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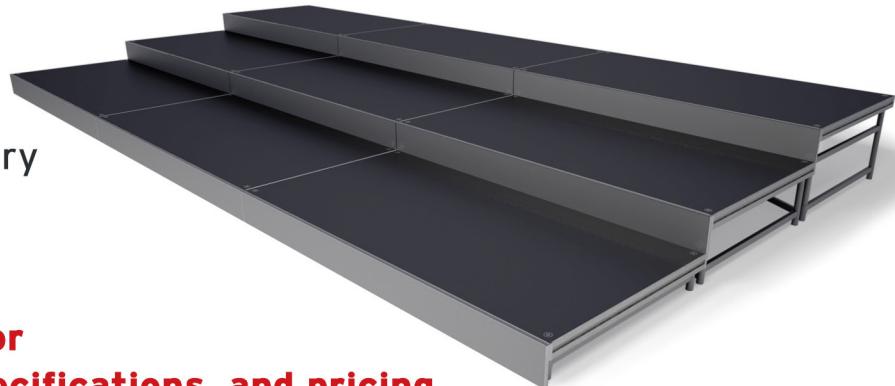
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NOT JUST ANOTHER MIDDLE SCHOOL MUSIC GROUP

by Raven Brooks and Toney Keeler

Just another middle school music group? Not this Mississippi native group. Earning two national titles and a total of twelve Grand Championship wins over the past five years, Oak Grove Middle School's Spotlight Show Choir is no ordinary middle school performance ensemble. This carefully cultivated group of 54, a combination of singers and dancers, boasts an expansive competition schedule each year.

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COST CONSIDERATIONS IN THE QUEST FOR QUIET

by C. Nicholas Colleran, Jr., CPA

While architects usually concentrate on the visual and acousticians focus on sound, accountants will focus on the money. Thinking about acoustics first and building correctly can often save you from having to spend money on fixing avoidable problems later on. Also, knowing the budget range in advance allows a proposal to fit the situation without the compromise of having to "value engineer" after-the-fact.



Cover photo by Suzanne Carey Photography

EDITOR'S LETTER

You may have recently come across a viral video from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, a clip from a larger presentation co-produced with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in "#SoundHealth in Concert: Music and Mind." In the introduction to the event, Dr. Charles Limb makes it clear to the audience that the orchestra members and their conductor Edwin Outwater are completely in the dark about what will happen in the next few moments or what the composer who is joining them on stage will ask them to perform, just as the composer himself has had no time to prepare or rehearse.

In a game of classy, musical improv, the songwriter, pianist, and producer Ben Folds was challenged to create a full song with the National Symphony Orchestra in ten minutes. What Folds had to work with came in the form of shouts from the audience, much like (the perhaps-less-classy) comedy improv. They told him which key he must use to design his piece (A-minor), whether the song should be a ballad or something upbeat (unanimous audience vote for something upbeat—no surprise there), and the lyrical inspiration that would be the center of the song. For that, audience members were instructed to glean any random line in their program and shout it toward the stage; the winner for the lyric line was, "These new spaces are all designed to be flexible."

In what can only be described as a magical ten minutes, Folds designs a new, unrehearsed song, and the result—aside from some less-than-magical singing—was deeply moving. He settles on a rhythm for himself on the piano, and then he begins instructing each section on what to do, banging out samples on the piano for them to follow. He often changes his mind only seconds later to tell them to do something else, as he imagines how it will meld with his next set of choices. Much to the audience's delight, he tells some of the musicians, such as those on drumsets, "You know what to do." And, yes, they did know. After only moments, they started together, played their parts, and the result was something I felt deep in my bones. *This is communication*, I thought. This is where all of us meet and what all of us share. There's no room for misunderstanding because it is pure, melodic, visceral, and natural.

I have been thinking a lot about how much effort it now takes to communicate with others, and how all channels of communication seem to be breaking down at various levels. For instance, whereas I can remember a time where people could debate their differences in political viewpoints passionately and rationally, now people with opposing political ideologies seem to be speaking different languages and even inhabiting alternate realities.

In fact, I've often found myself trying to explain what is meant by some newsworthy feminist issue to my husband, who just doesn't "get it" sometimes, and it's not a failing on his part. It's because we inhabit different realities to some degree, and no matter how much he listens, he doesn't always hear me in ways that lead to full understanding, and it's not for lack of trying. He's a smart, enlightened, big-hearted person; incidentally, he's also not a "mansplainer," which—in and of itself—is just incredibly sexist terminology. (Side-note: I'm sure he could say exactly the same of me, of everything but the mansplaining.)

