

An Oakwood University Presentation

The
Neolians

2012 Fall Concert

December 1, 2012

Oakwood University Church

5:00 pm

The Aeolians Biography



Dr. Eva B. Dykes

The Aeolians of Oakwood University was originally organized in 1946 by Dr. Eva B. Dykes. Since its inception, the choir has traveled widely, touching the hearts of both young and old with their inspirational singing. Subsequent conductors include: Mrs. Joni Pierre-Louis, Mr. Harold Anthony, Dr. Jon Robertson, Dr. Alma M. Blackmon, Dr. John Dennison, Dr. Ricky Little (a former Aeolian), Dr. Eurydice Osterman, Michele Cleveland, Lloyd Mallory, Julie Moore, Norman Creary, Dr. Wayne Bucknor (a former Aeolian) and presently, Jason Max Ferdinand (a former Aeolian).

Directors have made considerable contributions over the years. Under the direction of Dr. John Dennison, the Aeolians performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and received flattering reviews. Under the direction of Dr. Alma M. Blackmon in 1973, the group was propelled into national and international prominence with the performance of over 200 concerts in the United States, Bermuda, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, and Canada. Performances at the 1980 General Conference Session of Seventh-day Adventists in Dallas, Texas, led to an invitation from the Polish SDA Church in Warsaw, Poland, to tour that country.

Motivated by the desire for international performances, the Aeolians competed successfully in a nationwide contest to become Friendship Ambassadors for the USA. Under the sponsorship of the Friendship Ambassadors Foundation of New York City, the choir toured Romania (1981) and Great Britain (1983).

Aeolian concerts present a repertoire of choral music which ranges from the Baroque era to the twenty-first century. The Aeolians moreover are an authoritative exponent of Negro spirituals and Work songs which express the yearnings of their forefathers to be free. This is demonstrated in their early album of Negro spirituals, "Oh Freedom" (1974), which sold over 10,000 copies.

Under the God-inspired direction of Jason Max Ferdinand and accompanied on the piano by Dr. Wayne Bucknor, Chairperson of the Music Department of Oakwood University, the choir has placed "first" two years in a row (2010 & 2011) in the iSing HBCU Challenge hosted by Reid Temple AME Church in Lanham, Maryland. In December 2011, they were presented with the keys to the City of Huntsville, with December 3rd being a day named in their honor.

In January 2012, as part of the Russia-US Bilateral Presidential Commission on development of cooperation between Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama, the Aeolians were invited to sing in Moscow, Russia, at the Moscow International Performing Arts Center under the patronage of the US Ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul. God used this choir in a mighty special way.

Topping off a stellar 2011 - 2012 performance season, the Aeolians competed at the 7th World Choir Games held in Cincinnati, OH. On their first-time entrance to these competitions, they earned gold medals in all three categories of entrance and the overall championship for the Spiritual category.

This choir has been truly blessed and for this they are thankful.

The Aeolians



2012-'13 Roster

Soprano I

Alanna Aurelien
Ciara Scott
Ashlea Hendrickson
Sierra Hammond
Brittney Perry
Sydney Strickland

Soprano II

Lauren McNeal
Anne Laure Cesarin
Nia Johnson
Denae Fielder
Tirzah Hawley
Guielle Juzang
Kimberly Fouche

Alto I

Maya Raphael
Rachel Williams
Briana DeSha
Erin Tolbert
Mallory McHenry
Kaiya Flemmons

Alto II

Cheriese Roker
Jackie Willis
Shelby Brown
Breana Norris
Imani Hutton
Clarke Thedford
Ivory Wortham

Tenor I

Eric Samson
Clenol Jean
Quinn Taylor
Audi Johnson
Antonio Hargrove
Edwyn Cain
Aaron Kirkland

Tenor II

Riter Dany St. Luc
Chad Lupoe
Delany McCarthy
Alan Magny
Arion Mills
Johnny Henderson

Bass I

Anton Reid
Justin Jordan
Jeremy Jordan
Stephen Murphy
Paul Gaiter
Gregory Roper
Anthony Bolden
Terrol Stone
Antonio McFadden

Bass II

O'Brian Harris
Brent Hoyte
Marvin Jean
Gelani Banks
James Williams
Aaron Manswell
Nick O'Connor



Jason Max Ferdinand

Jason Max Ferdinand is in his fifth year as Director of Choral Activities at Oakwood University. Empowered through intensive erudition, Mr. Ferdinand, whose skill and anointing is demonstrated through his non-distracting choral presentations of his ensembles, is paving a path for himself in the field of choral conducting.

