

Singing in Style

Before the first note is uttered in a choral performance, impressions have already been made. The arrangement of the singers, their physical appearance, posture, and facial expressions – all of these elements communicate volumes about the character of the ensemble. And perhaps the most striking feature that the audience will key in on is the clothing a choir wears during a performance. Most vocal ensembles opt for a uniform look to convey a sense unity, that each member is part of a greater whole. For school groups, standardized apparel can also take the guesswork out of the “what to wear” dilemma, while imbuing students with an air of professionalism and a heightened sense of import.

With an eye on the latest trends – robes versus formal wear? Ease-of-care versus comfort? – *Choral Director* has put together this roundtable in which seven choral professionals (five experienced educators and two long-time apparel suppliers) offer thoughts on choral performance apparel.

Darrell T. Crowther

Choral Director
Coronado High School
Las Vegas, Nev.

Choral fashion has improved in that it is melding with more fashionable trends of the day. This is particularly the case with fabric choices. When I was in my high school choir, it seemed that every choir’s dress was loud, large, and overly shiny. Now, the fabrics are more comfortable and stylish.

I prefer black for my choirs because it is easiest to maintain, it allows the focus to remain on the children’s faces, and it never distracts. Any fabric that does not need to be dry-cleaned is preferable. Better yet is the new trend of fabrics that don’t need to be ironed, they’re simply wash-and-wear.

Modesty, price, quality reputation, style, and variety in catalog choices are the factors I use to determine from whom I’ll make the purchase. I have been consistently impressed with Stage Accents. While many of my students don’t always agree, I think modesty is an absolute must – it pleases parents, the director, and invites less criticism from the choral community at large. I am always looking for dresses that cover the shoulders and have a neckline. I also am always on the lookout for the “empire waist,” as these are the



most flattering for all body types, especially large girls.

Our boys wear tuxedos, which have not had many noticeable changes through the years. They are always modest, and almost always consistent in price.

Rebecca R. Herring

Department of Fine and Performing Arts Chair

E.E. Waddell High School
Charlotte, N.C.

The reality of life is that our ensembles are judged first by their appearance before anyone hears a note that we sing. A visual presentation that is uniform in design and color can open gates of perception that might be otherwise closed. A standard look for

“We can be grateful that the disco spandex craze has been firmly and permanently interred.” – Rebecca Herring

students also provides equalization for students of varying economic backgrounds. I always tell my students that they are being judged in the moment they step on the stage and that the image they present will color the perception of the listener, and affect what the audience hears.

On the other hand, there are often financial issues about purchasing outfits that are not provided by schools, some of whom have a supply that is recycled year in and year out. Additionally, body types can vary greatly from year to year, and what looks appropriate on incoming ninth graders may not still be viable during the senior year. Another consideration is that gender ratios do not remain constant, so maintaining dual inventories can be problematic. If outfits are recycled, repair and dry-cleaning expenses have to be factored into the equation.

Back in the day, every school had robes and stoles and wore them with pride (and not a small amount of perspiration). We have passed through the look of monogrammed blazers and/or vests, and we can be grateful that the disco spandex craze has been firmly and permanently interred. The look to-

day seems to be much more “wearable,” with polo shirts, chino-type slacks and/or skirts being in vogue. This trend is tied to improvement in fabrics that are easy to care for and the need for busy families to have low maintenance clothing.

With the exception of show choirs, the look seems to be one of almost “business casual.” Robes are financially draining on programs and do not seem to be in use by general ensembles, although they are still popular with gospel choirs.

For my own choirs, I have always maintained that the trusty neutrals of black, white and khaki can be adapted to every setting. A navy and a maroon also can be very versatile. With appropriate accessories, artfully fitted and ironed casual outfits can become very dressy. Natural fabrics – cottons, summer weight wools and good blends of these fabrics that are treated

to be wrinkle resistant – are the mainstays of the combinations that my students use. Quick touch-ups with the classroom iron salvage many a last-minute shirt that was in the bottom of someone’s locker.

