

# The Art of Choral Performance

by: June E. Ambush

It was the summer of 1958. As I gazed into a mirror in my bedroom, I pretended to be an opera singer on stage performing for an audience of thousands. The orchestra was playing brilliantly to the sounds of my melodious soprano voice. "Bravo! Bravo!" cheered the audience with thunderous applause at the conclusion of my performance. Then, it happened - the moment I had been waiting for patiently! I took a most gracious bow, genuflecting with thanks and humble appreciation. June Ambush was a super star dazzling her audience with song, grace, and poise. What a great day! I spent many days dreaming of becoming a performing artist bringing joy to those willing to listen.

My dream finally came true. After years of singing with my church choir, playing violin for an elementary and junior high school orchestra, and singing with the junior high school jazz band, I was enamored with performing on stage. I obtained a Bachelor of Music Education Degree from Howard University in 1976 and continued performing as a singer and pianist with various bands. It was thrilling! But what I learned most from my choral and instrumental conductors was the art of performance and deportment.

What is deportment? Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (tenth Edition, 1993) defines deportment as the manner in which one conducts oneself or behaves. I currently serve as Music Specialist at The John Marshall Elementary School in Dorchester, Massachusetts (Boston Public School District) teaching general and vocal music to students in grades kindergarten through five. My fourth grade chorus had the opportunity to perform at two Boston Public School choral events this year. I spent months

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coaching them vocally and rehearsing the protocol of deportment or how to conduct oneself in public performance. They were the music ambassadors of the John Marshall School, representing our music program in the Boston community. Entering a concert hall quietly in an orderly manner, approaching the stage with poise and grace, showing respect for other choruses while performing on stage, and wearing appropriate concert attire were "non-negotiable" standards for my students. I noticed the sponsors of these events observing all of us – students and teachers. We were being watched very closely!

These performance standards and expectations must not be ignored. Artistic choral presentation and appropriate deportment are required components to teach our students how to perform as proficient and highly-skilled artists. This is the responsibility of all music educators! Zoltan Kodaly, Hungarian composer, ethnomusicologist and music educator (1882-1967) said, "Let us stop the teachers' superstition that only some diluted art-substitute is suitable for teaching purposes. A child is the most susceptible and enthusiastic audience for pure art...only music of intrinsic value is suitable for children. Everything else is harmful." ("Children's choirs" in F Bonis

(Ed.). The selected works of Zoltan Kodaly (L. Halapy & F. Macnicol, Trans.). 1929/1974d, p. 122).

The New England Conservatory of Music offers a Kodaly Music Institute Summer Program for music and non-music educators. I spent three summers completing my training at the Institute to become a more proficient teacher and choral director at my school. With the deluge of MCAS preparation dominating the curriculum in Massachusetts schools today, our students are being deprived of the opportunity to develop their artistic talents. We, as music educators in the Boston Public School District - and other school districts across the state and around the country, must unite to save our students from "dying" artistically! They deserve the right to receive only the best music instruction that will also enhance academic proficiency in their classroom. We must rally together as one unified voice to strategically cultivate musical artists for this generation and future generations to come. Let us join together, my fellow colleagues, to insure that no student is left behind musically. Let us teach our students the "art" of proper choral performance and eloquent deportment. After all, we are their role models, and it is our responsibility to raise the bar of musical integrity in our students. Let us work together to achieve this goal and save our young artists. Viva La Musica!

Voices from the Urban Music Classroom is a feature of Massachusetts Music News that is sponsored by the Urban Music Educators Coalition. We need contributors! If you are a music teacher in an urban setting and you would like to write a piece for Voices from the Urban Music Classroom, please contact Rhoda Bernard, Ed. D. at [rbernard@bostonconservatory.edu](mailto:rbernard@bostonconservatory.edu).