VOICES OF HOPE: Minnesota Prison Music Initiative

Voices of Hope is an organization that builds choral singing communities in correctional facilities in the state of Minnesota. The flagship ensemble, Voices of Hope-Shakopee, was founded in 2015 by Dr. Amanda Weber and has grown from 15 to 50 incarcerated singers. The organization has recently expanded to include Voices of Hope-Stillwater. Both choirs rehearse weekly and perform several times a year inside their respective facilities.

MISSION: To provide accessible music-making opportunities within justice-involved populations that foster individual growth and bridge unlikely communities through song.

HOPES: We recognize that Voices of Hope has a dual calling to serve communities both inside and outside of Minnesota’s state prisons:

1. BRINGING HOPE INSIDE PRISON WALLS
   Voices of Hope provides a safe and sober activity which empowers incarcerated individuals to find their voice, build connections in a diverse setting, and bring a positive message of hope and healing to the wider correctional facility.

2. BRINGING HOPE OUTSIDE PRISON WALLS
   Voices of Hope views singing as a powerful tool of restorative justice, seeking to transform perspectives of incarceration and build bridges of healing within the wider community through collaboration and reflection.

Benefits of Choir and Vocal Study:

- Empowerment
- Deep breathing for stress release—healing, therapeutic, cathartic
- Confidence
- Overcome fears
- Improved posture, connect to body
- Sense of community, common purpose, everyone is equal
- Escape—feel like a normal person
- Release endorphins—sober “high”
- Raise self-esteem
- Develop leadership skills in welcoming new members to the choir
- Self-expression, safe place to show feelings

“Like” Voices of Hope on Facebook! [https://www.facebook.com/wearevoicesofhope/](https://www.facebook.com/wearevoicesofhope/)

For more information or to join our mailing list: wearevoicesofhope@gmail.com
Part II: Piano Lessons in a South Carolina Women’s Correctional Institution
Anna Hamilton, DMA

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<tr>
<th>Hamilton Piano Studio (Columbia, SC)</th>
<th><a href="mailto:annahamilton.piano@gmail.com">annahamilton.piano@gmail.com</a></th>
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<td>University of South Carolina Aiken (Aiken, SC)</td>
<td><a href="mailto:annah@usca.edu">annah@usca.edu</a></td>
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PROGRAM FOR PIANO STUDY

| Goodman Correctional Institution (Columbia, SC) | 2012-2016 |
| Camille Griffin Graham Correctional Institution (Columbia, SC) | 2017-Present |

The Lessons

- Arranged with Institution Chaplain / Volunteer Services Coordinator
- Individual 30 minute lessons for four students, once every other week
- Location: In the chapel (Goodman), in the gymnasium (Camille Graham)
- Practice: Individual assigned time (30-60 minutes, once weekly), additional available sometimes during recreational hours, inmate who plays for Sunday services and directs the choir has a keyboard Monday-Friday for practice
- The Instruments: Yamaha upright piano, two keyboards for practice (one located in Chaplain’s office, the other assigned to an inmate)
- Lesson Materials: Music library of donated books, lesson folders including handouts, worksheets, and weekly assignments
- Recitals: Twice yearly (Winter and Spring), recital program includes student pianists and often guests (singers, choir, handbell group, dancers) – attendees include nearly 100 inmates and institution employees and volunteers

The Benefits – through piano study students may gain:

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<th>Appreciation of beauty</th>
<th>Outlet for self-expression</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
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<td>Organization Skills</td>
<td>Recognition of Process and Patterns</td>
<td>Historical Perspective</td>
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<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>Hope</td>
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<td>Purpose and Goals</td>
<td>New perspective</td>
<td>Community and Connection</td>
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Articles

Part III: Prison Outreach for Student Performances

Catherine Kautsky
Lawrence University, Appleton, WI
kautskyc@lawrence.edu

How to get started:

1. Search online for all prisons within range of your school or studio. In my experience, it was often necessary to send snail mail letters; email addresses are not readily available.
2. Then HOPE! It took months for me to get any responses, and most prisons didn’t respond at all. Be patient.
3. Once you speak with someone, begin *months in advance* to nail down a date for your concert. Prison schedules are highly inflexible. Be as specific as possible about how long you’d like the performance to last, but be prepared that schedules are rigid.

