

Ball State's Choral Union is open to all students without audition. We rehearse once weekly – Monday evenings – preparing two public performances each semester. The ensemble fills a curricular need for some students; however, many participate from outside the School of Music. Although it currently does not, the ensemble *should* reflect the diversity of the university since we represent a public face of Ball State on occasion. Students may repeat the course indefinitely since the course material – the repertoire – changes each semester. Most students who enroll for fall semester repeat in the spring so I am proposing a two phases, corresponding to fall and spring semesters.

I have been working with Charles Payne to find ways to specifically extend an invitation to international students and students of minority populations. Should these efforts be successful, my proposed modifications to the course seek to make the ensemble accessible to all students in terms of music literacy. In my brief (2 semesters) experience with the Choral Union, the students roughly correspond to the following categories:

1. underclassmen music majors whose primary instrument is not voice. These students typically read music quite well, but have little or no vocal training. They would prefer to participate in an instrumental ensemble rather than Choral Union, but they did not pass their instrumental audition.
2. undergraduate and graduate non-majors who have had previous positive choral experience. These students probably read music to some extent and have vocal experience, but not solo training. They choose to enroll in the ensemble for fun.
3. undergraduate voice majors who auditioned for an upper-level choral ensemble but were not selected because of poor music literacy. These students probably have solo vocal training and strong voices. They would prefer not to be in the Choral Union.
4. undergraduate non-majors who enrolled in the ensemble out of curiosity, but have little musical background. Some of these students have never performed in public in any capacity!

The inherent challenge of the ensemble is to keep the advanced students engaged in the rehearsal process, while preparing the inexperienced and reluctant students for a performance that is satisfying to all.

The specific challenge I seek to address regarding the inclusion of African-American students is one of music literacy. In the African-American tradition, music is often transmitted orally rather than from a score. In an interesting twist of demographics, virtually all of my students, though mostly “white”, have been influenced by the success of Blues-based music – virtually all “pop” or “rock-and-roll” – and have been raised and educated in the African-American musical tradition.

The institutional assumption remains one of literacy on the part of students and increased literacy is one of the curricular goals of the Choral Union. I propose the following pedagogical innovations/experiments to make the ensemble a safe place for students of varying backgrounds to fully participate. Yet, I cannot play the part of gatekeeper, tending the secret of music literacy – and, thereby, sequestering an enormous body of repertoire – solely for those in the music trade. So, the second project outlined below is designed as a first step to break down the barrier between what is seen and what is heard, engaging students in the process of creation and notation.

**Phase 1** – Engaging the oral tradition

**Objective:** Explode the relationship between music and the printed score.

While I have previously led the ensemble in performances of music from the African-American tradition (as well as music from a cross-section of the globe) we have approached them from printed scores. I propose to teach the ensemble one piece for our November performance using a rote model. We will learn the piece alongside others prepared from printed scores.

It may prove worthwhile to examine a score or transcription of the described piece toward the end of our preparations. Such an exercise would open the door slightly to examine the relationship between sound and sight, but from the reverse perspective of our usual pedagogical model. Phase 2 builds on this endeavor, by making the relationship more explicit.

The ensemble typically has few musical requirements outside of the assigned meeting time; the assumption of the university is that all graded elements occur within the assigned meeting times – 2.5 hours per week for .5 credit. Therefore my outline presents my proposed rehearsal schedule.

**Week 1:** Introduce the concept and the melody of the chorus in call-and-response manner.

**Week 2:** Reiterate the chorus melody and introduce the concept of a single harmony to all voiceparts.

**Week 3:** Labor Day – no rehearsal

**Week 4:** Expand the harmony of the chorus to four voiceparts.

**Week 5:** Reiterate the chorus and teach the melody of the first verse.

**Week 6:** Introduce harmony for the first verse.

**Week 7:** Reiterate the first verse and apply to subsequent verses.

**Week 8:** Reiterate all parts and discuss the form of the piece in the context of its stylistic conventions.

**Week 9:** Rehearse the whole and discuss notation conventions.

**Week 10:** Rehearse the whole and experiment with improvisation and the resulting notation needs.

**Week 11:** Dress rehearsal and performance

## **Phase 2** – Making the connection

**Objective:** Explore the relationship between music and the printed score from the perspective of creator.

In order to connect our oral/aural experiment to written music and advance the literacy of the whole ensemble, the temptation is to tackle a specific written piece with the traditional exercises for learning to read music: solfege, interval training, rhythm drills. In this case, however, I propose to guide the ensemble in the creation of a new piece for performance and also through the process of transcribing their creation in written form. In this manner, the students will be led to consider the relevance of notation from the position of composer and therefore consider more carefully their own transcription choices.

I hope that the perceived barrier of learning to interpret the signs of some “other” will dissolve as they wrestle with the dilemmas of notation and the necessity and responsibility of the written form in transferring the re-creation ability to future performers.

Another advantage of the proposed model: I can assign some of my more advanced students to take dictation. Giving these students the more difficult role of transcribing the work of the ensemble will hopefully keep them engaged in the project and divert them from dominating the creative process.

**Week 1:** Introduce the idea and get them to think about and appropriately inclusive musical topic for our “holiday” concert.

**Week 2:** Martin Luther King Day – no rehearsal

**Week 3:** Discuss the topic and introduce the search for an appropriate text.

**Week 4:** Select a text (or non-text) and begin discussions of form and texture.

**Week 5:** Make some decisions about form and assign a tone quality/timbre project.

**Week 6:** Set the piece in broad strokes and begin the transcription.

**Week 7:** Refine the piece and continue transcription.

**Week 8:** Refine the piece and continue transcription.

--Spring Break--

**Week 9:** Rehearse the piece and refine the transcription.

**Week 10:** Rehearse the piece and refine the transcription.

**Week 11:** Complete the score and polish the performance.

**Week 12:** Distribute the scores, performing the piece with and without them.

**Week 13:** Final rehearsal for April concert.

As these two phases dovetail and compliment each other, I anticipate that each student will view the printed score from a new perspective will take ownership of the final product. All written music is, after all, merely transcription of an aural event in the mind of the composer. Surmounting this barrier between sight and sound is my primary responsibility as a conductor each time I take the podium but I hope to reach my students in a new way and make the ensemble accessible to a greater cross-section of the student body by considering this issue from a cultural perspective.