Mr. Ferdinand was born in Trinidad and Tobago into a household of educators. Dr. and Mrs. Ferdinand are currently on faculty at the University of the Southern Caribbean (USC) in Trinidad and Tobago in the department of Education. USC boasted a vibrant music scene during his formative years, and by the time he entered as a freshman, Mr. Ferdinand was selected by the music chairperson, Ms. Rosie Ward, to be the conductor of the College Choir. In addition to this responsibility, he served as founder/conductor of Adoration, a 30-member student ensemble.

It was in 1997 that Mr. Ferdinand departed the shores of Trinidad and Tobago to attend Oakwood College, in Huntsville, AL. While attending Oakwood, Ferdinand studied conducting with Lloyd Mallory Jr., and served as a student conductor, student accompanist and arranger for the Aeolians.

In 1999, Ferdinand received the following Aeolian choir awards: Most Musically Inclined, Most Hard Working Member, Most Dedicated Band Member and Most Valuable Member. He was also the recipient of the Alma Blackman Music Scholarship Award, in recognition of academic excellence and demonstrated music potential. In May of 1999 a Bachelor of Arts in Piano Performance (with honors) was conferred upon Mr. Ferdinand.

It was at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, that the talents of this young budding conductor blossomed. Ferdinand was afforded the opportunity to lead the choir on various occasions and helped prepare the Morgan State Choir for its many engagements.

In May of 2001, Ferdinand received the Master of Arts degree in choral conducting from Morgan State University.

For seven years, Mr. Ferdinand had great success as Choir Director of the Pine Forge Academy Choir. The Concert Choir toured extensively throughout the continental United States, Canada, Bermuda, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados.

Jason Max Ferdinand was the sole invitee for the 2005/2006 school year, from a highly competitive auditioning process, to begin his studies toward the Doctor of Musical Arts in Choral Conducting at the University of Maryland, College Park.

In August of 2008, Mr. Ferdinand returned to his *alma mater* Oakwood University to take the helm of the celebrated choral program there. He directs the world renowned Aeolians.

Composing is still Mr. Ferdinand's active passion, and his works have been performed and recorded by the Adoration Chorale, London Adventist Chorale, Aeolians of Oakwood University, and the Pine Forge Academy Choir, to name a few.

Mr. Ferdinand is married to the former Koretta Samuel and they have been married for nine years.



Wayne F. A. Bucknor

Wayne Bucknor is associate professor of piano at Oakwood University, and the Chair of the Music Department. He also served as Minister of Music for the Madison Mission Seventh-day Adventist Church in Madison, Alabama from 1997-2012.

Dr. Bucknor was born in Queens, New York, and grew up in Orlando, Florida. Reared in a musically talented family, he was the first to seriously pursue formal study in music, starting with piano lessons at age 6. He continued music study in Orlando with Drucilla Engel at the Iris Engel Daniel School of Music.

Although initially planning to enroll as a computer science major at Oakwood College, Dr. Bucknor graduated with both a B.A. in piano performance and a B.S. in computer science. During the summer following his fourth year of study, he had an internship to ITT Hartford on the campus of the University of Hartford, where he had opportunity to observe what work would be like in the computer field. At that point, Bucknor decided to pursue music as a career.

Dr. Bucknor completed an M.Mus.Ed. at Alabama A & M University in 1998 and has completed a Doctorate in Musical Arts in piano performance and pedagogy at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.