My career has been spent largely in schools with high populations of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch programs. Money is always an issue. When I get a catalog from a vendor, I look at the lowest-price items first. If those are clothing I know the most affluent student in my classes would have difficulty with, that catalog is discarded. It really comes down to budget, then style, then durability, then availability. It may not be politically correct to say that sources such as Wal-Mart or Target can be realistically the best way to go, if a careful eye to style and respectful treatment of the apparel is judiciously applied. If families cannot afford to put gas in a car, they are not going to pony up money for a limited use outfit for one child.

Since attaching a label of “concert apparel” automatically adds to the cost of a garment, it would be

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33 years, 27 of which have been at Pearl High School in Pearl, Miss. She currently serves as Director of Choral Activities and District Arts Coordinator for Pearl Public Schools. Donna is a 2003 National Board Certified Teacher.



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Darrell T. Crowther

is in his seventh year as choral director at Coronado High School in Las Vegas, Nevada. His choirs consistently earn superior ratings at local and national festivals, and he currently chairs the Clark County School District Honor Choir and serves as editor for both state affiliation newsletters of MENC and ACDA.



Bruce C. Lengacher is director of cho-

ral activities at Acalanes High School in Lafayette, Calif. His program consists of seven choirs and 190 students. Bruce resides in El Cerrito, Calif, and also works as a composer/arranger and clinician in the greater S.F. Bay Area.



Russell Hammond is the music department chair and director of choral activities at Ledyard High School, in Ledyard, Conn. Russell has served as both president and treasurer of the Connecticut Chapter of ACDA, and was a site chair for the 2002 ACDA National Convention in New York City and the 2004 National Convention in Los Angeles. He is listed in both Who’s Who Among American Teachers as well as Who’s Who in America and was the 2003 Connecticut ACDA choral director of the year.



nice to see suppliers offer an economy line that is cost effective for those with severely restricted budgets. I would also like to see kits offered so that fabric and patterns might be purchased and the actual construction of the items done by parents or the fashion design classes in collaboration with the music program.

Performing ensembles serve as their school's musical ambassadors to the greater community. A visual identity that is easily associated with a program can greatly enhance the impression it leaves. Looking good also bolsters self-esteem and gives pride and unity to an ensemble. In my career, I have had students that have asked to wear their concert outfit to family events such as funerals and weddings, as it was the only "good" outfit that they had. As humans we are creatures of visual input and so much of what we believe enters through our eyes. This can be used to the advantage of the ensemble, if care and thought is put into creating the right visual image.

Bruce C. Lengacher

Director of Choral Activities
Acalanes High School
Lafayette, Calif.

Choral uniforms provide a sense of ensemble, a professional presentation, a unity of visual appeal, and ensemble identity.

Recently, I've seen a lot more band collared shirts and vests than tuxedos. Eventually I would like to see these become more sleek and streamlined. For girls, I would hope that choir dresses become more fashionable and less like bridesmaid dresses.

Our school colors are blue and white, and my ladies have two different dresses. For the Women's Ensemble, they wear the Southeastern Catalina. For Concert Choir, they have the same dress only with a blue rosette added to the broach on the front. My Chamber Women have calliope dresses that are black on top and have blue and black taffeta on the bottom.

I'm always looking for accessories for the ladies that can be used to designate membership in different ensembles. I also hunt for clothing

that is flattering to all body types and doesn't look trashy or cheap. My men wear single-breasted notched-collared tuxedos with band-collared shirts and button covers.

One element we value is fabrics that can be packed in a suitcase and come out looking good. We've found that the calliope dresses can be balled up in a backpack and come out looking like they just got back from the drycleaners. I only wish they were made of more natural/breathable material, as it can get stifflingly hot and smelly on stage or after extended periods of wear.

Donna W. McCommon

Director of Choral Activities, District Arts Coordinator
Pearl Public Schools
Pearl, Miss.

