

Encore!

Advocating for the Arts in Education
Terre Johnson



Terre Johnson is Minister of Music for Vestavia Hills Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama and the National R&S chair for Music & Worship.

ACDA has taken a strong stand as an advocate for the arts in education. In this interview, the author interviews Terry Taylor, who was Minister of Music at the First Baptist Church of Dothan, Alabama from 2000 to 2008, and became a leading arts advocate in that community. He is now Minister of Music at the Shades Crest Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Terry describes an "Encore" program he initiated in the public schools of Dothan, through which he and many other volunteers from throughout the community provided singing opportunities for children in elementary schools where no music education was taking place. Consequently, those efforts led to the hiring of music educators for the elementary schools, the development of middle school choral music, and an arts program for the entire school system.

Johnson Describe your background, and how you became interested in music education.

Taylor I went to Belmont College in Nashville, where I had music education courses, and Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where I studied with Michael Hawn, a music education professor. I began to understand the dramatic impact that music has on children, particularly at younger ages, and the way it changes their brain and their lives for a lifetime. I began to spend more time and interest in this area.

Johnson How did your interests in childhood development and learning styles lead you to your concern for the elementary children in Dothan, Alabama?

Taylor Over the years, I've been involved in writing curriculum materials for children's choirs in churches. When I arrived in Dothan and realized we had ten elementary schools and none of the students were receiving music education, I began to look for opportunities I might have to make a musical impact. Through a relationship I developed with an administrator, I received an invitation to go to one elementary school and volunteer to teach choral music and introduce fifth-grade children to playing recorders. For three years, I went every week and taught in three classrooms.

It was interesting to see the impact the musical experiences had on these children. Teachers would point out children who would stand at the window waiting for my car, because they couldn't wait for music class. The affect it had on student motivation and engagement was significant. And, seeing the joy they had as they learned and shared their music, made it a transformative experience for me.

One of the recorder songs we learned was *Ode to Joy*. So I thought it would be interesting to bring a recording of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, and a poster of Beethoven. I was sharing with them a description of Beethoven, his peculiar personality and his wild, bushy hair. They didn't really know what to think of him, and most of them thought he was funny. But I realized that they had never heard of him. To them, Beethoven was a dog in a children's movie. It was an epiphany for me to realize that my teaching was the first exposure to classical music for these fifth graders. We want our children to be contributors and participants in the arts in the community, but in this case, they were given no background or foundation to enable them to do so.

Another motivation for me to teach these children to sing was the fact that their musical/artistic influences came from a "pop

style" of singing. Very likely, they would never develop a head-tone, where they could have a beautiful expansive range. They would just stay in a limited chest voice *tessitura*. Of course, some experts say that 17–20 percent of the children will never discover their singing voice or match pitch without some instruction. We know that children who haven't tapped into that singing style by third grade are more likely to have a limited range, and sing inaccurately throughout their life. So we have a limited window of time in which to impact the musical experience of children in the lower grades. I realized that we had 4,000 students in our elementary schools who were receiving no music instruction. That fact alone was a motivational force to find some strategy or initiative to bring music to these students. There had been music educators in the past, but they had been cut in budget proration, and were a distant memory.

Johnson What is the "Encore" program? How did it begin, how did you raise the needed resources, and how did you get it activated in the school system?

Taylor I was driven by the need for music education experiences for these students, and by a certain level of fatigue, after three years of volunteering, while being so busy in my work at the church. I was leaving the school one day thinking about how much the students received from their encounter with music. The teachers were telling me how, on music day, they had a different class, and how the whole atmosphere was different. Consequently, I was asking myself how I might multiply my efforts. I had asked others to help in the past, but they didn't feel adequately prepared or have the appropriate musical resources.

The idea came to develop a songbook, with 27 songs, organized thematically to accommodate the school year. We incorporated simple teaching plans, including purposeful body movement, emphasizing the macro beat and matching the form of the song. Also, we included a CD for the purpose of playing a performance of the song under instruction, while the children moved, and as a means of providing accompaniment. This resource was fairly foolproof. We felt that any volunteer could teach in this manner. I had a radio spot to enlist volunteers that said, "If you have a little time in your schedule, a little music in your background, and a desire to make a big difference in the life of a child, you can be an Encore volunteer." If someone could keep a steady beat and match pitch, they didn't require special music education training to use the resources and guide the children through these musical experiences.

I was fortunate to have a music educator in our system's one magnet school named Kim Price, who collaborated with me to develop the songbook. We had a professional organizer in our church choir named Debbie Yurevich, who agreed to coordinate the assignment of volunteers and to organize the program administratively. I was then free to give creative guidance and work on promoting the Encore program.

We were joined by Dothan's Cultural Arts Center, who gave great support and funded the program. My three years of volunteering gave us credibility with the schools. They were assured that I didn't have any motives other than giving the children a musical experience, and advocating for music education in all the schools. When we asked for an audience with the school administrators, the principal, at whose school I had volunteered, was able to

stand and give a recommendation that was followed by the others.

