
“When you **sing**, it doesn’t matter that ‘Johnny’ didn’t ask you to homecoming. When you sing, you have the chance to tell yourself ‘I can be amazing and I will be because I deserve to make people feel something they didn’t know they could feel when they listen to me.’” (10th gr. female)
“I have been learning a lot of things in choir”

- 7th gr. male
I. Music fundamentals, choral concepts, or vocal technique

II. Life lessons

III. Understanding new cultures, exploring new languages
I. Musical concepts

“It’s fun because you learn how to sing better and to read notes.” (7th gr. male)

“Being in choir is so amazing because you learn new skills...dynamics, vowels and breath. These three things are important.” (8th gr. male)
LEARNING - UNDERSTANDING

II. Life lessons

“Choir teaches us about music but also about respect and discipline.” (9th gr. male)

“I learned many lessons by being in choir. I can express my feelings throughout the songs I sing instead of handling it with violence. Choir is wonderful.” (8th gr. male)
III. Languages & cultures

“Choir is a way for people to exchange the culture, beliefs, and ways of life of a particular group of people.” (12th gr. male)
We all work to accomplish our goals together. The feeling of finishing a concert is amazing because I know we did it together and overcame all the obstacles in our path.”

- 8th gr. male
I. The joy of working hard, overcoming challenges and achieving goals

II. Sense of accomplishment from the success of the group

III. Praise from others, increased social status, self-affirming
I. Working hard, achieving goals

“Every time I leave (choir), I feel so invigorated, like I can overcome anything. If I’ve had a really crappy day, I completely forget about it when myself and 45 amazing young women work hard together to reach a common goal.”   (11th gr. female)
“Choir is the anticipation before a concert. The long hard hours of rehearsing for the big day, and finally the joy to have a large crowd give you a standing ovation.”  (7th gr. female)
II. Success or Achievement of Group

“When we work so hard to get a certain section just the way we want it, it might be so, so so difficult during practice to get all the things combined, but when it all comes together, I just get an indescribable feeling of accomplishment.” (11th gr. female)
III. Praise, increased social status, & self-affirmation

“[Choir is] a way to be noticed.” (7th gr. male)

“It’s fun to be the best in choir and get a solo cause girls think guys who are smart, athletic and can sing are super hot!!!” (10th gr. male)
Choir is *everything* to me. I will never give it up. I love to come in the choir room in the morning and see those *risers.* Best feeling ever.”

*(9th gr. male)*
I. Valuable and important to the student

II. Where many find a sense of identity

III. The student’s favorite subject or the best part of their school day
I. Valuable and important

“If a school was shutting down its choir program, I would do anything to stop that from happening. Choir is the meaning of life!”

(8th gr. male)
II. Identity

“With choir I have a hope to be the best I can be. Choir is my life.”  (8th gr. male)

“Choir is the most important thing in my life. It has made me a better person all around.”  (10th gr. female)
III. Favorite subject or part of day

“Choir is the absolute best subject in the history of the world.”

(7th gr. female)
For 30 years, I’ve been covering school reform and we’ve basically reorganized the bureaucratic boxes: charters, private schools, vouchers…but we’ve had disappointing results year after year, and the fact is, **people learn from people they love**, and if you’re not talking about the **relationship** between a teacher and a student, you are not talking about **reality**.”

- David Brooks
What **singers** have to say about us...

- **100 Singers**
- **Grades 3-12**

Surveyed about their choir programs and choir directors

Information courtesy of Christy Elsner, Artistic Director, Allegro Community Children’s Choir

Used here with permission.
What makes an excellent teacher?

100%: High expectations, believes I can meet the high expectations, challenges me

82%: Sense of humor, class is fun, teacher loves what they teach, teacher is strict, teacher is happy

68%: Creative, energetic, positive, respects me

50%: Treats students fairly, doesn’t play favorites, is kind/nice/friendly/unique, makes me think

40%: Student feels connected to the teacher or teacher makes student excited to learn
What frustrates you about choir or your choir director?

64% : Teacher is always eating or drinking in front of us

59% : Teacher is always on the computer

51% : Never starts class on time

40% : Teacher does not challenge us, “push us- please!”

39% : We just sing straight through the music

35% : My director yells at us, but doesn’t seem to ever help us fix what he is yelling about

32% : “It is so very hard to make lots of changes the week of the concert” (or similar)

26% : My choir director has no idea who I am/does not know my name

15% : Get the piano tuned!
What frustrates you about choir or your choir director? (additional quotes)

“We are singing the same music the choir did 2 years ago”

“I think my music teacher is ‘living for the weekend.’”

“We do the same warm-ups day after day, month after month, year after year. I am dying of boredom.”

“My teacher talks and talks about things and sometimes brags about what he does. It doesn’t relate to what we are doing.”

“My choir director is always in a panic before concerts or contest. We often hear how we will embarrass him, which I find to be a weird comment. This is his choir and we are just doing what he tells us.”
What frustrates you about choir or your choir director? (MORE quotes)

“I get frustrated in choir because all of the kids talk all the time and the teacher doesn’t do anything about it.”

“Please put batteries in the clock!”

“If we are unprepared for contest because you have been focusing on the musical, is it our fault?”

“It’s frustrating when my teacher tells us something to make us better and it initially works, but then she never expects us to do it again.”
What do you LOVE about choir or your choir director?

