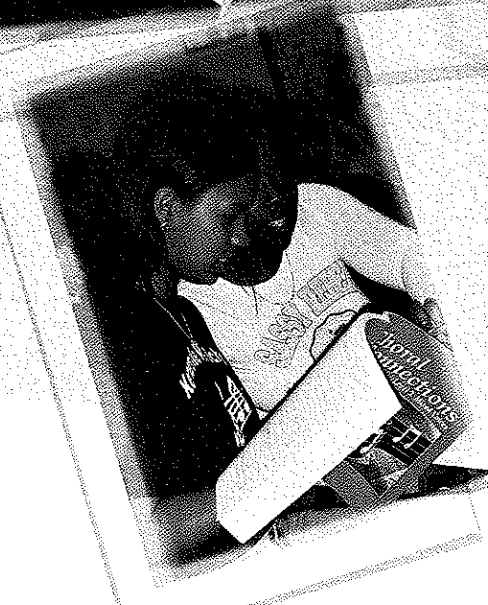
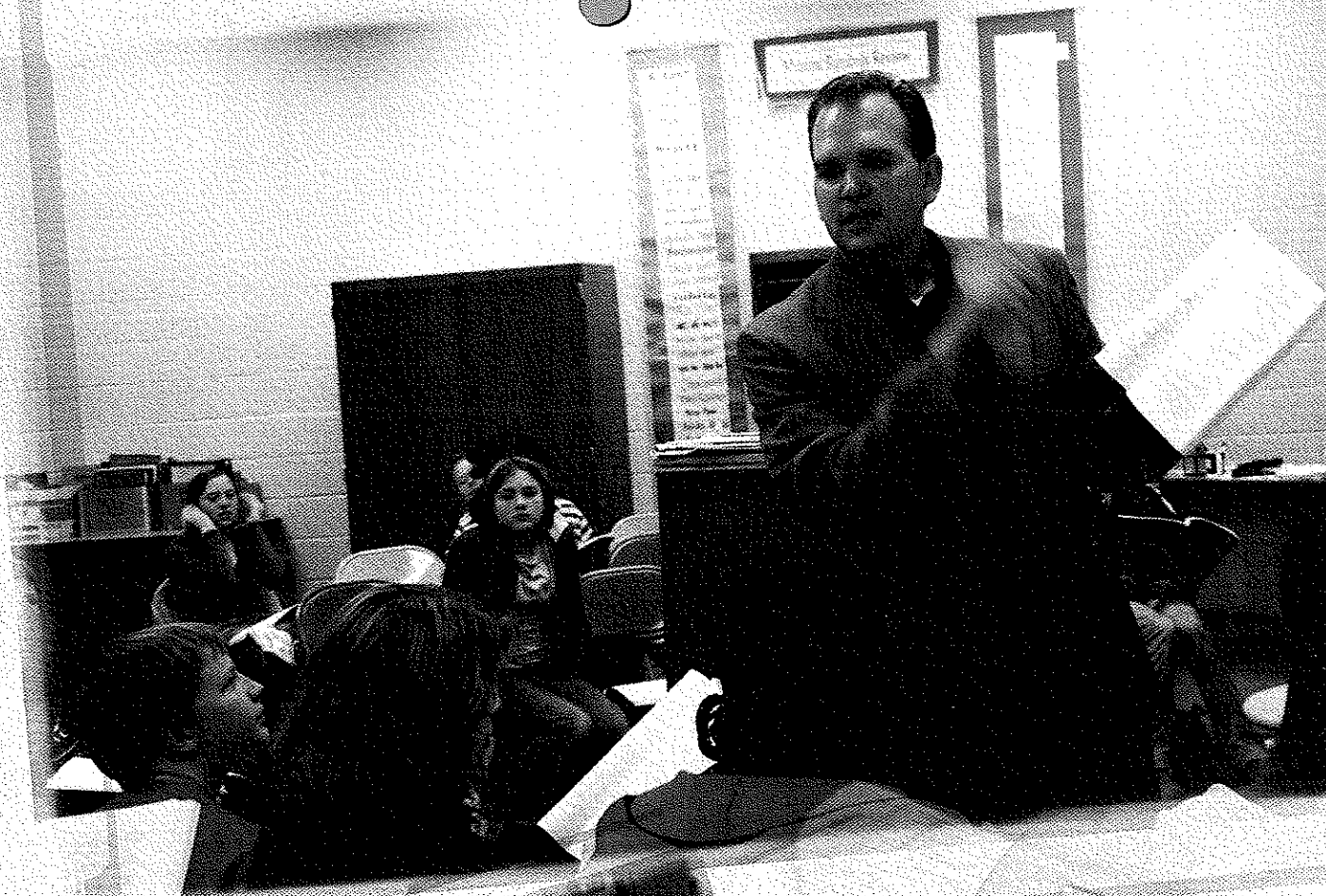
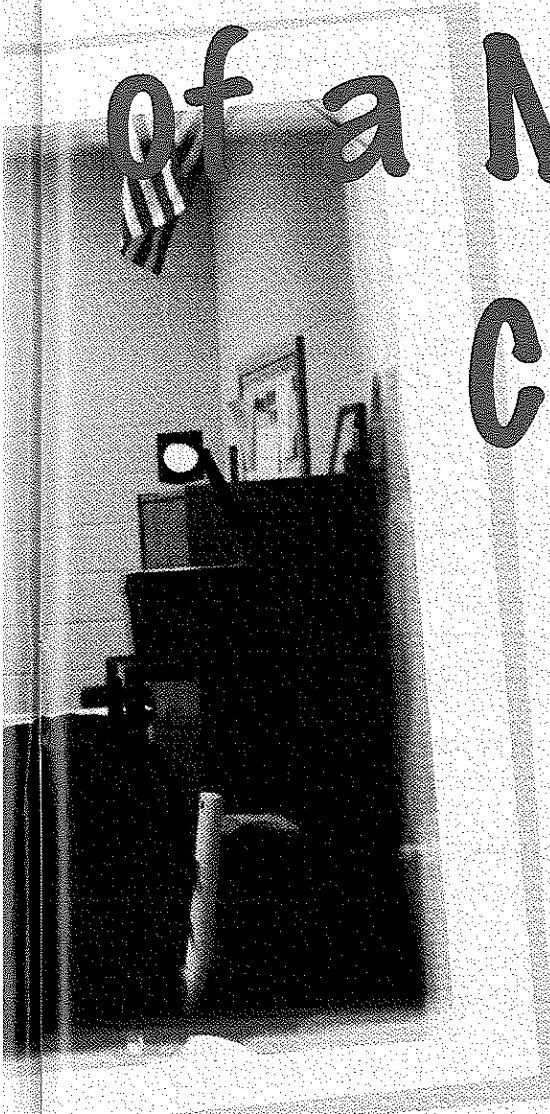


