

VOCAL: PROGRAMMING REPERTOIRE FOR THE STUDENTS

By Sean Rodriguez

Last school year was my fifth at Legacy HS in San Antonio, which is reported to be 90% economically disadvantaged and 95% Hispanic. Choral music as a fine arts credit is a recent addition at this school. Our choir is less than a decade old, and as much as I focused in my first years on calls to excellence within the program, we weren't reaching our full potential. To better connect with the students and our community, I shifted from programming works I wanted to perform to programming *for the students*. What follows describes how that shift has helped our choir grow.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

San Antonio's missions are part of the city's rich cultural heritage. While they aren't in our district boundaries, many of our students have their quinceañera, prom, and senior pictures taken on the grounds of these beautiful spaces. Given the community's deep connection to these historic missions, we presented an annual holiday concert, in collaboration with the second high school in our district, at the gorgeous Mission Concepción on the south side of San Antonio. Through this concert, we promoted a food drive to benefit the parish's food pantry. This was a great step in reaching out to a local church and building connections to the neighborhood community who may not have experienced high school choral music like this before. After the concert, several community members expressed their appreciation and admiration of the quality of the concert. We wouldn't have had this experience had we not left our campus and ventured into the community.

CULTURAL APPRECIATION

For this concert, I programmed *Los Peces en el Rio*, a traditional villancico with roots in the Mexican/Hispanic Catholic community. If you've tried to program Spanish-language music before, you may have found it challenging to obtain arrangements that

don't compromise the linguistic integrity of the song. After a deep dive on YouTube, I found an arranger based in Colombia named Gabriel Andres Rodriguez Zuluaga. He had created a beautiful arrangement of this song for his choir. After reaching out, he graciously offered the piece to me for the students to perform at Mission Concepción—a stylistically appropriate arrangement performed in a beautiful space just as the arranger had intended. It was a huge hit with the kids and well received by parents and members of the church. Through this concert I learned that some students had been a part of the Spanish choir at this church with their families. What a way to connect with their culture!

HONORING OUR TRADITION

Lastly, I stopped trying to program *those pieces*—the ones performed by programs with no fewer than 200 students, two full-time directors, private voice teachers, and students who can easily attend rehearsals outside the school day. While I teach highly capable students who are continuing to grow, we would not have experienced success with those pieces, especially as the students are just learning about choral music in general. I had to program pieces that would *resonate with them*. For now, that might mean an Eric Whitacre composition is off the table and that Spirituals, as much as I love them, might not be the best repertoire to reach my students. I have realized that creating the tradition of excellence within my program will look different than someone else's. More importantly, I've realized that's okay.

As you begin selecting your pieces for this UIL season, ask yourself whether you are programming for yourself or your students. We can all recall that formidable musical experience that shaped us into the musicians we are today and sparked our love for choral music. Are we trying to program the music that can do the same for our students and their longevity as choral musicians, or are we trying to program for ourselves? I challenge you to program for your students and see what happens as you prepare for this UIL assessment season.



Performing at Mission Concepción



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