

Du holde Kunst: Three Music Programs in Prisons

MTNA 2020 Virtual Conference—Session Handout

Part I: Voices of Hope—Finding Vocal Freedom Behind Bars

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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/>
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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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:

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

Articles

Hamilton, Anna. *The Music Inside*. Piano Magazine, Winter 2019-2020, Vol. 12, No. 5.

_____. *Music Knows No Walls*. Clavier Companion, May/June 2018.

_____. *The Gift of Music: Teaching Piano in a Women’s Correctional Institution*. Clavier Companion, July/August 2014.

Part III: Prison Outreach for Student Performances

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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

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2012.

Hinton, Elizabeth. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of how our Government Segregated America*. New York: Liveright, 2017.

Taibbi, Matt. *I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2017.

Forman, James. *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017.

Burton, Susan. *Becoming Ms Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women*. New York: New Press, 2017.

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2014.

Kerman, Piper. *Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2013.

Morris, Monique. *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*. New York: New Press, 2015.

<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:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbxvVMu99ts&feature=youtu.be>