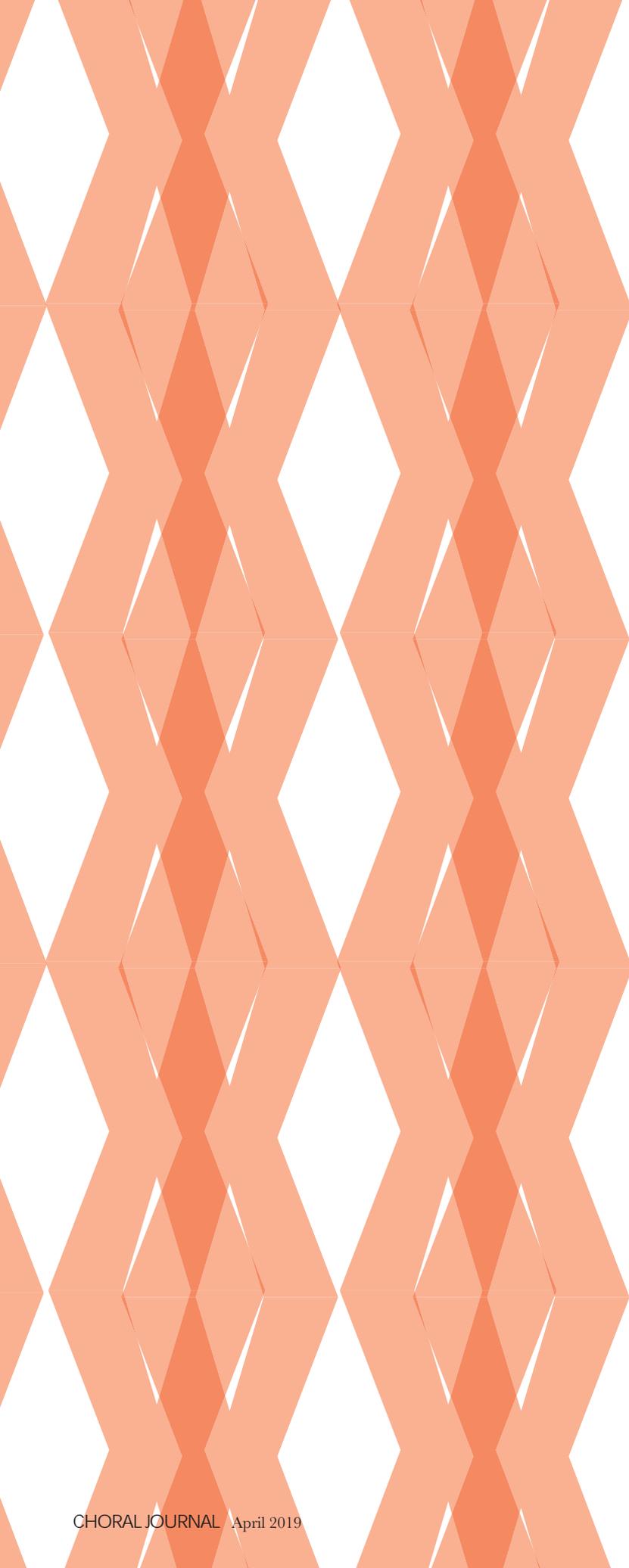




A Rubric for Choral Relevance

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Those of us gathered in Fargo for the North Dakota State University Symposium on Choral Relevance in October 2018 witnessed a tipping point. What had been a groundswell of concerted efforts to raise the bar for impactful and relevant work in the field of choral music gained the momentum needed to become a powerful movement of change. Honoring the spirit of lively discourse in the centuries-old symposia tradition, speakers shared powerful examples of new organizations, creative programming approaches, and performance events, and described how they advocate for social justice issues, engage with marginalized populations, and expand partnerships between music organizations and their communities. Some were examples of choruses with a mission entirely based on serving a specific population, and some were the result of special projects built into the concert seasons of more traditional groups. All were designed to connect with the specific needs, cares, and demographics in the communities that the choruses serve.

My own presentation, born of having planned many such projects myself, focused on the process of programming for social change and community impact beyond any specific repertoire. Could I describe a methodology of relevancy that could help shift the immense work of special projects into a lens that choruses with a more traditional model could build into the foundation of their operations? I wrote down the thought process that I've come to follow in my own work and crafted a rubric to describe it. It was galvanizing to look at that process in a broader sense, and I was curious to learn how it would pair with the presentations of my fellow symposia colleagues.

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As I sat in the NDSU recital hall, it became clear that we were all thinking along the same lines—all reaching for relationships with our communities and responding to the needs that we saw. And it did seem that most of us with established choruses were doing this work on a project-by-project basis. Amazing work with compelling impact. How could it be easier, more central? How could our organizations be flexible enough to keep up with the pace of change that relevancy requires and still stable enough to plan ahead, acquire funding, and acknowledge the limitations of staffing, volunteers, and nonprofit budgets and workloads?

I offer this rubric as a guide of sorts for creating relevancy with every action of our organizations. It is not intended to be a form of assessment but rather a starting place for inspiration, as I was further inspired and informed by the work of my colleagues.

Grappling with History and Philosophy

Before diving in, there are two essential points of context on which a movement toward relevancy depends. One requires us to candidly face our history and one our philosophy.

Historically, choral music has not had to work hard for relevancy, at least on a general level. We have been able to rely, despite constant battles for funding and support, on the inherent relevancy of music and particularly, of singing. We sing and have music in our lives in some form from birth, and our music departments, performing organizations, and musical traditions have been around for a long time. However, being inherently relevant is no longer enough for choral music because of a gradual but critical shift in Western society: the nature of gathering.

In the boom of American choral music through the twentieth century, and earlier in other Western cultures, our gathering places were many and regular. Church services brought us together weekly; civic and fraternal organizations like Rotary Clubs were pillars of our social fabric and frequent funders of the arts; and most art happened in the concert hall, theater, and town square. These gathering places provided our audiences, our venues, our patrons, and often, our singers. Our trans-

actions—consisting of our music and the public's patronage—were the very nature of our relationship and a way to know what people cared about through their attendance and donations.

Now, our churches are smaller and more dispersed, and our civic organizations and movements are online more than on the ground. Arguably, other art forms have had a more natural ability to respond quickly to this change. Dancers, writers, and visual artists create their material in the present and by doing so, communicate their messages directly. These artists and more—actors, poets, solo and small ensemble acts (particularly contemporary ones)—nimble incorporate the cultural trends and fusions around them and can change venues and performance environments with agility.

In choral music, we have contemporary composers working as fast and as brilliantly as they can to add new works and new musical languages that speak to our modern culture, but we as conductors are also the caretakers of an immense historical canon that we are compelled to uphold and celebrate. In addition, respectfully representing the music of multiple cultures is a challenge in our field. Though we are steadily gaining access to music from native composers all over the world, that has not always been the case, and we have to take great care to program and perform music authentically. Finally, it is an immense challenge for choral organizations to break the bounds of the concert hall. Though we are millions strong, we must find new ways to make our art form—which is centered on the act of gathering to sing together—continually relevant in an increasingly post-gathering society.

As we are grappling with this significant societal change, we also need to take on a change in our core philosophy that distinguishes between relevancy and impact, actually reversing which of those is the driving force for our organizations. One could say our traditional choral model has been impact-driven in both altruistic and practical ways. We hope and plan for our music and programming to be impactful on our audiences, and we also count on those performances to impact our reputation and the growth of our audience, singer, and supporter bases. Impact is not possible, however, without relevancy, and relevancy is entirely about relationship: the specific connection that people have to an issue, an

organization, and each other. Put simply, humans can rarely be impacted by something they have no connection with.

As demonstrated so powerfully by my symposia colleagues and by so many other choral professionals in the field today, allowing relevancy to be our primary driver leads to impact. Not only in the ways we have sought in the past, but in dynamic, multi-faceted relationships that amplify that impact—inspiring our audiences and, more, offering us the very resources and ideas that we need to lead and sustain our organizations.

