

# The Song of the



PHILIP STEINBACHER  
DIRECTS THE ISLAND  
SCHOOL 'OPIO CHORUS  
IN THE 2012 SPRING  
CONCERT.

# Island

At Island School in Lihue, Hawaii, Philip Steinbacher has created a thriving choral music program from the ground up with the approach that “music is for everyone.”

BY CYNTHIA DARLING



**OVER THE PAST EIGHT YEARS,** Philip Steinbacher has developed an innovative choir program at Island School in Lihue, Hawaii. The result has been nothing short of transformative for students' understanding of music and of themselves. When Steinbacher joined the Island School faculty in 2006, his process for growing the choruses was gradual: There was a small music program in place, but he was starting his chorus program from the ground up. Since the days of the fledgling choral groups and the school's first concert, enrollment has grown and is currently at a very healthy 120 students participating in one of those choirs, out of the school's preK–12 enrollment of 365. There are four choral groups: The Alaka'i Chorus, The Keiki Chorus, The 'Opio Chorus, and the



THE ISLAND SCHOOL ALAKA'I CHORUS PERFORMS AT KAUA'I COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

Island School Singers. Fifty-nine out of 121 high school students sing in the Island School Alaka'i Chorus (“alaka'i” means “leader”). There are 22 out of 90 middle school students participating in the ‘Opio Chorus (“‘opio” means “youth”). The Keiki Chorus is for fourth and fifth graders (“keiki” means “children”). There are 33 participants out of 49 students in these two grades. Finally, the select Island School Singers has a total of eight members.

Just how did Steinbacher create this robust program in such a short time? Although the chorus program grew quickly, Steinbacher was conservative at the beginning in setting up performance dates; this allowed the groups time to coalesce. “For the first two years as we got our grounding we performed only at small school assemblies and events; no major concerts. Our first full-scale public concert was held in December 2008 in the school’s Main Hall. The concert sold out—so sold out, in fact, that we actually had parents standing on the outside lanai, peering between the slats of the jalousie windows in order to see the performance. Since then, we do our concerts

at the Kaua’i Community College Performing Arts Center, which we fill.”

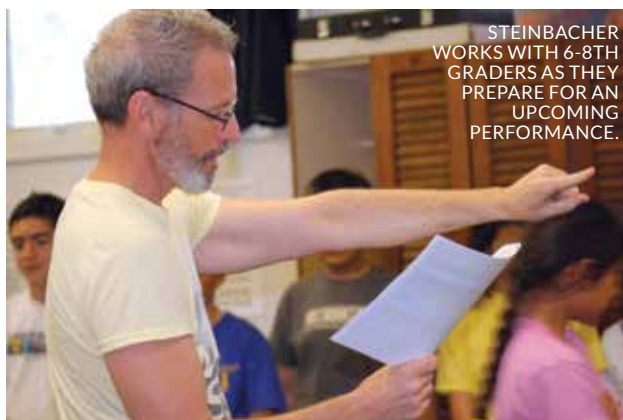
Steinbacher’s philosophy underpins all of the work he does as an educator. “I approach the development of my program, and therefore my teaching, with a spirit that music is for everyone.

*“When I think about the day that I won’t be singing with my students, my heart breaks a little.”*

So many students, when they first encounter choral singing, complain that they cannot sing. I try to help them understand that singing is a skill, a physical activity and, therefore, can be learned. They don’t come to school knowing algebra or Chinese, so they take classes to learn these things. In the same way, they sign up for chorus so they can begin to learn how to sing. They may not be accomplished masters at it, but they can progress. Singing—that is, music—is for everyone.”

Steinbacher’s approach to teaching and music is noteworthy for his open-minded perspective as well as his warmth. Additionally, he believes in appealing to students’ and audiences’ tastes. “I work hard to maintain the students’ interest—and the interest of our audiences as well. I’m willing to look for interesting or unexpected music or arrangements so things feel fresh. I incorporate a great deal of humor into all rehearsals and try to keep things moving quickly. It’s challenging, sadly, for many students to stay focused for long periods of time, so I like to keep them guessing. I’ve had students tell me my class is ‘not like any other class they’ve ever taken before,’ and I see that as a good thing.”