Organizing the performance:

1. Make sure that students fill out all forms for security clearance well in advance—it can take weeks for the forms to be processed.
2. Prep students well about prison rules. They’ll need to be sure to wear no metal (biggest challenge here is women’s underwire bras!) and to dress very conservatively. In WI at least, no cell phones or other electronics are allowed on prison grounds. The prison will undoubtedly send a list of its rules, and they are strict and daunting. Do reassure students that once they get through the initial metal detectors and past the often-fierce guards, they will be treated well. We’ve been treated to lunch in a prison-run cafeteria, encountered therapy puppies in training as walked across the grounds, and enjoyed concerts by prison choirs.
3. Insist that students prepare remarks about their pieces, so that no piece is performed without an introduction.
4. Plan for a lengthy question/answer period, since, in my experience, prisoners are very curious about both the music and the performers and ask great questions. Be prepared, however, to fill in extra music, should not enough questions arise.

Arranging for a piano:

1. This is the hardest part. Contact local music stores to see if they will donate a piano rental as part of their community engagement program. I’ve had excellent luck with this, and never had to pay for an instrument. Heid Music Company, which is the main piano dealer in Appleton, has been particularly generous over many years, but Madison, WI dealers were also highly co-operative. It helps—and seems appropriate—to offer to publicize their generosity.
2. Find out who the preferred mover is for the music store and see whether any discount can be arranged there. Not surprisingly, I’ve been less successful there.
(Most movers are not getting rich, and asking them to donate precious work hours and crews for someone else’s chosen community action, is asking a lot.)

3. Now comes another hardest part! Make sure that the piano move will go smoothly. This means that you need to check the size of doorways, the locations of stairs, and possible tight turns or corners. You will probably want to put your mover directly in touch with the prison.

4. Make sure there’s a safe place for the piano to reside before and after the concert. You will be responsible for returning it in pristine condition. Obviously prisons don’t have concert halls, so, in my experience, concerts often take place in gyms—where rough and tumble sports also take place. Make sure the prison and the movers coordinate on moving times that will leave the piano untouched.

**Why to do all this! The advantages of your persistence:**

Admittedly, the road to a prison performance can be a rough one. Prison staffs are already over-burdened with essential tasks, and arranging classical music concerts isn’t necessarily part of their job description. Even once you find someone eager to help, they will be heavily encumbered by the prison bureaucracy. I’ve had dates changed, length of concerts changed, numbers of performances changed, and, at one point, a concert cancelled at the last minute because the flu was circulating in the prison.

BUT—it’s so worth it. And here’s why:

- Your students will have a serious performance venue with an audience that truly appreciates their efforts.
- They will need to grapple with how to speak about music (*without reading from notes!*) to a non-expert audience.
- They will see that classical music has appeal to people who are not necessarily white, wealthy, or educated. (They will also see that some of the latter people are in prison too.)
- You will get wonderful media coverage of your studio’s activities.
- And most important: Your students will gasp at the realization that people in prison can be warm, funny, smart, knowledgeable and eager to communicate. Life isn’t simple, and our stereotypes need to bite the dust.
SUGGESTED READING/LISTENING/RESOURCES


https://revealnews.org/episodes/pushed-out/ Accessed 26 April 2020

https://www.sentencingproject.org (Accessed 26 April 2020) So much information here about all issues related to incarceration in the US.

https://www.justicechoir.org Free downloadable songbook. Submit a new song, start a chapter, host an event!

Voices of Hope team “virtual choir” project: