

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS



# CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CHORAL MUSIC EDUCATION

What Teachers Can Learn From Nine Students'  
Experiences in Three Choirs

Julia T. Shaw

ROUTLEDGE  
Focus



# Culturally Responsive Choral Music Education

*Culturally Responsive Choral Music Education* visits the classrooms of three ethnically diverse choral teacher-conductors to highlight specific examples of ways that *culturally responsive teaching* (CRT) can enrich choral music education.

Principles of CRT are illustrated in contrasting demographic contexts: a choir serving a sizeable immigrant Hispanic population, a choir with an African American classroom majority, and a choir comprised of students who identify with eighteen distinct ethnicities. Additionally, portraits of nine ethnically diverse students illuminate how CRT shaped their experiences as members of these choral ensembles. Practical recommendations are offered for developing a culturally responsive classroom environment.

**Julia T. Shaw** is Associate Professor of Music at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Her research interests include music teacher education, culturally diverse learners, urban education, and sociocultural issues in music education.

Volume editors: **Vicki R. Lind**, University of Arkansas, and **Constance L. McKoy**, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.



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What Teachers Can Learn From Nine Students' Experiences in Three Choirs

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**For Reid Michael and Mary Claire, who are among my  
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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
1 Introduction: Premises of Culturally Responsive Teaching	1
2 Culturally Responsive Teaching in the West Side Choir	22
3 Culturally Responsive Teaching in the North Side Choir	43
4 Culturally Responsive Teaching in the South Side Choir	63
5 Lessons Learned From Students' Experiences Across the Three Choirs	85
6 Recommendations and Future Possibilities	100
<i>Appendix</i>	122
<i>Index</i>	124



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# 1 Introduction

## Premises of Culturally Responsive Teaching

“I don’t want to sing like a White<sup>1</sup> girl.” This comment, made by a student during the first rehearsal of the newly established choir at Garfield Elementary,<sup>2</sup> took me by surprise. As a teacher who identified as a middle-class Caucasian, I was the only “White girl” in the classroom. Located in Chicago, the school served a student body that was 99.8% African American, with 88% of its students qualifying for free or reduced lunch (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). This school contrasted markedly with another in which I’d taught just months before in a suburb of Indianapolis, which had served an overwhelmingly White, middle-class student population.

Starting a new choir had generated excitement at Garfield, and the students were eager to begin singing together. All of the singers identified as African American, reflecting the school’s demographic population. I began with a series of vocal warm-ups emphasizing the *bel canto* tradition of singing that had been emphasized throughout my education as a teacher. After addressing elements of Western classical vocal technique such as posture and breathing, I invited students to sing a five-note descending scale beginning from C5 on an [u] vowel. Because I then considered such exercises to be “routine,” I was caught off guard when the singers laughed and appeared uncomfortable. The comment, “I don’t want to sing like a White girl,” came from Dameon, a seventh-grade African American boy. Unsure of how to respond in that moment, I continued with rehearsal. The students were willing to try everything I suggested, but weren’t as engaged as I’d hoped and didn’t appear to be enjoying the experience.

When I returned for rehearsal the next week, Dameon popped his head into the classroom just long enough to exclaim, “[Expletive!] I ain’t gonna sing in no [expletive] choir,” before running off down the hallway. I ran after him, frantically calling, “Wait! Can we talk? Tell me what would make choir better!” Halfway down the hall, he paused to explain that the repertoire I’d chosen wasn’t the kind he was interested in singing. He observed, “You wouldn’t know any singers I like. They didn’t learn to sing in choir.” The director of another afterschool program, having overheard, offered the names of several African American R&B and rap artists whose experiences had included singing in choir. As Dameon had correctly perceived, I was

## 2 Introduction

unacquainted with these artists, having not encountered them in my teacher education program or through personal experience. When our conversation concluded, Dameon was willing to return to rehearsal on the condition that I would learn more about the music he valued.

These early conversations with Dameon raised questions for me, some of which upended my own assumptions about “the right way to teach choir.” What did it mean to “sound like a White girl?” How did the warm-up that prompted that comment reflect that sound? What, more specifically, did Dameon find objectionable about the way we’d sung that exercise? Who were the musical role models to whom students looked for inspiration? What kinds of music did my students consider to be relevant to their backgrounds, identities, or life experiences? What kinds of learning experiences would result in effective, meaningful, and engaging instruction for them?

