

TEACHING TIPS

from Alfred's Expert Authors & Editors



LEDGER LINES



Musings of Master Music Teacher, Richard Wesp

We recently had the opportunity to interview Richard Wesp, an extremely popular choral director who spent 57 years teaching in the Forest Hills School District in Cincinnati, Ohio. Mr. Wesp is a recipient of both the Ohio MEA Distinguished Service Award and the CCM Distinguished Alumni Award. Having taught well over 10,000 students in his career before retiring in June 2011, he has had many opportunities to share his passion for music education with students, student teachers, and now, with other educators.

What is the value of music and arts education in the schools today and has it changed since you started in the classroom?

In the current trend of budget cutting, the arts remain an integral part of any complete education. Years ago, it may have just been a general feeling regarding how important the arts are, but now we have a large body of research that shows exactly how arts education positively impacts other subject areas.

What steps did you take to build a successful choral program?

Selecting quality repertoire is the most important part of teaching choral music. You have to take the time to find material that will work with each new group, year after year. What is the potential of each group (and student), and how will your choice of repertoire lift them to the next level? In general, students can master anything the teacher can master, so don't be afraid to push and dream some. If I had paid attention to all those who said "high school students can't sing that piece," neither the students nor I would have grown nearly as much. Even if something never makes it to a 'performance-ready' level, just rehearsing a piece can be valuable and enlightening.

As a director, do you have any favorite styles of choral music?

I always felt I should work to expose my choirs to many different styles. And I've found that my favorite music has almost always been the music I was teaching at any given time. It's always fun to see how students' opinions change during the rehearsal process, eventually falling in love with music that they may not have liked when sight-reading it at the first rehearsal.

I also feel that it is important to pay attention to the lyrics in your repertoire. How many times will your students hear those words during the rehearsal process? Is it a message worth repeating?

Do you have any advice for those currently working to lift up students through music?

You must be passionate about your work. Your enthusiasm for sharing good choral music must be contagious, as must your own desire to never stop learning. Even now that I'm retired from the classroom, I still want to attend workshops and conferences to find new repertoire and learn new rehearsal techniques for my church choir. I've shared this formula with many student teachers: master teaching skills + passion = success.

Have your former students shared any insight on how the study of music impacted them?

At my retirement celebration, hundreds of former students wrote notes to me, sharing with me that they were listening to what I was saying, whether it was about the music itself or life in general. Many shared that the lessons learned in the classroom became much more meaningful after they had graduated. One former choral student that went on to work with Procter & Gamble told me that he was successful in his career because he learned a strong definition of excellence while singing in choir. Notes from students included: "Years later, I still remember that when you stop being better, you stop being good" and "I never told you while I was in school, but thirty years later, you should know that singing in the choir was the highlight of my day."

Perhaps this note from well-known performer Vicki Lewis sums it up:

"The safe and nurturing environment you created made it possible to shine, to feel special, to be seen and heard. You generously gave the highest compliment you can pay an artist—rapt attention. It was with such kindness and grace and patience—so much patience—that you guided us, that you allowed us to follow muses . . . I thank you from the bottom of my heart."