The rise of a new model of choral ensemble—serving populations of people with dementia and disability, providing safe space for singers who are LGBTQIA, homeless, or in prison, and gathering specifically to give voice to social justice issues—is a welcome and vital expansion of our field. Our established, traditional choruses are also expanding in vital ways as we pursue relevancy. Now we have the momentum to go even further. More

than relevancy-seeking, we can become relevancy-driven organizations without changing our current missions, budgets, or constituencies. We can be a visible voice of change in our communities because we have the pulse of our communities.

Specific Who-Based Relevancy

Being truly relevant means being truly in relationship. We may feel strongly about an issue and have wonderful messages about that issue in our music, but we cannot form relationships with issues, only with people. And, no matter how national or global an issue or how broadly we would like our message to be heard, the people who are in front of our choirs are the only ones that we will form a relationship with. This is true whether we are considering a concert on world peace, a Haydn mass, or a gala of Broadway show tunes.

My rubric starts with a battery of who-based ques-

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tions that get very specific about the people involved with your choir and chosen material. Looking first at your community and potential audiences, ask yourself, “Who do we want to relate to? Who do we want to care? How can we get them in the room?” For those outside of your regular audience, this is dependent on how they are connected to what you are singing about. How do they know that you understand their connection and will have something to offer them? Once you have them in the room, what about your program will really speak to their understanding and connect with empathy and compassion?

Consider what various perspectives exist in your community. This is important not only for more polarizing topics, but also for concerts that celebrate a religious holiday (or any holiday, for that matter) or are targeted in any way. Is your family concert an event that celebrates and invites different family makeups? How can people in your community who have never had the privilege to hear a large work in a foreign language have a connection to it? Do they have the means to even be in the room to experience it?

If we define relevancy as relationship, as I am suggesting, we can all come up with many examples of concerts that have tried to address different perspectives without truly and specifically building that foundation. To offer a couple of controversial examples: does putting a Hanukkah piece on a December concert or including an energized Spiritual as a big concert moment extend the inclusive hand that you intend? Would it be more meaningful to the Jewish community to pair music with a more major observance like Rosh Hashanah and be mindful of performing on a day other than Shabbat? Jewish audience members have approached me to express their appreciation for the gesture of a Hanukkah song, but others have bravely challenged me on that. And as a white woman I have struggled, as I know many have, to discern how to both respect and celebrate the music born of the African American experience.

We make these efforts toward balanced, inclusive programming to be in right and good relationship, and the last thing that we intend is to offer a form of tokenism. But what if our choices really are tokenism, no matter how meaningfully or beautifully presented? The only real way to know is to seek out the kind of relationships

where you can be in dialogue with the actual people in your community and, you hope, in your audience. Ask questions, check assumptions and biases, and learn what would truly extend the hand of inclusion.

Returning to the rubric, consider the who of your material: whose story are you telling and who are you to tell it? Sometimes you can include the authors/owners of the story, whether they are represented in your choir

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or brought in through partnerships. When that is not possible, how can the authors of the story help you tell it? This could mean developing a dialogue with the people in your community who are of a particular culture. It could mean allowing those who work directly with and for a need in the community (e.g., homelessness or hunger) to tell you what message or support they need. It could even mean being in right relationship with authentic performance practice, taking time to do due diligence and ensuring that your arrangements and editions are historically informed.

This kind of commitment to authenticity and relationship means, above all, not making assumptions. It's an easy and well-intentioned mistake: assuming that homeless shelters need blankets when they really need socks; assuming that a community of a different culture or color will appreciate your show of solidarity though you unknowingly misinterpret or misappropriate a deeply meaningful song; assuming that people in hospice or with cancer want to be soothed. These considerations force us to recognize who we are and who we are not and to really own our various biases, privileges, and mo-

tivations. What we learn from the relationships and dialogues we seek should drive our decisions about what to say and how to say it. It is possible for choruses of one homogenous culture to sing music from a host of other cultures and traditions and give voice to a host of needs and communities, but it is effective and lasting only by being born from true relationship.

Dynamic Relevancy

Being specifically relevant is by definition the opposite of one-size-fits-all, and that means that relevancy must be completely dynamic. We have to keep updating our relationships for them to remain vital. Demographics may change relatively slowly, but what people need, what they care about, and how they are impacted by shifting times can change quickly and have ripple effects throughout the community. If we stop asking questions and reaching out, even with issues and organizations we have engaged with before, we fall into making assumptions and out of being in true relationship.

We could feel overwhelmed by the perceived pressure to offer concert themes and material that try to broaden indefinitely, embracing every perspective and circumstance all at once. Being specifically and dynamically in relationship allows us to avoid broad sweeps that don't speak personally. Rather, we can have more confidence that we are in meaningful dialogue regardless of how broad or targeted the topic.

Our audiences are a body of specific people sitting right in front of us multiple times each season, each a research sample waiting to be mined. And no-fourth-wall performing art that invites the audience to directly engage is an ever-strengthening trend. Social media, PollEverywhere, artist talk-backs, intermission questionnaires, and online surveys are but a few of the ways we can discover the demographics, passions, and concerns of the people in front of us. Staying dynamic may seem like a lot of extra work. But what if that work was not extra? What if it actually becomes the generator of our programming and success? Relationships, connections, and dialogue quickly lead to inspiration and resources for relevant choral programming on multiple levels: organizational, season, interseason, and within single events.

Relevant Concerts

The repertoire of your program is critical, but what if it were not regarded as foundational? With relevancy as the starting place, what you want to say is not confined to what you sing, but how you guide your audience through the story you have to tell. Put in the right context, Britten can be as accessible as Rutter, Bach and Bacharach can elicit the same depth of emotional response, and a quiet chant can shout as loudly as a grand alleluia. A common way to conceptualize a concert is through storytelling, and every good story has an arc. Instead of simply a beginning, middle, and end, consider the following arc for an issue-driven concert:

- Open ears and mind and develop trust. What musical soundscape and emotional tone do you want your audience to acclimate to?
- Capture attention and curiosity. What is important? Consider answering the “so what?” question up front rather than as a big conclusion.
- Connect to common experiences. Generate empathy with your audience and between them and your subject.
- Give listeners something to hold on to: lasting impressions or information that will generate discussion; a new perspective or example to struggle with; actions that are critically needed and easily accessible.
- Empower and inspire the audience as you reach the end of your concert. Beyond the “so what?” is the much more compelling “what can I do?” What do you hope they will do upon walking out of your concert? Remember that any issue, no matter how broad or pressing, can only be addressed by specific actions of individual people. How can your audience members leave with an accessible way to be specifically impactful?

Any given concert's contextual elements are exciting to play with and the options for presenting them are truly endless. You'll find a list of examples on the Rubric for Relevance on page 29, but in general, consider

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all the senses and each one of the who/what/where/when/how questions. Think about what could be spoken or shown in addition to (or in place of) what is sung. How can the audience participate in more ways than listening? How can other art forms add to your musical presentation? Inviting other artists, be they musical or other performing/visual art partners, builds all of our audiences and expands the vital presence of art in our community.

Finally, a word about effective community partnerships for single concert events. Consider both what is needed and what is possible for you to effectively offer. Many of our choruses are smaller nonprofit organizations that are struggling with the bottom line. We need to keep the proceeds from our ticket sales, and raising additional funds is a hard sell, for both audience members' pocket books and their sensibilities. If you are able to raise money effectively, can it be targeted in a way that feels actionable and visible for your audiences and for you? If you can't, you can raise advocacy, making sure that the message you promote is the message that is needed. You can be a conduit for information, education, and support, raising supplies, volunteers, and in-kind donations. All of these, when done through actual relationships with the people in need or the organizations on the ground, will generate connections and benefits that are reciprocal and will lay the foundation for future partnerships.

Relevant Seasons Turn Us into Relevant Organizations

For many traditional choruses, programming that engages the community as more than audience is planned on a project-by-project basis. Having an annual "Concert for a Cause" or similar issue-driven program is a good model, but causes are not the only source of connection. We can still have varied seasons in theme and repertoire, but if we are truly interwoven with our communities, we will never think of concerts as stand-alone events. Relevancy should change the lens that we use to see how any one program fits within the different populations and goings-on of our area. You start to notice who is not coming or not able to come to a concert, even if they are the audience that you'd love to sing for. You

notice how a concert that you thought was universally accessible actually presents a struggle or barrier for a population that you weren't familiar with until you sought them out.