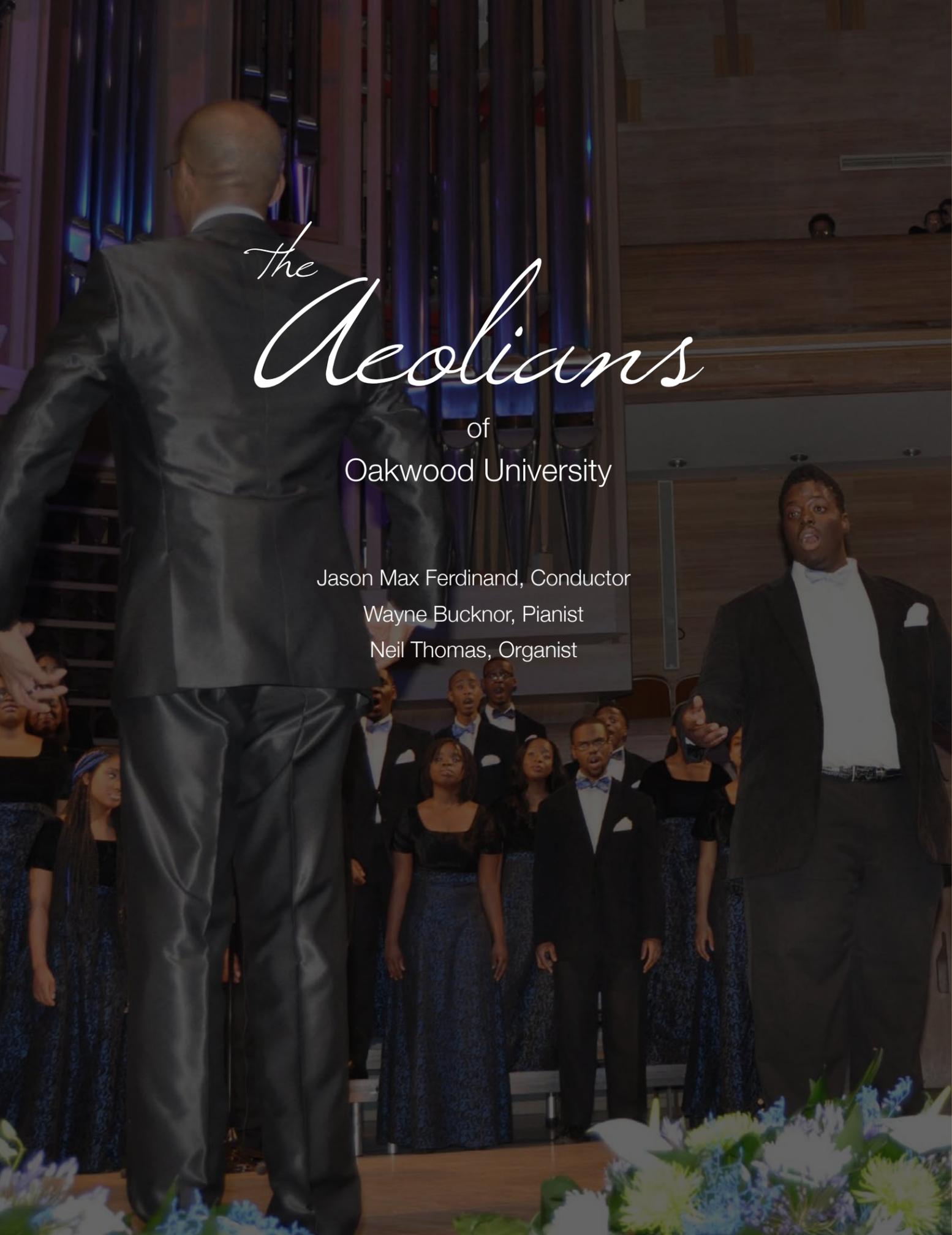
A prolific songwriter, producer, and arranger, Dr. Bucknor has worked with soloists and groups, including Virtue (I Must Tell Jesus, Angels Watching Over Me, Till You Believe (piano), the Madison Mission Mass Choir (Great and Marvelous, Open Praise, Lord We Have Come, etc.), Darwin Hobbs, Dynamic Praise (God Restores, O Come) Ann McCrary, Duawne Starling, Joyce and Robert Pressley, Anointed Praise, and others who have included his work for them on their recordings. He admits that song writing is his passion and has hundreds of finished and 'unfinished' songs.

In September and October 2006, he toured in Japan with the nationally known Grammy award-winning group Take 6, where he substituted for the ensemble's baritone Cedric Dent. He found the reception given the group to be an exhilarating experience.

For the 2007-2008 academic school year, Dr. Bucknor was asked to be the Interim Director for the world renown Oakwood University Aeolians and the University Choir. The choir was blessed with a successful year and toured in the cities of Atlanta, Nashville, Birmingham, Tuskegee, and Montgomery,

In his "spare time," Bucknor enjoys touring with a troupe of talented pianists called the "Keys to the Kingdom." This group of classically trained duo and solo pianists include: Nancy Dudley, Gail Murphy, Adrian Westney, Shelton Kilby, and Brian Jones, among others. In November 2008, Bucknor was honored as a Young Musical Legend by the NAD Vervent United Christian Artists Association Conference.

