



Best Advice I Ever Got: A Buffet of Lessons from my Friends

By Terry Berrier, Secretary

During my three decades of teaching, I have had the good fortune to learn from and work with many fine choir directors. In this article, I would like to share some of the incredible lessons I learned from co-workers and teachers, who, by the way, also happen to be my friends. I will paraphrase their advice and serve you some dishes from the “buffet” of lessons these fine Texas Choir Directors cooked up!

“If you can’t sing it slow, you can’t sing it fast.” This is actually verbatim from my former boss, Carroll Barnes. This morsel of information comes in handy in several different rehearsal situations, like cleaning up the precision of challenging rhythms, executing leaping vocal lines, and “locking in” the vertical structure of a piece.

If you clean your plate, you know you can have dessert. You earned it. That’s the way it was in Debbie Daniel’s junior high classroom. Her boys and girls knew what her expectations were from day one, and they knew the consequences of not living up to them. She was always kind to her students, they made fabulous music together, and her classroom management was impeccable. I never heard Debbie raise her voice; in fact, she taught me the most effective “teacher look” that I still use today.

My first high school job was with Sharon King. I was only able to work with her for one semester, but the lessons I gleaned from Sharon were like the antioxidants in super-foods! While learning notes in a new piece, Sharon would make certain her students were solid on their notes using syllables and beautiful tone before moving to text or combining sections. Then, after that initial work was completed, it was easier to put the parts together and make music.

In our “buffet,” there can be no gluten-free meal. Gluten is a wheat product in foods that acts as an adhesive, holding ingredients together. The gluten in choral music is my lesson from Randy Talley. He taught me about creating a beautiful “section sound” in each section of my choir. I love to use Randy’s method of voicing my sections. It makes a homogenous sound, and it is my observation as a UIL judge, that this is the most ignored aspect in concert programs. It can be time consuming work, but teaching tone, making beautiful, blended, cushioned sound, is time worth spent.

I used to teach just what was on the page of a piece of music without looking deeper. “Well, here’s a crescendo, so let’s get louder.” Or, “Let’s slow down here, because the editor told us to.” I forgot that someone created this music, and that someone applied expressive suggestions *for a reason*. I was lucky enough to team up with Michael O’Hern for 14 years. I heard him, on many occasions, ask his students to sing with more feeling. He would say to his choir something like, “People your age are the most passionate and expressive people on earth! So, let’s hear you sing from your hearts.” Given permission to emote, Mike’s students were then able to realize their expressive decisions based upon the music and text. Perhaps this is the spice that brings out all the wonderful flavors.

There are more delectable dishes I picked up: conducting gestures by Bill Gorham (who is gone but not forgotten), having fun with students by Cheryl Wilson and Randy Hooper, embracing our differences by Kari Gilbertson, winning students’ hearts by Linda Ice, and others! I hope you have similar types of “buffets” available to you. Here in Texas, they should not be hard to find!