C h o r u s

Snapshot



PHOTOS BY RACHEL TOWNSELY; PHOTOSPIN.COM



of a Middle School Choir Director

With their arms resting at their sides and standing up tall and focused, students in Tom Shelton's eighth-grade honors women's choir watch Shelton's hands and sing the matching solfège pitches on his cue. As they go down the scale, *sol, fa, mi, re, do*, Shelton says, "Listen. Don't let *mi* go flat." The girls try again, this time more focused on singing the pitches in tune.

Shelton, who has been teaching for sixteen years, has built a strong choral program at Kernersville Middle School in Kernersville, North Carolina (a growing suburb of Winston-Salem). Nearly one-third of the 1,200 students at Kernersville Middle School are enrolled in his classes. When students enter his choruses in sixth grade, they have had general music, and a few may have sung in their fifth-grade chorus. All students are welcome in Shelton's choirs, and he works diligently to make them better singers and better musicians. What follows is a peek into Shelton's classroom and some of the strategies that have proven successful for him.

Shelton acknowledges that classroom management is key to making rehearsals successful. During his first years of teaching, he was giving students too much freedom, which made the situation miserable. His mentor-teacher told him, "If anyone has to be miserable, it is *not* you." Shelton said that with appropriate guidelines, everyone was happier, and they accomplished much more during the class period.

