On Tuesday, October 6 I decided to observe the 7th and 8th grade show choir during the last period of the day. I’ve seen the teacher interact with and teach students before, and he has a very commanding, type A personality and good rapport with the students. The teacher had just recently changed the setup of the chairs and risers in the room, so the students were reacting to the change and talking more than usual at the beginning of class. The teacher responded to this with a loud commanding voice and the class jumped straight into vocal warm-ups.

Though the class spent 10-15 minutes on warm-ups, the pacing was lightning fast. The teacher prefaced each exercise with either a short demonstration of the exercise with his voice and the piano, or with an instruction such as “sitting up” or “round vowel shapes!” Though I have some background in singing, I was still impressed to hear and see some of the parallels between the choral warm-ups versus the ones used in a band or string setting. The students began with ascending and descending scales in solfege. Next, they moved to thirds on “wee-oh, wee-oh, etc.” which not only helped establish tonality, but stretched and promoted bloodflow in their face. Then they did arpeggios, worked on diction, sang scales as a cannon in solfege, and sang a chorale in four different keys. I was extremely impressed with the teacher’s quick pacing, but I was even more impressed that despite the speed the students and teacher were able to cover everything needed to sing efficiently throughout the remainder of the lesson. Even more impressive was the high level of musicianship demonstrated by the teacher and the high expectations he held his students to even during warm-ups.

As soon as the warm-ups were done, the students became extremely talkative. This put me off at first, but as soon as the teacher started playing the piano for the first song to be rehearsed the students sat up straight and became attentive. I’m assuming this level of respect from the students was addressed early on in the semester, and the teacher has a very consistent Type A personality.

Though the teacher has a percussion and instrumental background, he also had a fantastic singing voice. His consonants were clear, his vowels were round, he could project over the class, and his use of vibrato sounded very relaxed and natural. He was a perfect example of a teacher who understood comprehensive musicianship. The choir had just recently performed a concert a week prior, so they were working on new music. Even though the teacher was sitting behind a piano, his pitch recognition and retention was spot on, and he was able to sing almost any voice part accurately. The students were working on a Christmas medley, so there were some interesting key changes and accidentals that made the inner voice parts quite difficult. Nevertheless, the teacher’s error detection was quick and his delivery was succinct. Whenever he gave instruction or feedback, it was always very concise. For example, if the alto’s were singing an F natural instead of an F#, he would quickly play the two so that the students could hear the difference, and would then isolate that part with the alto’s. After only a minute or two, the choir would be singing together again. He always gave the other students something to listen for or a goal while another group was singing, and would only spend as much time as was necessary so the class would stay engaged.

The teacher provided many different mediums for the students to learn their music. Just a few of the strategies he used included: modeling, chanting, solfege, singing with a backing track, singing with the piano, and singing a cappella. Just like an instrumental teacher would ask her students to use open, round oral cavities while playing, the choir teacher would tell the students to “show their tonsils” and sing open and relaxed. He would preface each repetition or activity with a goal, but he was often speaking over the students as soon as they stopped. If the teacher’s personality wasn’t as strong, I doubt a more soft-spoken teacher would have been as successful with these students. If he spoke quieter and more reserved, he could tap into his more boisterous voice only when necessary. The dynamic between the teacher and the students seemed to work, but I’m not sure I would have been as successful in his position. One particular male student is in both band and show choir, and he often acts up in band class. He is extremely social and talented, and so he likes to act out during class and show off. This student is given consequences during band for misbehavior, but he doesn’t get the same treatment in choir. I think that because many of the students in the class act in a similar way, this behavior carries into band because he believes it is acceptable behavior. I will have to keep a closer eye on this student throughout the semester.

I was extremely impressed with the teacher’s pacing and level of musicianship. The students were constantly engaged and excited, and they always had a goal or concept to focus on. Though the dynamic between the teacher and the students was shocking for me, it worked very well for the teacher’s personality. It was interesting to see how music standards are taught in a choral versus instrumental setting.