In short, despite how much we want to fully appreciate how each of us processes information, and our daily opportunities to communicate as best we know how, we just don't understand each other completely, and maybe we will never be able to do so. Those challenges exist inside a marriage where two people are working diligently to acknowledge the other's thoughts and feelings. Then, out in the world beyond a close-knit unit, you try to cross cultural lines or gender lines or social lines or generational lines or party lines. Now imagine, you want to communicate with someone whose first language is different from your own. Sometimes it's a wonder we understand anything at all, and often we may struggle even to fully comprehend ourselves.

I think that's why so many of us are drawn to the arts. While storytelling is a powerful device, music, dance, painting—all forms of artistic expression that don't rely on the limitations of words—help us connect on a level beyond language, which can be highly comforting. Artistry touches an atavistic, primal center in our brain where we recognize for a moment that all of us are emotionally and spiritually connected by common desires and fears. It helps us communicate in a place beyond words, even beyond our own stories and personal histories. We find that place where empathy and understanding are not only possible; they are undeniable.



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Ed Bauer

Publisher

ed@productionsmag.com

EDITORIAL

Rachel James Clevenger

Editor-in-Chief

rachel@productionsmag.com

Sheila Wagner

Editorial Assistance

April James

Creative Advisor

SALES

Adam Hall

ART

Hilary Moreno

Creative Director

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Raven Brooks

C. Nicholas Colleran, Jr., CPA

Toney Keeler



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Rachel James Clevenger, MEd, PhD
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Not Just Another

MIDDLE SCHOOL MUSIC GROUP

by Raven Brooks and Toney Keeler

Just another middle school music group? Not this Mississippi native group. Earning two national titles and a total of twelve Grand Championship wins over the past five years, Oak Grove Middle School's Spotlight Show Choir is no ordinary middle school performance ensemble. This carefully cultivated group of 54, a combination of singers and dancers, boasts an expansive competition schedule each year.

With their hometown of Hattiesburg, MS, being the third most visited city in the state, the show choir group makes appearances at local festivals, an annual performance at a national caliber competition, and hosts the Magnolia Invitational, a joint effort between Spotlight and the group's respective feeder school. Nestled in the Oak Grove Community, a suburb of Hattiesburg, Mississippi's highlighted Hub City, Oak Grove Middle School is the largest middle school in the fourth fastest growing school district in Mississippi. Success in extracurricular activities is no stranger to the Oak Grove Community. The middle school alone boasts state championship cheer and dance troupes, and the high school has laid claim to numerous state show choir titles over the past two decades.

A Story of Vision, Determination, and Growth

Spotlight's journey is a story of vision, determination, and growth. In the group's formative years beginning in 2009, the group had an all-female membership as large as forty;

however, only 8th grade students could participate. By 2012, the group had dwindled down to seventeen female performers. Since then, Spotlight has transformed into an extensive performance ensemble involving students in grades 6-8, that delivers varsity-level performances with top-notch costuming, a ten-member instrumental ensemble, and modern, innovative, and demanding choreography.

As the president of the Parent Organization, Blake Thames Ogletree notes, "The face of choral music at OGMS has transformed in just a few short years. Spotlight didn't even exist a decade ago, and now it is known as one of the premier groups in the region. Student involvement has exploded during that time, and it's an amazing cross-section of the student body. Membership includes football and baseball players, dancers and cheerleaders, student council members, honor society officers and more. We are one of the most diverse groups at the school, and I believe that diversity helps make us successful." Students who are selected

for Spotlight balance rigorous rehearsals, demanding academics, and all are involved in athletics.

The group's success, over the past five years, is no stroke of luck. Through careful planning and a vision executed by the ensemble's leader, Toney Keeler, Spotlight is redefining the scope of middle level show choir ensembles. In year five as Director of Choral Activities at Oak Grove Middle School, Keeler has seen Spotlight through major growth. Keeler arrived as a rookie teacher in 2012 to a choral program that boasted over 200 students. Although thriving in the choral aspect, with an assortment of extracurricular activities to choose from, the show choir was struggling to maintain its identity among a student body of 1,300 students.

Solidifying Choral Tradition

Keeler spent his first year of teaching solidifying the choral tradition that had been established by his predecessor while instilling fundamental vocal and performance

The advertisement features four photographs of women in formal dresses. On the left, there is a pink dress with a beaded belt and a teal dress with a beaded bodice. In the center, there is a large photograph of two women in purple dresses performing on stage with their arms raised, with the text 'READY TO WEAR & CUSTOM DESIGN' overlaid. On the right, there is a black dress with a beaded bodice and a blue dress with a beaded bodice.

