

An Interview with Kirby Shaw
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Competitive Show Choir Festivals: What Are the Benefits?

For over forty years, composer, conductor, educator, and performer, Kirby Shaw has been a mainstay in vocal jazz and pop music. His choral arrangements and compositions are sung all over the world by traditional, jazz and show choirs. Shaw is no stranger to show choirs, being involved since 1980. While attending Showchoir Camps of America (SCA) in June of 2003, Shaw and Ken Thomas, American Choral Directors Association National Repertoire & Standards Chair for Show Choirs, were engaged in conversation regarding show choirs and particularly, show choir festivals and competitions. Shaw presented some very interesting viewpoints regarding the competitive aspects of show choirs. During the 2004 SCA camp at Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois, Shaw was asked to answer some questions regarding show choirs and the direction in which he sees show choirs moving. The following are the words of Kirby Shaw in first person.

Thomas: You are considered one of the "Deans" of vocal jazz and show choirs. How long and in what capacities have you been involved in these areas of choral music education?

Shaw: I've been involved in vocal jazz education since 1972. At that time I was teaching music at College of the Siskiyous in northern California and had heard of Hal Malcolm's Mt. Hood Vocal Jazz Festival in Oregon. I attended his festival and was impressed by what I saw and heard and decided to start my own community college group. My first group had eight singers, a rhythm section, and a rudimentary sound system. In 1972 there wasn't much literature available of a popular nature, let alone vocal jazz; so I wrote most of the arrangements. My choice of literature was influenced by the rich diversity of American popular music... jazz, spirituals, blues, latin, rock and roll, folk, ballads, musical theater and jazz-rock (particularly Blood, Sweat, and Tears and The Chicago Transit Authority). By the second year we had twelve singers, rhythm section, and a horn section of trumpet, trombone, alto, tenor, and baritone saxophone. Over the next few years the group grew to twenty-four singers, the current publishing standard horn section of two trumpets, tenor saxophone and trombone, and a rhythm section of piano, guitar, bass, and drums.

I came to the Show Choir movement in 1980 because of my interest in writing/performing/arranging and directing all kinds of American popular music but, most importantly, through my marriage to Markita. She is a talented singer/dancer/choreographer and we have amazingly similar thoughts about aesthetics and teaching. Together, we have taught at dozens of show choir camps and directed school groups at Colorado State University and University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Thomas: Since we are dealing primarily with show choirs in this discussion, what are some of the biggest changes that you have seen in this genre over your career?

Shaw: The biggest change I've witnessed is the growth of the show choir movement itself. As a high school choir member in the late 50s, and as a beginning choral director in 1964, there were very few show choirs in existence and literature was nearly impossible to find.

Thomas: Give some of the positives elements that you see in the current "show choir world."

Shaw: If you believe that incorporating movement into the singing experience is empowering for people of any age, then the show choir experience has much to offer. Musically, America is the most culturally diverse place on earth, and show choirs offer incredible opportunities for representing this stylistic diversity in a positive and enriching way. Working as a team toward a common goal, mastering the small details, which make up the show choir experience, and representing the meaning of the lyrics through facial animation are elements of the positive, even life-changing impact that can occur for performers and audiences.

Thomas: Give some areas in which you see that the "show choir world" could be improved.

Shaw: Relentless pressure from our current popular music culture to do more and more "flashy movement," coupled with the corrosive effect of competition at show choir festivals has hurt the show choir movement and polarized the choral community.

We must keep asking ourselves why we are teaching and what we want the result to be. Is our motive to include and uplift every student? Are we balancing good singing practices with meaningful movement? Enabling students to understand and perform the elements of music and movement

and teaching them to respect each other's individuality is a prize that can never be summed up by a trophy.

Thomas: As you know, ACDA has just added this new Repertoire and Standards area of Show Choirs. What would be your advice for this new Repertoire and Standards Committee?

Shaw: I would admonish them to remember that the bottom line of good education is enabling students to discover the things that will make them happy, healthy, and productive.

Thomas: What would you like to see this Committee accomplish in the area of Show Choirs?

Shaw: To be as practical as possible... more "how to" columns on subjects such as (1) What makes a great choral arrangement? (2) Rhythm Section Basics (3) Possibilities for show choir sound reinforcement (4) Individual or area miking...pros and cons (5) Setup and tear-down ...it's everybody's responsibility (6) How to start a non-competitive show choir festival (7) Fund raising... proven solutions (8) The booster group... here's how the best ones work.

Thomas: How do you see the role of the show choir in the total program of choral music education at the elementary, junior high, senior high and collegiate levels?

Shaw: The educational community has come to realize that engaging students in a broad range of interests enhances their whole educational experience.

Thomas: So much of today's activity for show choirs, especially at the high school level, is centered on competitive festivals or competition in general. What is your perspective on this development in the show choir arena?

Shaw: I don't think competition is a good teaching tool for two reasons. (1) Music is a gift of life. It's an expression of being. It's a shared experience. It's a tool of self discovery. There should never be any "Losers." (2) Having participated in hundreds of competitive music festivals over the last forty years, I have found that no matter how well-meaning festival organizers and judges may be, it is impossible to be completely fair. Consequently, competition scoring cannot be truly accurate when the playing field is uneven. The list is long. One group may have a small budget while another can afford designer costumes, private voice lessons, and custom-arranged music. Judges work from dawn to dusk without sufficient time to eat or

rest, to the extent that their judging ability is affected. Choir directors aim their whole year's repertoire towards competitive ends, or choir directors are fired by administrators who use festival rankings as the sole measurement of the teacher's abilities. To top it off, there can be mean-spirited responses from losers, including judges having their tires slashed by vengeful show choir members.

Again, we must ask ourselves what we want our students to gain from a music education. Is a trophy the most honest indication of what we've taught them? At a time when everything seems to be competitive, it's critical that students be given the opportunity to express themselves free of that kind of pressure. We must find a balance between codified achievement and the celebration of individual contributions, or else we are teaching our children that if they don't have the aptitude to compete, they're losers. Competitive festivals can and should be realigned on a non-competitive basis.

Thomas: Based on your years of experience in the area of music performance and music education, what would be your advice to a young choral music educator who is starting a career as a comprehensive choral musician?

Shaw: (1) If you don't feel great joy watching your students learn, please find another profession (2) Be able to demonstrate as many music styles as possible (3) Fill your musical life with so many outstanding experiences that you will know the difference between excellent and average (4) Aim high! (5) Work on your musical weaknesses (6) Ask lots of questions from leaders in your field... they'll be happy to share what they know (7) Many of the best choral arrangements were written before you were born.. .make it your business to find them (8) Piano skills are important (9) Don't be afraid! Be bold, and mighty forces will come to your aid (10) Don't bury your inner child... you're teaching about life through music, and teaching is the highest calling!

Thomas: As a composer and arranger of both vocal jazz and show choir literature, how do you see future developments in the music publishing industry as it relates to these types of literature?

Shaw: Times have never been better for finding quality choral music in any style. Some complain about the amount of inferior choral music being published each year. Excellent music is out there... go find it, and be glad you know the difference!

Thomas: As you reflect back on your distinguished musical career, what do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

Shaw: I hope that I am a choral music teacher who has the understanding of and the ability to impart music knowledge in a way that empowers students of any age to reach higher in their lives and be unafraid.

There are varying perspectives on what show choirs should be and their competitiveness. As we embark on this new journey, those out in the trenches must be engaged in meaningful dialogue and work together to bring equitable recognition of this type of choral music education in the American Choral Directors Association.

Ken Thomas,
National Chair,
R&S Committee on Show Choirs