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TEACHING CHRISTIAN VALUES THROUGH  
SCHOOL CHOIR ACTIVITIES

by  
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TEACHING CHRISTIAN VALUES THROUGH SCHOOL CHOIR ACTIVITIES1.- Introduction:

Music has an important place in education, as it contributes to a balanced development of the whole personality.

Choral singing is a very effective and practical way of accomplishing educational and musical objectives, and due to the spiritual significance music has, it can be used to teach Christian values.

This paper proposes that spiritual values should complete the educational and musical objectives in school choirs, and that these spiritual values can permeate and integrate the intellectual, emotional, social and moral values incorporated through a choral (class or performing group) program. It also suggests ways in which this integration can be achieved in a Christian school choir.

2. - The Importance of Music in Education

The importance of music in general education is a well accepted fact recommended both by secular and Christian educators.

Starting with Plato, who urged music in the education of every citizen, and continuing through the universities of the middle ages, which included music in the quadrivium of subjects required for the master's degree to the present-day educators like James B. Conant and organizations like the Educational Policies commission, music has been deemed an essential part of a good education (Hoffer 1967, p.6).

Aristotle wrote: "Because music has so much to do with the molding of the character, it is necessary that we teach it to our

children" (Tufts 1965, p. 8). Dorothy Bromley adds: "We are only beginning to learn that the right kind of music and singing taught to children while they are young has the power to change the course and destiny of their life" (Tufts 1965, p. 7). Louis Diercks completes the idea: "Music has long held a unique place in the culture of men and of nations, in their efforts to strengthen and improve themselves" (Neidig & Jennings 1969, p. 22).

The value of aesthetics in the curriculum is also stated by the National Association of Secondary-School Principals:

Neither an outstanding nation nor a worthy individual can be intellectually mature and aesthetically impoverished. School programs should reflect a balanced image of social and artistic values (Ernest & Gary 1965, p. 2).

Ellen White also recommends music and singing as a powerful influence in education:

The value of song as a means of education should never be lost sight of. Let there be singing in the school, and the pupils will be drawn closer to God, to their teachers, and to one another (White 1947, p. 168).

### 3. - Choral Singing in the School

Singing is one of the most important musical activities in school, recommended by educators and musicians alike.

Choral singing is one of the best ways of making music with a rather small investment. Singing uses the most personal instrument - one's own voice, one's own body - with no need of buying one. Musical instruments and music lessons are usually expensive. When resources are scarce, singing becomes the most feasible alternative. Almost anyone can be trained to develop an

acceptable singing technique and, with serious work, a good choir may be assembled in a reasonably short time.

In a well balanced program the choir becomes a laboratory in which the structure, design, and meaning of music can be demonstrated and practiced. Active involvement and participation can thus help the students to achieve musical and educational goals.

Participating in a school choir is one of the most significant experiences a student can have in the school. Long after he leaves the school, these experiences will hardly be forgotten. Memories of fellowship with fellow singers and conductor at rehearsing time, excitement of performances with moments of grandeur, tours, may last forever like a sense of achievement.

Choir singing can be regarded as a healthy hobby for the rest of his life, and may become a ministry that will benefit both himself and the church.

#### 4. - Christian Values in Choral Activities

Christian values can be fostered through an appropriate selection of repertoire, methodology, and materials. As argentinean educator María Elena Gonzáles suggests: "moral, aesthetic and spiritual values can be cultivated through songs and rounds at school" (Gonzáles 1963, p.39). Furthermore, singing in the choir provides that affective response which can reinforce the cognitive, helping the student to further incorporate and consolidate those

values.

Songs have words, and their meaning should add to the message of the musical elements.

Music has never been merely a 'science of sound', but is virtually a way of life. Choral music, especially, is concerned with ideas - from every philosophical background and of every theological persuasion - because of the unbreakable bond between text and musical line. This marvelous quality must be conveyed to each student as his individual development is strongly encouraged by the director, who, himself, must constantly grow in understanding (Neidig & Jennings 1969, p. 19).

#### 4.1 - Intellectual Values

God created man with wonderful intellectual aptitudes and potential. Developing these skills to their fullest extent is the objective of education. Acknowledging our intellectual power as God's gift, is the key to integrating intellectual and spiritual values.

The Creator of man and Creator of all beauty, intended arts and music to contribute to man's holistic growth. "Aesthetic experiences are vital if man is to achieve his full stature" (Hamel 1973, p.13). Ellen White says that music was meant to elevate, to inspire, to uplift the thoughts (White 1947, p. 166).