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techniques into his meager but eager show choir. A large task for Keeler was educating the community and students about show choir and its worth to the performance world. Every community has seen success at the high school level, but the general perception is that middle school students "just didn't do show choir." As the school year came to an end, Keeler scheduled a school performance featuring the high school show choir and enthusiastically recruited new members for the middle school show choir, Spotlight.

As Spotlight thrives, the ensemble remains true to the program's roots as a successful concert choir program with vocal development, diverse choral repertoire, and theory instruction as the crux of the music curriculum. In order to maintain membership in Spotlight, students must enroll in their respective grade level concert choir. The program's concert choirs Cambiare, Con Spirito, and Cantabile boast a tradition of



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superior ratings in performance and sight reading at both the District and State level. There is one thing that sets Spotlight apart from other middle school show choirs: Leadership.

In the development of what has become Spotlight's signature show design, Keeler states that he has "never let the notion that these students are middle schoolers" stop him from planning vibrant shows, elaborate costuming, and ambitious trips. An energetic opener, upbeat novelty number, meaningful ballad, exuberant male and female features, and a riveting closer have become the structure that has wowed adjudicators and audiences alike. In comparison to what other ensembles do in the area, Keeler's show concept is quintessential; the focus is always on vocal integrity while utilizing movement as enhancement to the text. "While it is important to plan with the limitations of the singers in mind, I truly believe that musical experiences are what you make of them. I have always set the bar high for my students, and I will always treat my students as young adults," Keeler states.

Expecting a Higher Level of Commitment

That reinforces the fact that the leader/director expects a much higher level of commitment from each performer. Higher expectations set the tone for performances and rehearsals. Spotlight's choreography is intricate but

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effective. Kyle Aiden, a Wisconsin-based choreographer and clinician, comments on his experience with Spotlight, saying, "I have had the pleasure of working with Spotlight as both a clinician and choreographer. It is so refreshing to work with a group that is willing to make changes and run with them. There is little to no complaining by the performers when you take the show and drastically alter it. Toney knows what he wants, what his kids are capable of, and how to get the best result."

Spotlight's creative team is comprised of several choreographers, a vocal and instrumental arranger, costume consultant, and a choral assistant. Under Keeler's leadership, the ensemble is exposed to instruction that is challenging but curtailed to the students' ability with the ultimate goal of education through performance. Compared to other show choirs in the circuit, Spotlight's competition shows are rather simple in structure: no elaborate sets, no thematic show design. However, the refined, charismatic performances from the ensemble are entertaining and relatable to all audiences.

As Spotlight has grown, today in 2017, a crucial aspect of its growth has been the parent support group that Keeler developed during his second year as director. The parent group has assisted him in realizing costuming, publicity, and logistics for performances. You'll find parents involved in every aspect of Keeler's organization from ticket sales to back stage crew. Parents eagerly invest in the program. Keeler believes that the parents have really gotten behind the group because they see their children being challenged, achieving goals, and becoming better people. The skills gleaned in Spotlight clearly go beyond the stage. The skills learned are for life. The parent organization has also been very active in establishing a community image for the ensemble. Ogletree comments, "Getting to peek behind the curtain and see everything it takes to make the magic happen was eye-opening. From doing our own costuming to securing musicians, and from fundraising to recruiting parent volunteers, it's very clear that none of it would be possible without a huge investment on the part of families."

Organized Chaos

Walking into a Spotlight rehearsal is sort of like organized chaos, to be honest. You'll find parents completing last-minute alterations and coordinating the evening meal, students rehearsing a last-minute dance sequence, and instrumentalists rehearsing a cut in the music. But one thing is certain: There is a positive energy in the air that shows perseverance and hard work. As Keeler outlines the goals for each rehearsal, the tone of his voice is one that is firm and recognizable, yet understanding. The path for Keeler and the renowned middle school ensemble, Spotlight, is a remarkable story that proves that students of any age can experience success in music.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Raven Brooks is a member of the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission team. Toney Keeler is in his fifth year as director of Choral Activities at Oak Grove Middle School

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COST CONSIDERATIONS IN THE **Quest for Quiet**

by C. Nicholas Colleran, Jr., CPA

While architects usually concentrate on the visual and acousticians focus on sound, accountants will focus on the money. Thinking about acoustics first and building correctly can often save you from having to spend money on fixing avoidable problems later on. Also, knowing the budget range in advance allows a proposal to fit the situation without the compromise of having to “value engineer” after-the-fact.