“My teacher has all sorts of fun ways to describe what we are trying to do.”

“He is always doing crazy stuff. I never know what will happen in class!”

“My choir director treats us like adults (well, at least like mature young adults.)”

“I like that my choir director stands up to the kids that are misbehaving.”
What do you LOVE about choir or your choir director?

“I feel different when I sing. I don’t know how to describe it, but I live for choir class.”

“My director picks tough music, mostly classical, but I kind of like classical now.”

“I love the students in my choir. We are very close.”

“My choir director is very clear of what is expected every day--writes specific things on the board to accomplish. It’s sort of basic, but we know what is expected of us.”
What do you LOVE about choir or your choir director?

“Choir is the best part of the school day. It’s like recess, but we work.”

“I always take choir because the directors are usually funny. Most teachers aren’t.”

“I love when my teacher shares a little bit of personal stuff or a personal story to make us sing better.”

“My choir director loves her job and it shows EVERY day.”
Dwell in possibility

- Emily Dickinson
Implications for rehearsal

“There is only one way to get somebody to do something…

…and that is by making him want to do it.”

- Dale Carnegie
Expression - Awareness

• Selection of repertoire:
  • Meaningful, poetic texts
  • Emotion, purpose, application
  • Text’s relevance to self or society
Life has loveliness to sell,
Music like a curve of gold,
Scent of pine trees in the rain,
Eyes that love you, arms that hold,
And for your spirit's still delight,
Holy thoughts that star the night.
Pt 1

Dona nobis pacem,

Pt 2

Dona nobis pacem, pacem,

Dona nobis pacem

Dona nobis pacem

Dona nobis pacem
Expression - Awareness

- Maximize expressivity
- Avoid micro-managing & frequent stops
- “How” you say it is just as important as “what” you say!
Enjoyment - Relaxation

Rehearsal can (and should) be fun!!

- Laugh with your choir
- Fun ≠ easy
- Use humor, imagination, or friendly competition
Enjoyment - Relaxation

Reading your choir’s non-verbal communication

- The power of the “change-up”
- Knowing when you cross the “threshold of counter-productivity”
If the horse you are riding dies...

it’s probably a good time to dismount.
Mixing it up

- Random objects (surprise is your friend)
  - Paintbrushes, foam ball, canned goods?
- Physical activity (can be musical or extramusical)
- Red light/green light (audiation/singing)
Red > audiate

Green > sing

Part 1.

Part 2.
Encompassing - Unifying

• Our role as teachers:
  • Empowering vs. belittling
  • Investing vs. accommodating
  • Persisting vs. browbeating

• Creating the environment:
  • ‘leave it at the door’
  • Safe zone (even face-making!)
  • Teach less. Share your passion more.
Inspirational - Transformational

• Shift in perspective?
  • Advocacy - talk.
  • Advocacy - excellence.
  • Who is choir “for?”
  • Recruiting/fearlessness

• ~75% male responses
  • Young men are positively changed through singing
  • Young men want to sing…
  • They just want to sing well!
Silber (2005)

Bars Behind Bars: The Impact of a Women’s Prison Choir on Social Harmony

- socializing benefits of choral singing
- form new bonds
- accept criticism
- express ideas with very little resistance.
The multi-vocal *ensemble* is a METAPHOR for *relationship*, where the individual is called upon to control her own voice and at the same time blend with the voices of others. This delicate balance requires personal skills, self-control, patience, ‘finding one’s voice, self-expression, intuition--and the relationship skills necessary to produce a harmonic whole in negotiation and cooperation with a diverse group: listening, yielding, trusting (as for other voices to come in), sharing, and supporting.”

Friendship - Social Value

• Example of positive peer pressure
• Consider:
  • Teambuilding activities
  • Social events
  • Service projects
  • Group activities such as:
    - memory work
    - discussion of text
    - opinions on phrasing
Learning - Understanding

• Content
  • Sight-singing
  • Score comprehension
    (terms, expressive markings)
  • Vocal health & technique
  • Life-lessons

• The ‘Multi-Vitamin’ Approach
  • A little every day
  • Weekly life-lesson or quote, weekly music term
Hard Work - Reward

• There must be work...
• Provide real challenges
• Provide real support
• Persist positively
“Flow” concept by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Hard Work - Reward

Support with praise

• Avoid general praise, be specific!

• More performance opportunities!
Priority - Identity

- If choir truly is their life, then
  - We owe them our best
  - Bell-to-bell rehearsal
  - Every minute is precious

- Reality check...
  - For most students, choir is NOT their life
  - Avoid “guilting” students
  - Acknowledge and value their participation in other activities
CHOIR is ...
Making it your own...

• End-of-year reflection—ask *your* students, choir is: ?

• Structure needed

• Reality expected

• Requires **courage!!**

• Experts/commonality
“As civilization (and I say specifically technology) advances, the sense of 

wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of

information, but only for want of appreciation.”

- Abraham Joshua Heschel
FINAL thought

"Choir is where wilted people become alive and everything you lose in the rush of everyday life is found, and the camera of your heart can focus. And I think it’s this way because singing is like speaking, only deeper, and so singing with other people is, to me, the purest kind of love there is."

(11th gr. female)
Thank you
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