Choral fashion has taken on a different look over the years with increased combinations of colors and styles. There are more shirt, tie and, cummerbund choices for men that change the look of the basic tux. My observation is that more groups through the years are opting for tuxes

"Any non-uniform visual distraction takes away from the art of making music."

– Donna McCommon

for the men. The classic concert apparel has maintained its formal look, even with extended choices. I do not anticipate a dramatic change in true concert attire.

For our dresses, we use royal blue blended fabric. A blended fabric travels well and requires little refreshing after being packed away. It is also basically wrinkle free. Because of this, our dresses don't require much maintenance, so they last for a number of years. Our men wear the classic black tux.

Availability of obtaining the same material and dress style has been very important. Our dresses are two-piece, which allows for flexibility in fitting girls year to year. I have found them to work well for all sizes. In the past, each girl purchased their dress be-

cause they would wear it for at least three years. However, we now have a supply of dresses and the girls can rent them each year for a minimal fee. This has proven to work well for the students.

Selection of apparel can be challenging. The overall look of the choir is a determining factor each group should consider carefully. Today's students want the apparel to look good on the individual, but it's important to remember that a group look that is pleasing to the eye enhances the performance. Any non-uniform visual distraction takes away from the art of making music.


Russell Hammond

Music Department Chair, Director of Choral Activities
Ledyard High School
Ledyard, Conn.

For our groups, we want uniforms that are classy and timeless. We stay away from trends. We want our concert apparel to make a good first impression that says, "This group takes pride in their appearance," not, "Wow, what were they thinking with those outfits!" Concert apparel helps the first impression but the substance must be about your performance.

I have not seen a huge change in fashion. The differences I see have always been regional, where different parts of the country seem to have very different tastes in concert apparel. I don't foresee any significant changes in the future except, perhaps, for the ability of groups to pay for concert attire.

We like traditional black for our top groups and use school colors (blue and white) for our middle level groups. Our beginning groups use dress pants and white shirts or blouses, and guys wear ties.

My impression is that if you look, you can find just about anything. The best choice I ever made regarding apparel was to ask for input from my girls. When they help select the outfits, they cannot later complain about them. However, one word of advice: choose the girls who help you carefully. 

Vickie Hall
President
Thomas Creative Apparel



Ginger Clark
Designer & Owner
Praise Hymn Fashions



How have choral fashion trends changed in the past few years?

Vickie Hall: We have seen a downward trend in the popularity of choral robes for the religious sect. However, many schools still continue to use choir robes. Although styles haven't changed much in the past few years, some schools have opted for attached stoles in a contrasting color. This helps eliminate "lost items."

Ginger Clark: Choral fashions have become more interchangeable. We now see many more two-piece outfits instead of one-piece dresses.

What are currently the most popular colors and fabrics your choral customers are requesting?

VH: Normally a school will order robes in the school colors. Churches on the other hand opt for a color that is complimentary to the church interior. We have seen a popularity of orange, wines, and blues. Fabric choices have been tough. As the manufacturing of clothing has moved overseas, suppliers are limiting fabric and color choices. This has had a big impact on the industry.

Also, with the current state of the economy, many suppliers have gone out of business and others have consolidated. This means that the range of fabrics and colors is now more limited as suppliers reduce inventory costs.

GC: Our most common customer requests are for black. After that, people usually request red, or school colors. As for fabrics, we've seen some great new material that has texture, shine, and lots of sparkle.

What specific elements should school choral directors be aware of when selecting performance apparel for purchase?

VH: Involve the kids in the process to help promote a positive image, uniformity of robes and desire to wear them.

GC: It is critical that choral directors think about size, size, and size. Look for garments that fit fuller figured gals and guys.

Additional thoughts on school choral apparel?

VH: Some schools have tried choral apparel such as dresses for the girls and vests for the guys, however, these must be purchased by the individual. They are also a more fitted garment which many times requires alterations to be done.

Choral robes are very forgiving and allow for a uniform appearance, allowing the audience to enjoy the music and not be distracted by various dress.

GC: Uniformity is always best. Our most successful products involve soft, stretchable fabrics that are also washable.

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