Based on these quotations, we can conclude that no education is complete if it neglects the human need for aesthetics. If our spiritual life doesn't include the aesthetic aspect it is lacking an important element.

In contrast to our contemporary culture and its appeal to the cheap taste of the masses, a Christian teacher should lead his students to aesthetic maturity. This can be accomplished as they

strive for excellence in making music to the glory of God.

The work of preparing a piece of music for performance demands of each singer his best efforts. It requires awareness of the musical elements (pitch, intonation, rhythm), diction, phrasing, in order to interpret the meaning of the lyrics. Sound interpretation is accomplished with a careful, subtle combination of musical and non-musical elements, demanding concentration, sensitivity and self-discipline. This is hard intellectual work, fostering values like organization, and a pursuit for excellence.

#### 4.2 - Emotional Values

Being able to control one's emotions and/or express them in a constructive way should be the mark of a mature and educated Christian. Music is the language of the emotions. It can express feelings and ideas in a way words can not. As Hoffer states:

Music can play a significant role in helping students emotionally. Music has value not only because it is an expresser of emotion, but also because it is a releaser of emotions (Hoffer 1964, p.18).

Performing great music in the choir gives the opportunity to experience and express many different emotions, developing emotional sensitivity.

Through appreciation and performance, we are exposed to a range of emotions, and we learn emotional sensitivity. As we learn how to refine and direct emotions, we find the inner harmony and calm that are part of personal balance (SDA/SPU 1990, p. 6).

Emotions are an important component of behavior, and values can be strengthened as they are in some way related to positive

emotions.

Art affords an area of experience in which emotion can be objectified or externalized and within which feeling may blend with cognition (SDA/NAD 1973, p. 32-33).

Nevertheless we should always balance emotions and intellectual content.

#### 4.3 - Social and Civic Values

Man was created as a social being. Sharing ideas, feelings and experiences with his peers responds to his elemental need of companionship. Singing in the choir is a collective activity which meets this same need and provides channels of expression and communication.

Man is by nature gregarious. The desire to share thoughts, experiences, and emotions is more easily fulfilled through musical expressions than through any other medium (Neiding and Jennings 1967, p. 24).

Participating in the choir may provide a sense of belonging and being accepted by the group. Also the opportunity of contributing with time and effort toward common goals, sharing with others the thrill of producing a work of art, gives the students a positive response to their social needs.

Choral singing helps to develop habits and discipline of collective and social order. In this microcosmos, by accepting the group's decisions, respecting people's individuality, acknowledging minority groups, the student can learn social and democratic values.

Being part of the team neutralizes the "star complex", social and racial prejudice, vanity, and any personal feelings of

superiority. The singers are given the responsibility of working with the group for collective results, aware that any personal failure may jeopardize the group's efforts. Self-discipline is required, as it is necessary to concentrate all attention on the task.

Several studies have shown a positive correlation between participation in music and student leadership and acceptability (Hoffer 1964, p.17).

The teacher may potencialize the power of peer influence as a way to help in the development of positive attitudes towards music, the involvement in music, as well as in the establishing of what is "acceptable" or, better still, "aesthetically beautiful music".

Music and singing help to develop self-confidence and self-affirmation. Young people frequently have poor self-concept, and being actively involved in a group will improve his self esteem. Dobson calls this mechanism compensation.

It means the individual counterbalances his weaknesses by capitalizing on his strengths... Perhaps he can establish his niche in music - many children do (Dobson 1981, 87).

Brazilian composer and educator Villa Lobos used singing both to teach music and to promote values. Among the objectives of his system, called "Canto Orfeônico", he would emphasize discipline, citizenship, social graces and the arts (Arruda 1951, p. 187)

"Civics is one of the main objectives of Canto Orfeônico. Studying and performing folk and civic songs arouses patriotic feelings, love to nation and respect toward national artists and heroes." (Ibid. p. 188)

"Music and singing", according to W. Wilson, "make for better citizenship; they drive out envy and hate, they unify and inspire.

Music is the one common tie between races and nations" (Tufts 1965, p. 8). Louis Dierks comments how music helps to create a spirit of good will and fraternity:

To understand the music, the art of a people, is to understand their culture, and the problems and struggles which produced it. With understanding comes tolerance and appreciation, willingness to live, and to help live. Music is one means by which this unity of spirit and effort may be more readily instigated and cultivated than by any other implement (Neidig & Jennings p. 23).

#### 4.4 - Moral Values

Music cannot be considered morally neutral. In the battle between good and evil, music and singing are being used by both sides. Satan knows well how to use music to pull down moral standards, and we can see his aims being fulfilled in the majority of the popular music today.

