Where are those wonderful, energetic boys?

We see them rambling down the hallways, tearing down the sports fields, and laughing with friends, but where we don’t see them is in the choir room.
It’s 8:30 a.m. and you enter the jungle, otherwise known as first period—a 40-voice junior varsity mixed choir full of energy, adrenaline, and hormones. Some students are hurriedly grabbing their folders, others are getting water, a group is in the corner singing the newest #1 pop chart, and another set is discussing the latest Hollywood drama. The bell rings, and as you prepare your choir vocally, the obvious imbalance (or should we say, wall of sopranos) reminds you that of those 40 voices, only four are boys. Within that small group, three are basses (or so they claim), and two of those are non-pitch-matching. After hearing what resembles something between an Eric Whitacre cluster chord and a fascinating interpretation of a Schönberg tone row, you begin to mentally reassure yourself:

They work so hard . . .
I’m just happy that they are here . . .
I’ll get them in shape . . .
It’ll just take some time, but I can fix this.

This scene is often played out in choir rooms across the state. Yet what we sometimes fail to see in our moment of slight panic is the underlying question: Where are those wonderful, energetic, and wild things—Where are the boys? We see them rambling down the hallways, tearing down the sports fields, and laughing with friends, but where don’t see them is in the choir room.

The downward trend of male enrollment in choral ensembles is an often discussed and researched topic in our field. We attend conferences, read articles, and resort to stalking the hallways looking for our next big find—another male to sing tenor. We do sometimes find him, but at what cost? Long hours at work? An unintended male bias? Let’s face it; what we’re doing isn’t working, so let’s get to work . . . the wild things are waiting.

Where Are We Now?

The measurement of choral enrollment has been limited and sporadic, charting a steady decline in participation since the 1930s. The most recent study of choral enrollment was completed in 2011. This study of members of MENC (now NAfME), included choral enrollment gender ratio, organization, and several factors influencing male enrollment in choral ensembles. Male choral enrollment nationally was found to be 26.9 percent of the total enrollment. Middle school choral programs were found to include on average 106 students, with 27 males, while high school programs were slightly smaller.

It’s a Jungle Out There: Assessing the Situation

When boys look at our choral programs, what is their immediate first impression? For adolescent males, both internal and external factors can serve as negative influences that keep them from singing in school ensembles. Recruiting and retaining young males in choral ensembles is perhaps one of the most frequently documented challenges for secondary choral directors. The lack of male singers creates an imbalance in parts or voices, especially in mixed voice choirs. This reduces the pedagogical potential of the experience, restrains the choir’s ability to reach their musical potential, and most importantly, limits the opportunities to teach students the intrinsic and extrinsic values inherent in participation with a fully voiced choir (Castelli, 1986).

Administrators, counselors, and even parents are often the ones who influence boys away from participation in choir, as they fail to see its benefits compared to the increased attention on tested subjects and shrinking school budgets (Abril & Gault, 2008; Sweet, 2010). Many choral programs cite struggles with master schedules, as choir courses are scheduled against single-section offerings such as advanced placement or, worse, athletics (Phillips, 1988).

The Food Chain: Banishing the Eat-or-Be-Eaten Mentality

The food chain is a brutal hierarchy—predators, starvation, and natural selection swallow up the weak, leaving only the strong and those who evolve still in the race. In many ways, the course selection card can seem much like this—our subject can get consumed by the cacophony of required classes, get-credits-now courses, foreign languages, athletics, and more. How can we evolve so that choir can move higher up in the chain?

Through interviews of participating male singers, boys have acknowledged that effective repertoire choices, teacher influence, affirmation of singing ability, and the enjoyment of singing are the main reasons they elect and continue to sing in choir (Kennedy, 2002; Parker, 2009). While boys may join the ensemble because of peers or the prestige of the program (in fact, the reputation of the program is the most effective recruiting tool we have), their decision to continue must be internally driven (Clements, 2002).

If the jungle of your choir room offers love and encouragement through singing, you are on the right track. The wild things will find their way.

Let’s face it—society in general doesn’t hold male choral singing in the highest regard. We are not revenue-producing like a competitive sport, and frankly, we never will be. If we decide to fight the football coaches in an attempt to gain school superiority, then we will have already lost. Instead, we must choose our battles wisely, determining how choir can learn from the successes of athletic programs and enhance what is already working in our schools—all with the goal of creating well-rounded young men. We must remember that we teach young men and women and have the privilege of sharing choral music with them. Our values must come first, music second.

Sailing Home: Navigating the Winds of Change

So how do we engage young men to pursue singing in hopes of influencing a culture of singing in America? The task is not easy and will not be achieved quickly. We must first establish a solid foundation. In preschool, boys begin forming opinions about what music they like and dislike, and by fourth and fifth grades, they are deciding whether or not they enjoy and will continue singing. Music programs that emphasize singing by all, most notably the Kodály method, help to effectively provide a much-needed foundation for singing at a young age. This must
be reinforced through consistent music education—an objective which understandably can be compromised by remediation pull-out and schedule conflicts.

Elementary schools should offer and support the formation of choral ensembles that enrich the curriculum instead of being extracurricular. Students, especially boys, have more afterschool conflicts than ever with athletics, clubs, and other events all competing for this precious time. Become a persistent advocate for providing elementary choirs during the school day or in a homeroom time. This will eliminate a student’s need to choose and will encourage boys to enroll in choir.

It is especially important that boys not be lost during the transition from elementary to middle school, because once they leave, they may never return. This responsibility should be shared by the elementary and middle-level teachers. Elementary teachers should promote upcoming opportunities for singing at the next level, and the middle-level choral director should be visible to the elementary school and enthusiastically supportive of singing in choir. Middle school choral directors could visit or clinic the elementary choir and support elementary choirs through attendance at their concerts.

As students continue to the middle school/junior high level, programs must be structured for optimal success through the creation of all-male choirs as early as possible. A 2011 study of Texas middle and junior high school choral directors revealed that those who divided their programs by gender had a significantly larger number of boys enrolled in choir than those with only mixed choirs. Additionally, evidence was found to support the creation of beginning male choirs at the sixth-grade level, with an additional boost to male enrollment provided (Dame, 2011). The all-male choir serves many purposes, such as alleviating the embarrassment of voice change, providing a safe environment in which to sing, improving classroom management, and establishing choral singing as a fraternal activity (Dame, 2011; Freer, 2006; Williams, 2011).

Just as middle school directors should be active with their elementary school music programs, high school directors should be visible in their feeder choral programs. Not only is it crucial for the directors to be involved, high school males must also be visible to provide younger males with much-needed role models. The director should seek out well-rounded students to encourage junior high boys to continue singing into high school choir, allowing them time to answer questions and promote the high school program. Ultimately, males are attracted to success, and if the choral program is successful and promoted, they will come.

**Taming the Beasts: You’re the King**

Take a mental snapshot of your male choral program. Are you happy with the image you see? Is your choral program a good representation of the student body? Does your community hold choral singing in high regard? Is male singing viewed as masculine? Frequent self-reflection and critical analysis are key to a successful choral program. Are you analyzing your curriculum after a long school year comes to a close? Networking with other
directors? Identifying your weaknesses? Seeking out solutions for improvement? These questions provide much-needed introspection and spur the answers that provide our students with innovation that keeps them interested and encourages new blood to follow in their footsteps.

A Fork in the Trail: The Future of Choral Music

When the book Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak was originally published, it was banned by some schools. In a display of rebellion and differing beliefs, students flocked to this book—many identifying with the character Max, a young boy struggling to find his place in the world. Perhaps Sendak’s view of Max can be applied to all: “And Max, the king of all wild things, was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all.” If the jungle of your choir room offers love and encouragement through singing, you are on the right track, and the wild things will find their way. They are out there and looking for a place to call home. Let’s bring them together and “let the wild rumpus start.”

Nathan Dame is Director of Choirs at Harpool MS in Denton ISD.

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