We can use the financial game "Monopoly" as an analogy: Are you going to build on "Park Place" or "Marvin Gardens"? If it's the latter, you do not want to have a proposal for the former. In other words, you do not want a Park Place design with a Marvin Gardens budget. Most competent professionals will do their best to work with the available funding.

Although there could be some hesitation in revealing the available budget, the risk of getting the wrong solution because of keeping the funding a secret is greater. Be sure to discuss the budget up front to ensure that your consultant does not inadvertently waste money by going down the wrong path.

Define the Problem

Next, before you can tackle costs, you must first define what the problem is. To do this, we will digress briefly into the world of physics. Sound control materials generally fall into four categories: absorbers, diffusers, vibration control, and barriers.

Sound absorbers prevent acoustic energy from reflecting back and therefore can reduce echo and reverberation. If overused, they can produce an acoustically "dry" or dead space.

Sound diffusers, sometimes appearing as geometrically complex shapes, scatter and disperse sound energy. This has the effect of lowering sound intensity by spreading it around, thus bringing clarity while preserving the life of the acoustics in a room. This characteristic is often an essential element for music performance spaces.

Vibration control pads will prevent sound transmission through flooring and are quite cost effective when installed during construction. However, they can border on cost prohibitive when they are installed "post-construction." Sound barrier materials, which block sound transmission between rooms, are also more cost effective when installed during initial construction. They are generally easier to retro-fit than vibration control products.

Bigger Room Equals Bigger Budget

There really is no basis for "good, better, best" price ranges for acoustic room treatments. Rather, the material requirements generally follow the size of the space and its intended use. Lecture halls, music rooms, libraries, and gymnasiums all have their own

distinct acoustical needs. Also, as obvious as it may seem, a large auditorium requires more material than a small one in proportion to its dimensions.

It is worth noting that many product specifications will show absorption as a coefficient. This requires conversion to total absorption in sabins if you wish to compare various materials. While cost is measured in dollars, sound absorption is generally measured in sabins. How much sound absorption, in sabins, is needed to achieve a desired result follows a diminishing return in effectiveness. That is, one quantity is required to reduce the reverberation time (RT60) of a room by four seconds, from 'RT60 = 8 seconds' down to 'RT60 = 4 seconds'. The same amount again is needed for two additional seconds reduction from 'RT60 = 4 seconds' down to 'RT60 = 2 seconds'. A third equal amount is required for the last one second, where the room would be ideal for speech intelligibility.

Reverb Reduction Results

First there is acoustical wall covering, which is generally a ribbed fabric material about one quarter-inch in thickness and having a Noise

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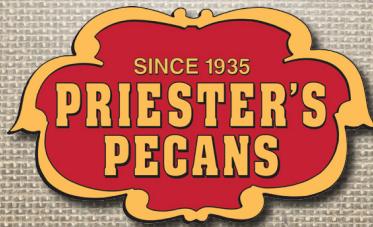
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Reduction Coefficient (NRC) of about 0.20 to 0.25. This converts to 1/5th or 1/4th of a sabin per square foot of material. This is averaged over the NRC frequencies of 250, 500, 1000 and 2000 Hertz (cycles per seconds to the older folks).

By comparison, a standard one-inch thick acoustical wall panel (fabric wrapped, high-density, fiberglass board) usually has an NRC of about 0.80. Therefore, roughly four times the surface coverage of an acoustical wall fabric covering is needed to come close to achieving the same result as one-inch thick acoustical wall panels. Total cost may be constant. This, however, is not the whole story.

If you have "bass" sound waves, which are long, a deeper or more resonant acoustical material will be needed for sound control and costs will go up. The mid-range frequencies, such as the human voice, are shorter (1 kHz = 13.5 inches). Basic fiberglass wall panels can absorb that for around five dollars per square foot. Low frequencies, such as those produced by home theater woofers, are much longer: 40 Hz = 28.5 FT; 20 Hz = 56.5 FT.

Large sound waves require large devices. Absorbing auditorium sound in the 60Hz

range is often accomplished with polycylindrical (barrel-shaped) sound diffusers. Large diffusers often perform double duty as both diffusers and "bass traps." However, larger devices often bring larger price tags—in this case, approximately \$29 per square foot of wall area treated.

You should also remember when comparing absorptive devices, that ceiling baffles are often an economical choice. Although a typical acoustical ceiling baffle is 2' X 4', the absorptive surface area is actually greater. This is because when these baffles are hung vertically, both sides and the edges are exposed.

Whereas a two-inch thick 2' X 4' wall panel typically exhibits absorption of about 8.4 sabins, the similar-sized ceiling baffle can achieve 17.9 sabins of absorption. This is more than twice the absorption for the same footprint. And while 2" wall panels can cost about \$14.00 per sabin, the vertically hung ceiling baffles can come in as low as \$2 per sabin when using the vinyl covered version. Therefore, ceiling baffles can reduce both reverberation and costs.