All I had learned about choral pedagogy was gleaned in university environments where my experiences focused primarily on the Western classical tradition of choral singing, a tradition I continue to value and teach. During my early teaching career, the way I had initially learned to teach choir appeared on the surface to be compatible with the needs of my learners, the majority of whom were White, middle class, and residing in suburban communities. Yet comfortable and familiar ways of teaching seemed not to serve my students in Chicago, who were predominantly pupils of color, equally well. That is not to say that pupils of color, in general, wouldn’t identify with the Western classical tradition or desire to learn it, but that my specific singers at that time considered different musical styles and genres to be more relevant to their experiences. To meaningfully engage Dameon and the many other wonderful students I taught in demographically contrasting communities across the city, it was apparent that changes to my practice were warranted. While I didn’t yet know the educational term for what I hoped to learn, my interest in culturally responsive teaching had been piqued.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is a pedagogical approach that uses “the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106).<sup>3</sup> It is an asset-based pedagogy that builds upon students’ knowledge and strengths while also broadening their intellectual, cultural, and musical horizons. While the central premises of CRT developed as one outgrowth of the multicultural education movement in general education, recent years have seen growing interest in how music education can be enriched through CRT. Considering the prominent role of singing in many of the world’s cultures, as well as music’s potential to serve as a powerful cultural referent, choral music educators are well positioned to create enriching learning experiences through CRT.

The term *responsive* emphasizes that CRT evolves in response to particular learners, implying a student-centered approach. CRT must therefore be understood in relation to the specific individuals for whom it is designed,

and instruction that one student considers responsive to their cultural identity may not result in CRT for another. To attempt to offer a definitive “how-to” guide assumed to serve all students in all situations would therefore be misguided. However, stories of teachers and students engaged together in CRT can reveal guiding principles that can support teachers’ efforts to design culturally responsive instruction for their own particular learners.

This book invites readers inside the classrooms of teacher-conductors whose work provides concrete examples of how CRT’s tenets apply to choral music education. I present examples of culturally responsive practice from three teachers of differing ethnicities with whom I conducted research over a period of three years. Ensembles under the leadership of these educators offer a view of how culturally responsive choral music education unfolded in contrasting demographic contexts: a choir serving a sizeable migrant and immigrant Hispanic<sup>4</sup> population, a choir with an African American classroom majority, and a choir comprising students who identified with 18 distinct ethnicities.

Because of the student-centered premises of CRT, the voices of nine student members of these ensembles are foregrounded in order to elucidate how their teachers’ efforts to practice CRT shaped their experiences of choral music education. The students offer a range of cultural perspectives, identifying as African American, Guatemalan, Honduran, Korean American, and Puerto Rican, as well as biracial and multiethnic.<sup>5</sup> In addition to illustrating the potential for CRT to engage and empower, teachers’ and students’ portraits illuminate challenges associated with implementing CRT and suggest possibilities for addressing them. This chapter introduces central premises of CRT, drawing upon the work of leading theorists in general education. These concepts are then further illustrated in descriptions of real-life choral classrooms that follow in subsequent chapters.

## **The “Cultural Fabric” of Choral Music Education**

My student Dameon’s perceptions of his experiences in choir can be interpreted as a response to the “profound and inescapable cultural fabric of the schooling process in America” (Boykin, 1994, p. 244). This “fabric” consists of beliefs, formats, perspectives, behavioral standards, and ways of constructing knowledge that are so deeply engrained in the structure and process of education as to be taken for granted as “normal” or “correct.” While appearing on the surface to be neutral, this fabric has historically privileged White, middle-class students’ orientations toward education, conferring distinct advantages upon these students as they progress through school. Conversely, the norms, values, practices, and codes of behavior legitimized by educational institutions are often incongruous with the prior knowledge and experiences of students of color and those of low socioeconomic status, dynamics which perpetuate social stratification (Apple, 1979; Bernstein, 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010).

Choral music education in North America has traditionally been based upon Eurocentric frameworks, which have privileged the Western classical canon and its associated ideologies. Pedagogical and assessment practices based on these frameworks may present cultural incongruities to students whose musical knowledge and experiences are not centered in the Western classical tradition (Bradley, 2006; Carlow, 2004, 2006; Joyce, 2003; Kelly-McHale, 2011, 2013; Rohan, 2011). Further, a hierarchical orientation toward music that positions Western European ways of knowing about and participating in music as the “gold standard” of musicianship can be disengaging and disempowering to students from nondominant communities whose ways of knowing about and participating in music may not be valued, respected, or even acknowledged in schools.

Carlow’s (2004, 2006) research exploring ELL (English language learner) students’ experiences in a U.S. high school choral program illuminated threads in the cultural fabric of secondary choral music education that may be incongruous with students’ experiences with singing. She coined the term “discourse norms” to refer to guiding principles and curricular traits that characterize the culture of a music classroom, including organizational structures, rehearsal techniques, and performance practices that are so commonplace as to be taken for granted as “normal.” Examples of discourse norms prevalent in the institution of choral music education follow:

- Repertoire drawn nearly exclusively from the Western classical canon
- An emphasis on fluency with musical notation and deemphasis on aural learning
- Value for a specific Western European style of singing and vocal timbre and an emphasis on *bel canto* vocal technique
- Pedagogical frameworks with historical roots in Europe (e.g., an emphasis on Kodály, Orff, and Dalcroze approaches)
- A classroom culture that emphasizes individual accomplishment rather than collective effort (e.g., competition for solos, chair placements, roles in musical productions, etc.)
- Hierarchical organizational structures in which singers gain entry into progressively more selective ensembles through auditions
- Large performing ensembles as the preferred format for secondary school music programs

For music teachers interested in practicing CRT, a useful first step is to develop conscious awareness of discourse norms emphasized in our classrooms and then to recognize that these are not “neutral” but in fact reflect a particular cultural perspective that may or may not align with students’ orientations toward music education.

Joyce’s (2003) research illuminated “terms of engagement,” which communicate to singers the ways they are invited (or not invited) to participate in singing practice (p. 1). She asserted that the terms of engagement

traditionally emphasized in North American singing practice, privilege “Whiteness,” which symbolically refers not exclusively to race but to an interlocking system of hierarchies and power relations involving class, gender, age, and so forth. According to Joyce (2003), “learning the ‘White’ way to sing” (p. 103) emphasizes the Western classical canon of repertoire, Western European vocal timbre, notational fluency, and individual rather than communal achievement. She cautioned that a nearly exclusive emphasis on these terms of engagement can alienate some people from the belief that they can sing altogether.

This discussion does not imply that there is anything inherently “wrong” with the Western classical tradition of singing. It is also not intended to suggest that Western classical music or associated pedagogical frameworks cannot be relevant to students from nondominant communities. It is a hierarchical orientation positioning any music as the most legitimate to study and perform, and an inequitable distribution of power that upholds some types of music and musicians as supposedly more valuable, that is problematic when the aim of music education is to provide equitable opportunities for *all* children to have enriching experiences with music.

What happens when the discourse norms and terms of engagement emphasized in educational institutions are misaligned with ways in which students engage with music? Teachers may inappropriately characterize learners as being uninterested in music or as presenting classroom management “problems” (Fitzpatrick-Harnish, 2015; Gurgel, 2016). These dynamics may also influence students’ perceptions of themselves as singers or musicians, leading them to prematurely conclude that they lack musical ability or potential. Schools’ devaluation of students’ ways of being musical, whether tacit or explicit, may ultimately lead to singers’ decisions to discontinue their involvement in choral music entirely (Joyce, 2003; Lamont & Maton, 2010).

The concepts of “discourse norms” and “terms of engagement” invite an interpretation of Dameon’s reactions to his choral experiences not as “misbehavior” or “lack of interest” but rather as a logical and warranted response to an educational institution structured in a way that failed to honor or respond to the ways in which he was a musician. Drawing upon Giroux (1983), Chou and Tozer (2008) explained:

The notion of resistance points to the need to understand more thoroughly the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint (Giroux, 1983, p. 106). Stated differently, when people (including students) see their identities and experiences devalued by those in authority over them, they resist that authority. It seems clear that some teachers—and schools as organizations—are more adept than others at helping students learn mastery of new cultural codes without demeaning the cultural capital students bring to the school.

(p. 11)