Once you adopt a lens of relevancy, you are no longer an organization that pops into the community three or four times a year with different concerts, but a continual presence, more like a community service organization. Your season may be designed to make the rounds of possible audiences rather than relying on one regular following. Your community and promotional outreach expands from singing at local sporting and holiday events to showing up at an advocacy event or vigil, or helping to launch a new literacy program. You may have as many engagements outside the concert hall as in, and they all could utilize the material that you are spending hours rehearsing.

The time of trusting the inherent relevancy of choral music is past. The concerts that we used to give in reliable gathering places are now only relevant to smaller portions of our communities that no longer regularly gather. With that loss of security also comes tremendous opportunity to find new gathering places and put music back into the central connective and communal role that it has always held in cultures all over the world. To do this, we have to recognize that anywhere we live and work is now at the intersections of culture, because culture is no longer defined solely by nationality, race, or tradition but also by political/social affiliation, generation, economic status, and more. Next, we have to acknowledge that we have been accustomed to making assumptions within our previously more homogenous cultures. We have acted, spoken, and sung on behalf of others, believing that our circumstances, opinions, and needs were in common or that our good intentions were enough to bridge our differences.

In current times, we as choral directors would be wise to seek a more active relevancy based on dynamic, specific relationships with the actual people in our communities. Further, these relationships need not only be reserved for special projects and partnerships; they need to become the foundation of our organizations. When that happens, they will change us for the better and we, in turn, will be able to have the impact that we seek. ■

A RUBRIC FOR RELEVANCE

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SPECIFIC WHO

Who do you want to connect with? To care?

- How are they related to what you are saying?
- How can you get them in the room? What does your message have to offer them?

Whose story are you telling?

- What is your relationship? Is it direct? Can it be?
- Can the storytellers be “in the room” in any way?

Who are you to tell it?

- Where does your understanding come from?
- Is it represented in your organization?
- What assumptions might you be making?

Who could be affected/disaffected by your performance?

- Who in your community? Your audience?
- Are you speaking to all or to some?

WHERE AND WHEN

- Can you perform in a place and/or at a time that connects to the story you are telling?
- Can you use a musical voice in a non-musical setting? Get beyond the concert hall.
- Can you bring music to the aid of another storyteller/advocate/organization?
- Can you get your music, message, and support to people who cannot get to you?

WHAT IS SPECIFICALLY NEEDED?

SAMPLE CONCERT ARC FOR DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIP AND IMPACT

- Open ears and mind and develop trust. What musical soundscape and emotional tone do you want your audience to acclimate to?
- Capture attention and curiosity. Answer the “so what?” question up front.
- Connect to experience. Generate empathy with your audience and between them and your subject by connecting to likely shared experiences and points of access.
- Focus on your desired outcomes – action, lasting impression, discomfort, solidarity.
- Empower and inspire – what do you want them to do after leaving your program?

SAME MUSIC – DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

- Use the physical space, change the atmosphere.
- Pair with other senses – visual, mixed aural, tactile.
- Remove all/some of the words – set the atmosphere by singing the emotions.
- Vary the musical forces – within and outside the choir.
- Vary the artistic forces – create a backdrop for visual art, movement, or theater.
- Use theatrical/storytelling devices – repeating passages, musical bookends, sequenced transitions, monologue/dialogue rather than commentary.
- Give multiple angles for the text – musical, spoken word, physical interpretation.
- Break the fourth wall; invite the audience to participate.
 - Voiced participation – singing, spoken, silence, other sounds.
 - Physical moments of impact – stand, kneel, circle, walk, wander.
 - Written participation – on paper, by text, PollEverywhere.

Support

- Supplies – what specifically?
- Services – which specifically?
- Personnel/Volunteers
- Money

Advocacy

- Promotion
- Voices of change
- Amplification/distribution of information

What is possible and appropriate for you to give?

Which needs pair with your strengths, budget, capacity, and mission?