Once the administration, board of education, and Cultural Arts Center agreed to the program, we started to solicit volunteers. We felt that any interested person could use the established resources and go into a classroom and give the children a singing experience. My colleagues at area churches pitched the idea to their choirs, and we received a lot of volunteers from the church choirs in the area. We also talked to civic clubs, and promoted Encore on the radio, in the newspaper, and on television. We had an organizational meeting at which we needed to perform background checks and give orientation and training, even though we didn't know who would come. One hundred and forty-four volunteers appeared that day. Obviously, that number overwhelmed us. We discovered that our community had a lot of people who shared my passion for providing music to the students in our schools.

When the volunteers were trained and assigned to the schools, some of the city's more artistic people went into the schools every week, and they were experiencing what I had been experiencing.

These students loved music. It changed the way they thought and felt about school and academics, and the way in which they related to their parents. The schools, on the other hand, discovered that a Parent Teachers' Organization meeting that had received low participation before was suddenly full because the fourth grade Encore students were singing.

On those occasions, the principal would talk about academic successes at the school, and how music was seen as increasing the connection between the school and the parents, which, of course, is central to the success of the student. Music was creating that opportunity. All of a sudden, we had a much broader base of advocacy for music in the schools.

At the end of the academic year, we

would have an all-city concert, at which students in grades two through five would sing their favorite Encore songs. Students would come in their school tee-shirts, and hundreds of parents and grandparents would come, frequently crying tears of joy after hearing their child sing for the first time. It was an overwhelming experience, seeing that many children singing together.

At the end of the second concert, the superintendent stood and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, we have funded hiring music teachers for all our elementary schools." As music education advocates, it was the moment for which we had been waiting.

Johnson After such a positive outcome from the Encore program, how did you channel your efforts and the interests of the volunteers of the community?

Taylor After the new elementary music teachers were hired, we began advocating for a new program called "Arts

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Children at an elementary school singing in the Encore program

Integration”—a school reform model promoted by the Alabama Council on the Arts. It integrates more arts into the core curriculum of the school, which, in this instance, necessitated the hiring of several more music teachers.

We had four middle schools in Dothan without choral music. Now that we have music teachers in our elementary schools, I have turned my focus on advocating for the re-development of choruses in these schools. I have contacted several other ministers of music, and we are volunteering to direct after-school choruses at these schools.

In the school where I was assigned, we were asked to meet in the band room. During the last period, I was working to set up for rehearsal. Sixty-three students had been auditioned, so we needed more chairs. I was opening doors looking for chairs, and found a room with levels, and realized that it looked like a choir room. But, it had desks about eight feet apart on each level, which led me to asked a teacher friend what the choir room was being used for. She replied that the room was used for in-school suspension. I thought it was fascinating and ironic that this room that had been originally designed for creativity and artistry was used for punishment, especially given that artistic and creative students are far less likely to behave in a way that requires punishment.

I received permission to have the desks moved, and to use the choir room for its original purpose. For the first time in many years, students could be heard singing in the choir room. The students responded unbelievably to the opportunity.

Another bit of irony was that there are two high schools in Dothan, both of which have choral directors. With no middle school programs, except for our volunteer efforts, and until recently, no elementary school singing experiences, these high school directors received students with no knowledge base on which to build a choral program, or motivation to be involved in choral singing.

There is a direct link between children having singing experiences when they are young and in middle school, and having an exciting, vibrant high school choral program.

These middle school students didn't know what a chorus was. So I went to a friend who taught middle school chorus in a nearby town, and asked to borrow her DVD from a recent concert. I showed it to the students, and let them see what a chorus looks like, how they stand, how they watch the director, and how they sing expressively. It was an interesting and tremendously rewarding experience.

Johnson How were the songbook resources used by the volunteers in the “Encore” program? What were the criteria for the selection of the songs? Describe to what extent the CD provided an accompaniment for teaching the songs in the songbooks for volunteers with limited teaching experience

to succeed.

Taylor Without the resources, our volunteers would have been overwhelmed. I was a volunteer myself, and it was interesting to arrive and see another volunteer coming out with a notebook and CD player, smiling because their class had been successful.

The challenge we faced was finding something affordable. We saw some very exciting resources, but they were cost-prohibitive, at a price of several dollars per child. Consequently, we drew on songs from “Music K–8” from Plank Road Publishing (www.music8.com), that are used by many teachers as supplementary materials. Now that we have music teachers, we have fully accredited music education textbook resources. That is obviously the ideal. But to get started with our volunteers, we took songs that are used as supplementary materials by established music teachers, and made

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them our core material. It was a little like giving the kids all dessert. The reason for this resource decision was that each school could subscribe, for pennies per child, and get the resources we needed. "Music K-8" also posts hundreds of songs online, and we were able to listen to them and glean our favorites to use in our resource material. This approach would not be the ideal one for the long term, but we needed it to capture the imagination of the students, teachers, and administrators.