But Shelton doesn't linger on what students can't do; instead he shows them what they can do. In addition to the posters on the walls showing the circle of fifths, solfège hand signs, and music vocabulary, there are reminders of what is expected from students in class, including a banner over the door that reads, "Attitude is the mind's paintbrush. It can color any situation." Posted at the front of the classroom are the three main things Shelton looks for from his students: Focus,

Posture, and Mouth Position. At the end of each class, students receive a grade based on how well they did with each of these. Because self-evaluation is very important, Shelton often allows students to give themselves the grade they deserve. "If I don't agree with the grade the student has decided on, I will discuss it with the student, and we come up with a grade together."

STUDENTS AT KERNERSVILLE MIDDLE School are on a rotating schedule. They meet every other day for choir. Shelton

has found benefits and drawbacks to this system. "Since I don't see students every day, they don't retain information as well as in daily rehearsals," he says. With classes lasting forty-five minutes, he plans carefully to keep students focused and on-task.

Warm-ups

Choral rehearsals begin with a series of warm-ups. As students sing a familiar scale exercise on "oo," Shelton checks posture and mouth position. He shows them how tall the

inside of their mouth needs to be to produce a good sound and tells students, "Make your eyes look alive!"

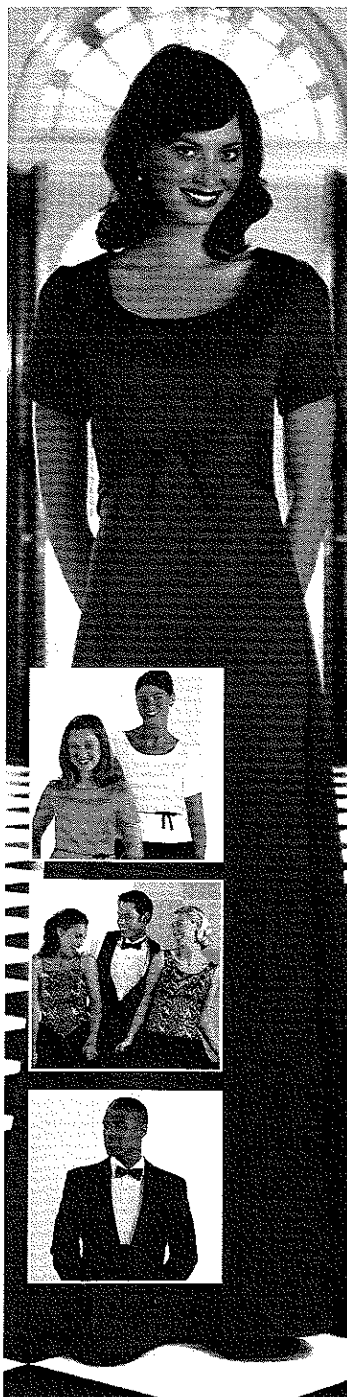
The chorus then moves to solfège exercises. After giving the starting pitch (either by singing it or playing it on the piano), Shelton signs a solfège pattern, and students sing it back to him. The students use moveable *do* solfège for warm-ups, sight-reading, and when rehearsing difficult sections in songs to learn their pitches. Shelton prefers solfège to singing numbers or neutral syllables because, "It's a great tone-builder and helps students learn the relationships among pitches."

Repertoire

Once students have warmed up their voices, they move on to rehearsing songs for their upcoming concert. In November, the seventh-grade mixed choir was rehearsing "Fum, Fum, Fum," a Spanish Christmas carol. "I try to include several Spanish songs in their repertoire each year," says Shelton. With a growing Hispanic population in Kernersville, he has found that music can be helpful for students learning English, in part because of the repetition in learning and memorizing lyrics. When learning Spanish songs, Spanish-speaking students help their classmates with proper pronunciation. This encourages communication and understanding among students.

In "Fum, Fum, Fum," one of the biggest challenges for the singers is the pronunciation. The students speak through the song, echoing each line after Shelton. He tells them to make sure their natural accents don't creep in when speaking or singing the Spanish words. The next step is to put the words to the music. Shelton reminds the chorus to "focus on keeping space inside your mouth." As they rehearse, first with the piano to help find pitches, then unaccompanied, the students listen to each other to improve their pronunciation and blend their sound.