Quiet vs. Quality – Absorption vs. Diffusion

Over the past three decades, sound diffusion has increasingly become a factor in room treatment. While its consideration is necessary to achieve top sound quality, it is harder to measure and quantify than the effects of sound absorption. Some labs are now testing sound diffusers, with the results displayed in three dimensional graphs. Sound diffusers should be considered in room design for any critical listening environment.

Unfortunately, since sound diffusion is by far the most esoteric of acoustical treatments, it's usually cut first when money gets tight.

Cost Increases

This takes us back to budget issues and the biggest cost drivers. Assuming all materials considered for a commercial project will meet Class 1(A) fire ratings, the single most influential component on price is usually the finish. The industry standard finish for most acoustical wall panels is a low cost, "acoustically transparent" fabric which is available in sixty colors. This fabric is used by most acoustical wall panel manufacturers in the United

The advertisement features a large, stylized logo for "SqwIncher SQUEEZE FUN-RAISER". Below the logo, text reads "COOL FREEZER POP HYDRATION for your PRACTICE & PERFORMANCE!". At the bottom, there is a call to action: "CLICK!...or Visit Sqwincher.com/music". In the bottom left corner, there is a logo for "Crossmen Connexion" with the tagline "DISTRIBUTOR OF SQWINCHER". Several bags of Sqwincher Freezer Pops are shown in the background, with visible flavors like "Berry" and "Orange". A group of young performers, possibly a band or choir, are shown in the background, some holding microphones.

States, and panel costs for average-sized panels will generally fall in the \$8 - \$12 per square foot range. However, the use of more "exotic" fabric materials, the kind sometimes specified by interior designers, can often increase the price by as much as three times. Custom fabrics are also often more difficult to work with.

Other factors in acoustical panel pricing are shapes and sizes. Since both large and small rectangular panels have four corners, they actually require roughly the same amount of labor to produce. Therefore, using larger size wall panels can often reduce job costs. Other items, such as mounting hardware, follow in proportion to size.

Also, Vinyl (PVC) is an extremely cost effective covering for ceiling baffles, which are usually high above and may disappear into the ceiling anyway.

Timely approval of final specifications can also help to avoid cost overruns. A last minute rush job can require overtime and expedited freight fees. Often these are not considered when a project is in the planning stage. A job cannot begin until there is a "sign-off" defining what is to be built.

Sound and Cost Containment

So far we have mainly discussed acoustic absorption as it relates to airborne sound. However, there is also structure borne vibration. Structural vibration can travel across a room or even into other rooms. This situation can require sound isolation to keep sound in or out. Absorbing materials do not stop sound penetration.

Stopping sound requires mass. Heavy dense materials will exhibit high Sound Transmission Loss (STL). An example is gypsum board (drywall). Layers of different thicknesses and densities will improve its effectiveness, as the sound must change speed as it changes medium, thereby losing energy. Adding a layer of thin high mass material, such as a vinyl sound barrier, further improves transmission loss. Vinyl barriers can also aid to block sound after construction.

These materials can be applied to a finished wall surface post construction and then dressed up with an acoustical wall fabric. This extra treatment is less than \$2 per square foot.

While barriers used in combination with absorbers are an effective treatment for airborne sound, treating structure borne noise

requires de-coupling. Steel beams and even concrete will allow sound to travel up several floors or down the street, if there are common plumbing connections.

Floating a floor or adding mass in the construction stage is always easier and lower cost than attempting to treat structural noise later. Vibration pads matched to the floor load are not only effective, but they are also inexpensive. A 24-inch square pad, cut into 4" squares, will cover a substantial floor area when placed 16" on center 12 inches apart. This is about 432 SqFt per 24' X 24" pad, or roughly 21 cents per square foot.

Hopefully you've found this primer helpful. Remember: Define your problem, set your budget, find a good partner or consultant, and set a realistic timeline that you adhere to.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: C. Nicholas Colleran, Jr. is a former recording artist and recording engineer. He wrote a business plan for his sound company while with a CPA firm. He is now a principal of Acoustics First Corporation working to control sound and eliminate noise.

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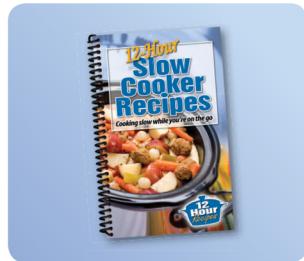
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