Never in this present world will we know the full influence that the wrong kind of music has upon the church and society. The lessons in evil living that are taught through music are contributing to the alarming deterioration of American life (Hamel 1973, p. 19).

"Music can be a potent factor in the conditioning of anyone's emotions, and thereby in influencing behavior (Ibid. p 33)

On the other hand, singing "is one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth". (White 1947, p. 167) "With a song, Jesus in His earthly life met temptation." (Ibid. p. 165) Hopefully, there are still many songs left, that "uplift the thoughts to high and noble themes," (Ibid. p. 166) protecting the soul at the moment of temptation.

#### 4.5 - Spiritual Values

Music is an essentially Christian art, says Gaebelien (p. 70), with deeply spiritual significance, and singing may become a spiritual experience. Ellen White says that

Music was made to serve a holy purpose, to lift the thoughts to that which is pure, noble, and elevating, and to awaken in the soul devotion and gratitude to God (White 1930, 293). It is one of the most evvective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth (White 1947, p. 168).

The great hymns of the Christian tradition contain a whole repertoire of belief and experience shared by believers of different ages and cultures. Singing them can give students an insight into the historical meaning of our faith.

Every singer should be led to recognize his voice as a gift from God, and the responsibility of exercising stewardship in using their talent to the glory of God and benefit of mankind. Ellen White recommends:

In every school, instruction in singing is greatly needed... Students who have learned to sing sweet gospel songs with melody and distinctness, can do much good as singing evangelists. They will find many opportunities to use the talent that God has given them, carrying melody and sunshine into many lonely places darkened by sin and sorrow and affliction, singing to those who seldom have church privileges (White, RH Aug. 27, 1903).

#### 5.- The Elements of Integration

Integrating Christian values to a choral program depends on some key resources: teacher, student and repertoire. They are (the) essential elements of the process, as it would not occur without the dedicated support of the teacher or without the cooperation or the student.

### 5.1 - The teacher

The teacher is the first and most important part of the process. He should understand the power of music, being aware of objectives and consciously committed to his task. No integration of values will occur if the teacher is not able or willing to fulfil this task.

The Christian teacher is the interpreter, the meaning maker. If he has not consciously accepted that role, he may be functioning in the educational process, but certainly not in the process of Christian education. (George H. Akers, The Measure of a School. The Journal of Christian Education, Vol. 40, N<sup>o</sup> 2, Dec.77/Jan.78, p. 9, 43

He will be a model for his students: "It is important that the teacher be a living witness of his philosophy of life, because his attitudes will influence more than what he says" (Matias 1986, p. 19). "All that he desires his pupils to become, he will himself strive to be" (White 1947, 281).

Modelling is potentially the most powerful way to impart values. However the process is subtle, and teachers need to be aware of both the negative and positive effects of their model (SDA/SPA 1991, pg 8).

Analyzing the different methodologies for teaching values Holmes states:

Especially in performance areas and in the disciplined development of skills... the attitude of the teacher or student is the initial and perhaps the most salient point of contact with the Christian faith...My [the teacher's] Christianity would come through in my attitude and my intellectual integrity far more than in the actual content of the course (Holmes 1975, p. 47).

### 5.2 - The Student

The student is the subject of any choir program. If the choir

is an optional, non-academic activity, its membership should be open for students who fulfil three basic, equally important requirements:

- a) Willingness to participate and cooperate.
- b) Musicianship
- c) Voice quality.

### 5.3 - The repertoire

Choosing the suitable repertoire requires wisdom and sensitivity. Besides technical and musical considerations/implications, it should be analyzed from the "values" point of view. It should also reflect the healthy criteria, . . . ., for the teacher's attitude toward selection of music will always be a point of reference to the students)

There are dual responsibilities for the Christian music educator. As a Christian one is compelled to choose music which expresses high moral worth. As an educator one is obliged to increase the comprehension and enjoyment of more complex and meaningful music. As a Christian educator one begins where the student is and encourages growth. (Taylor 1991, p. 297)

Although it is not the purpose of this paper to present criteria for the selection of music, a few hints to help the teacher can be given. They are as follows:

a) Use a variety of styles to enrich the students experience. There is room for classical, popular, folk, sacred or secular songs. Being able to understand and appreciate different styles makes a person more

Each music organization should receive a balanced diet of the best music literature. In order to give the students the

finest cultural experiences in music, the teacher should not allow his choice of repertoire to become narrow. When a teacher selects only works of a certain type, his students are receiving an incomplete music education (Hoffer 1964, p. 399).

b) Strive for musical quality. Here is Hannum's advice:

"In our schools we should encourage the pursuit of excellence in music, as well as in other phases of education. We honor our Maker when we learn to compose, to perform, and to appreciate the finest and the best in music (Hannum 1969, p. 45).

c) Beware of the quality and meaning of the lyrics. What is the message of the words?