The eighth-grade honors women's



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choir is rehearsing "Carol of the Bells" for their holiday concert. This song is still new to the singers, but even as they are learning their pitches, Shelton focuses on having the students sing with appropriate dynamics and articulation. He writes the rhythm for the soprano part on the chalkboard and models the long, short, short, short articulation. "Shake your head if you understand," he tells the students before directing them to sing it on their own. Shelton has students concentrate on holding the vowels and backing off of "s" sounds when they sing. He also addresses specific pronunciation problems, having the sopranos modify the vowel sound for the word "gaily" on higher pitches to get a better sound, and closing quickly to the "ng" sound in "ding, dong" to mimic the sound of bells. Rather than point out singers who are sticking out, he tells students, "Tap your neighbor on the shoulder if they're not getting it," encouraging students to listen to each other and fix their problems.

Sight-reading

Before tackling a new song, Shelton uses a sight-reading method that teaches students to hear the pitches before they sing, ensuring that they're really reading the music, not just learning by rote. He creates overhead transparencies with sight-reading exercises for the students. Often, these begin with a scale in the key of the song. Students identify the key of the piece and sing the scale together using solfège. Then, Shelton reveals the sight-reading exercise. These exercises are actually excerpts from music the students will be rehearsing in their next class. Shelton gives students the tonic pitch for the piece, but he does not sing any of it for them. Students then sing through their parts using solfège, following the notes as he points to them on the overhead. When one student sounds really fatigued, Shelton advises, "Don't stress your voice. Drop out

Close-up

**Tom Shelton, choir director,
Kernersville Middle School,
Kernersville, North Carolina**

How many classes do you teach?
Twelve. I teach four classes of eighth-grade chorus, four of seventh-grade chorus, and four of sixth-grade chorus.

Other activities or hobbies?
I love to travel! I also love composing music, particularly for the groups I'm working with. I have compositions published by Heritage Music Press, Hinshaw Music Company, and Santa Barbara Music Publishing. And I am president of the North Carolina ACDA.

Most influential person in your career?
Dr. Hilary Apfelstadt. "Dr. A." was my undergraduate professor at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. (She's now at Ohio State University.) If it had not been for her pushing me to reach my potential and inspiring me day after day, I would not be where I am today. She is a role model for our entire profession.

Hometown?
Greensboro, North Carolina



Colleges attended and degrees obtained?

BME, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Currently pursuing a master's degree in choral conducting from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Favorite quote?

"There is not enough darkness in the world to extinguish the light of one small candle." —Spanish proverb

What CD are you listening to now?

Breakaway, Kelly Clarkson; soundtrack to the musical *Wicked*; and *A Portrait*, Teresa Berganza

Favorite composer or performer?

Composers: Handel, Rossini, Z. Randall Stroepe
Performers: Teresa Berganza (Spanish mezzo-soprano), Idina Menzel, Patti Lupone

Best part of teaching?

Watching the progress and success that each child makes and knowing I may have made a small contribution to helping them succeed.

where it's too high, and sing only the notes that are comfortable."

When the singers seem to be getting the interval skips and rhythms, Shelton has them take out the song the exercise came from, and asks them to find the part they just sang. "They learn to sight-read their parts, and then see how it fits into the music," says Shelton.

AS THE END OF THE PERFORMING, Shelton compliments the students on learning their parts quickly. As he calls their names, the students get up to put their books and folders away. Shelton uses this time to take attendance and

make notes in his gradebook.

Even after teaching middle school choir for sixteen years, Shelton continues to bring energy, enthusiasm, and new ideas to his classroom. "I want my students to love music for a lifetime, not just a semester," he says. "My hope is that my students will be involved with some type of musical outlet for the rest of their lives. They will not all be music majors, but they can all be music advocates." ☺

By Andrea Keating, associate editor, *Teaching Music*, with special thanks to Barbara Geer, past president of the North Carolina Music Educators Association.