Some of the songs had an undeniable pop quality, and the voices on the recordings exhibited some chest voice, but we encouraged and trained our volunteers to get the students to sing using their head voice. We realized that there would be a "shelf-life" expectancy for volunteers, and we needed resources that would not add to the stress of their involvement, and be immediately useable.

In answer to the last part of your question, we took the selected songs, and made a CD for the volunteers, which included one with a performance of the song, and one with the accompaniment.

Johnson How did the investment of the Cultural Arts Center impact the activities of Encore?

Taylor Their contribution was huge. It was an enormous step of faith on their part. I just went and knocked on their door with my idea. By the time it was over, I was on their executive board. They paid for all the printing to duplicate 4,000 student books that include words and music, and notebooks for the volunteers. We also provided notebooks for the classroom teachers, so that if a volunteer couldn't come, the teacher could carry on without them. The Cultural Arts Center also paid for the CD duplication.

Johnson As you described your middle school volunteerism, I am realizing that the students in your middle school chorus must have been the children who were learning to sing in the Encore program. Talk about the continuum of music learning that has been created for these students through these volunteer efforts.

Taylor It's an exciting thing to see a child who has no music or artistic expression in their background having these experiences, and having their "artistic light" awakened. I think once that light comes on, it stays on. Once a child learns to be expressive it not only affects them, but also changes their teacher in the process.

One year, I was the fourth grade Encore volunteer, and then I was assigned to the fifth grade the next year, and the middle school effort started the next. So, after three years, these students came to know me as

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their music teacher, despite the fact I was a volunteer. I, on the other hand, was able to see these children developing and growing through these years. We observed them developing the ability to create art, and to do it with increasing excellence. I think they intuitively know when what they are being taught is watered down. There is something about creating art at a higher level that engages and challenges them, and motivates them to participate.

Johnson You mentioned that your advocacy had led to this educational reform effort called "Arts Integration." Where did you discover that program, and how did you influence local educators to not only consider it, but also have them understand the importance in the Dothan schools?

Taylor It was interesting that some people said, "You shouldn't be volunteering, because you are rewarding poor choices on the part of the school system. If you provide volunteers in music, they will never hire music educators." I understand the validity in that argument, but at the same time, you have class after class going through school with no music, during critical times in their learning process, while they wait for the school system to hire the needed teachers.

So while we provided the volunteer effort, we realized that there had to be a strong advocacy effort for what we were doing. As I was researching for this advocacy, a book was recommended to me by Diana Green of the Alabama Council on the Arts, called *Third Space: When Learning Matters*, from Arts Education Partnership. It described programs in which the arts are placed at the core of the curriculum of under-performing schools.

They are integrated into all subject matter in every subject area. The Alabama Council on the Arts is finding that the arts are the way for students to exhibit higher-order thinking, and the escalation of student engagement. The Council is not just interested in teaching to "fill-in-the-blank answers," but is more interested in the students learning to be critical, problem-solving thinkers. Schools that have begun this program are seeing the academic performance of their students exponentially improving, which gets everyone's attention. Schools in low-income areas that have adopted this program are out-perform-

ing schools in higher-income areas.

I was speaking to an administrator in Oklahoma who had implemented this program, and I asked how many arts teachers they had. She replied, "Everyone is an arts teacher." They still have arts educators and those programs go on in a richer way, and the classroom teacher utilizes those people in a consulting role. The most dramatic change comes in student motivation and engagement. The school is no longer a place you have to attend, but a community to which you belong, where students get up in the morning eager to go. It has a great impact on the community. These arts-integrated schools keep databases of local artists, who regularly contribute to the school's artistic life. Schools have waiting lists of teacher applicants, because they know they will be creatively engaging highly motivated learners.

I was able to present this initiative to music teachers, and then take teachers and administrators on a field trip to a successful program in Mississippi. Now, two of our lowest-performing schools have become arts-integrated schools. They will become models for the rest of the schools in the system. Our goal is for each school to become arts-integrated, with a full complement of arts educators.

Johnson In addition to your role as minister of music at the First Baptist Church of Dothan, you have gone from being a volunteer in the elementary schools to soliciting a large corps of volunteers, to directing a middle school chorus, and to advocating system-wide change and enhancement in the arts. Summarize the magic that influenced and created the Encore program.

Taylor All these efforts involved a team of people from the community, and my church was very supportive. Twenty-one of the Encore volunteers came from my church. Many volunteers came from the other church choirs in the area. In addition, the two choirs from the high schools volunteered, so that we had high school students teaching music to elementary students and serving as mentors to them. Hopefully, some of those high school students will go on to become music teachers as a result of that experience. My point is that all of these things have been characterized by teamwork and community effort.



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