The Christian will not sing songs that are incompatible with the ideals of truth, honesty, and purity. He will avoid compositions containing trite phrasing, poor poetry, nonsense, sentimentality or frivolity, which lead away from the counsel and teachings found in the Scriptures and in the Spirit of Prophecy (SDA/GC ED 1975).

d) Consider the coherence between music and text.

The facts of the communication must not be distorted by the mode of communication...We must speak in a language understood by people, but we must also be faithful to the content of the message (Johansson p. 34, 35).

e) Understand the cultural background of the music (period, composer and traditions) as well as the cultural environment of the students.

f) Maintain the Equilibrium

The repertoire should "maintain a judicious balance of the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual elements." (SDA/GC 1975)

(It would be proper to) We would suggest that the central focus of the repertoire in any Christian (school) choir should be the person of Jesus, His love, and, following Ellen White's advice, especially the emotion-filled scenes of His last days.

For more complete study on choosing the repertoire see Taylor

(1991) and Hoffer (1964, p. 377-384)

## 6 - HOW TO TEACH VALUES IN THE CHOIR SITUATION

There are many different techniques and opportunities to teach values in choir activities. In fact, learning values is a continuous process of synthesis, which results in the incorporation of desired attributes.

There are many ways to learn values. One important way is by identification with others and imitation of their behaviours. When we think people are accomplished, successful, desirable etc we find ourselves identifying with them and copying what they do. We can also learn values by simply being exposed to certain experiences in life. Another way to learn is to act on the strength of what we see and think about. Yet another way is the gaining of reward or fulfilment. A further way to take on values is to accept the authority of the source of the value. If our models or other sources of values have sufficient authority we may simply place faith in them. (SDA/SPD 1991, p.3)

Every situation has its potential, and the teacher should be creative, looking for every chance and devising new procedures. These are a few significant suggestions applying to choral class which are found in the SPD document:

### a) Identification:

When learning a new song, it is not enough to learn the notes and the correct interpretation. Songs have meaning and convey values that should be clarified as the text, musical elements, drama, emotional content, historical background, etc. are analyzed (by the teacher).

As Phillip Phenix suggests in *Realms of Meaning*, all information has some human meaning behind it (and we would add the word *divine*), and it is the teacher's task to help the student discover that meaning. Call it the moral dimension.

This unique and distinctive function of a Christian teacher sets him or her apart from his or her secular counterpart in the profession. The Christian teacher is the interpreter, the meaning maker.

b) Making judgments: Teacher and students may comment and detect positive or negative values, establishing lasting criteria for music selection.

c) Imitation:

By observing their teacher, students will imitate. They will learn values such as organization, responsibility, confidence, punctuality, fair play, integrity and commitment to mastery and to the ministry of music.

d) Expressing:

Expressing thoughts/beliefs through words and/or songs reinforces their influence. The student should be encouraged to describe the emotions aroused by the music and his feelings about the subject/values it contains.

e) Experience:

Singing in the choir can open opportunities to participate actively in meaningful experiences of worship and witnessing.

Worship: Singing for church services gives the students a special opportunity to participate actively in the worship program expressing their personal feelings of gratitude and praise. (to God) The students should be explained the meaning of worship and its various parts, including the role of the choir, leading the congregation in adoration, not only through the anthem, but also in the congregational singing.

Witnessing: A good choir can have a number of opportunities to

get involved in missionary work, reaching places and people that would not be reached by any other means.

Visiting and singing in schools, nurseries, hospitals, nursing homes and prisons is always welcome, and even private residential complexes can be visited for special events such as Mother's Day, Easter or Christmas.

To make these visits effective, planning should take into consideration aspects such as the audience, physical setting, timing and repertoire. Great care should be taken to ensure the appropriate attitude of the students before, during, and after the program. Personal contact with the public should be encouraged, as sharing through personal interaction will benefit both singers and audience.

After the event is over, back at the choral room, students may share their experiences and pray for those they have visited, and occasionally send a follow-up card.

## 7. - Conclusions

All over the world SDA schools and colleges may have choirs and singing groups. They provide endless opportunities to help develop Christian values. Participating in these choirs provides life-lasting impressions to each singer. Let us take advantage of this, and fill his singer's hearts and minds with Christian values.

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