The music program has benefited students in many ways. Says Steinbacher, “Starting a choral program (which, in turn, strengthens the general music program) has broadened the students’ awareness, appreciation, and understanding of music in general. Students have been exposed to styles, forms, and compositions they previously did not even know existed. These are all academic or intellectual benefits, but the students have benefited in other ways also. They are more confident, more accomplished, and more willing to take risks.



STEINBACHER WORKS WITH 6-8TH GRADERS AS THEY PREPARE FOR AN UPCOMING PERFORMANCE.

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WITH PHILIP STEINBACHER

**Q What do you know to be true about teaching music that you didn't know when you started?** I thought I knew how meaningful music was and how rich the experience of making music in a group could be, but I never really understood the depth of that until I started teaching music. Now I think the mystery is deeper than I know ...

**Q If I weren't a music teacher I'd ...** be lost. My life is sometimes so insanely busy and overwhelming, but when I think about the day that I won't be singing with my students, my heart breaks a little.

**Q What advice would you give to a teacher trying to start a program similar to yours?** When I first started, I was completely, entirely overwhelmed by the prospect of trying to create a program where a program did not exist. What I learned was that I didn't have to win the war in one battle, but simply had to make sure I kept one good step ahead of the students at all times. Rome, as they say, was not built in a day.

**Q What's the biggest lesson you want your students to learn during their time in your classroom?** First, that music is for everyone. Period. Second, offering others the opportunity to experience real feelings and emotions through our music-making is one of the most important things we as humans can do.

**Q The music education profession would be better if ...** music itself were valued more. There are still times when I must battle those who see music as fluff or extracurricular, and I'm put in a position where I'm more or less expected to "understand" that sports or algebra are clearly more important and my work should take a backseat to these more viable pursuits.

**Q What have you learned about students and parents through your work over the past years?** They're human, just like me, and sometimes there's some friction, but I try never to put them out of my heart. The vast majority of them come around when there are conflicts, and a little patience and time goes a long way. Without them? No program. No program, no you!

They are more open and willing to express their emotions." The payoff goes well beyond the music classroom.

Teaching in Hawaii presents an interesting context for music education.

Steinbacher works alongside teachers who are steeped in the state's music and culture. "We have another music teacher at school (locally-born and raised) and a Hawaiian studies teacher. As I consider my knowledge of Hawaiian music and culture (even after nine years) to be limited, I don't venture much into that territory. I allow them to teach and explore with children the things they are knowledgeable about, and I concentrate on the music and skills that I am uniquely able to contribute. I think it's a win-win, for the students as well as the teachers. I would say, however, that I'm striving to learn more about the music and culture of Hawaii so that I, too, become more well-rounded."

Perhaps the greatest tribute to the success of the program comes in the form of comments from his students. Steinbacher shares two stories that point to true success. "After our recent Christmas concert, I got the following email from the mom of a fourth-grader, who just sang in his first chorus concert: 'I just wanted to send you a really quick thank you for such a beautiful concert last night. It was the first time I have attended. Joshua really loves chorus and truly enjoys you. Last night while driving home, Joshua said, 'I think tonight was more fun than going to Disneyland!' I love that story." Steinbacher also recounts another story that illustrates how classical music can become part of students' everyday parlance. "My other, recent favorite story is the remark from the freshman boy (new to music, singing, or chorus this year) who remarked on our way back from the

All-State choral festival: 'I love the Brahms. It's definitely my new favorite song.' Does it get any better than that?"

For teachers starting programs of their own, Steinbacher offers words of encouragement. "First, never give up. It sounds simple, but here's the secret that I kept reminding myself of: You alone, as the teacher, know what you are trying to create. Those who resist your vision do so because they have not been exposed to the myriad wonders and benefits that singing in a chorus (or participating in any musical ensemble)

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can bring and, therefore, they cannot possibly understand why you are doing what you do. They do not know the journey you are trying to take them on. That's not their fault—they just haven't been there. So, dig your heels in, and move forward

with the knowledge that you are doing something good for your students, for your school, for your community, and—at the risk of sounding overly



STEINBACHER INFUSES HUMOR INTO REHEARSALS AND PERFORMANCES TO ENGAGE THE STUDENTS—AND THE AUDIENCE.

sentimental—for humanity as a whole. Never give up. Second, be patient. It takes far longer than you might expect. Had I known when I started that it would take this long to achieve the level of success I'd envisioned, I never would have started the adventure. This is true of all of life's great experiences, right? Be patient and don't give up." ■