Dr. Bucknor believes that "one's greatest act of worship is a life of obedience to the will of God." Bucknor is married to the love of his life, Carmen Byars. They have three children, Nina, Wayne II, and Cameryn.



The
Neolians

of
Oakwood University

Jason Max Ferdinand, Conductor

Wayne Bucknor, Pianist

Neil Thomas, Organist

PROGRAMME

(To Be Chosen From The Following)

Praise the Lord, Hallelujah

Hallelujah (From the Mount of Olives)
Alleluia

Ludwig Beethoven
Randall Thompson

Praise the King of Heaven

How Great Thou Art
Psalm 57

Arr. Dan Forrest
John Tebay

Give Us Peace

Da Pacem Domine
He Gives Me Joy

John Purifoy
Arr. Tom Fettke

Bible Stories I

Didn't It Rain
Joshua

Arr. Donald Dillard
Arr. Norman Luboff

Tribute to Living Composer

Steal Away
Amazing Grace

Arr. Diedre Robinson
Arr. Diedre Robinson

— *Rest* —

Bible Stories II

Signs of the Judgment
Daniel, Daniel, Servant of the Lord

Arr. Mark Butler
Arr. Undine Smith Moore

Christmas Spirit

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear
Joy To the World

Arr. Greg Jasperse
Arr. Frank Kuykendall

Some Things We Have Not, Because We Ask Not

Take It To the Lord in Prayer
If I Can Help Somebody

Adapted by Nolan Williams
Arr. Nathan Carter

— *Rest* —

FINALE

The Making of a World Champion

My Backstage, yet Front-row
Observations

by Tim Allston,
Director of Public Relations

“If you think that our performance begins on the stage, you’re wrong! This is where it really begins – right here, in this rehearsal. Put your game face on – right now!”

~ Aeolian alum Jared Roseborough, choral conducting grad student, Georgia State University, to his fellow male choristers

It Almost Didn’t Happen. Jason Max Ferdinand admitted it. So did Wayne Bucknor.

Wayne: “We did not know about this thing (World Choir Games) – or the huge significance of it – until this May, just weeks ago.”

Max: “Had I known, I would’ve started preparing them for it, at least starting right after Moscow (January).”

In its first-ever international choral competition the Aeolians, the lone choir from Alabama and Seventh-day Adventism, won three coveted gold medals in its three competing categories – as well as the World Spirituals Championship trophy – at the Seventh World Choir Games, July 4-14, 2012.

Oakwood’s challenges were several:

1. An unbudgeted event, coming at the end of a financially-stretched fiscal year;
2. Student choristers scattered across the country, fulfilling summer-school and summer-employment obligations, all previously scheduled;
3. New music to learn, for specific competitive categories; and, most importantly,
4. The un-familiar landscape and the politics of being new- and late-comers to international competition.

An historically-black David amongst the multi-national Goliaths.

The First Steps . . . and the Landmines

First, President Dr. Leslie Pollard and senior administration OK’d the Aeolians’ participation, with Mordecai-like reasoning, Esther 4:14: “For if you keep silent at this time, . . . And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

Next, last year’s 44 Aeolians (including recent 2012 grads) were canvassed for their interest, willingness and 23rd-hour availability. Then, to shore up the 37 consenters, alums were recruited:

1. Jared Roseborough;
2. Christine Jobson, Miami Union Academy choir director/music teacher and Barry University adjunct voice instructor;
3. Kayus Dare, newlywed and teacher at the Bermuda Institute; and
4. Ryan Lang, rising 4th year student, Vanderbilt University Medical School.

. . . As well as added a highly-recommended entering freshman, Chad Lupoe from Greater Atlanta Adventist Academy’s choir.

Finally, for the contemporary music category, Max decided to resurrect “*Cantate Domino*,” from an Aeolians 2008 CD project – but this Aeolians group had never sung it.

But how to learn this un-earthed song, as well as still perfect their now-mothballed standards for world competition, at the 23rd hour?

According to the Adventist News Network: “Earlier in the summer break from school, the group practiced new songs for the competition individually. They later held group rehearsals remotely using Google+. All 42 members met for a final rehearsal at the university campus the weekend before the competition.”

Advancing to the Battlefield, and eyeing the Competitors

Now, boarding a chartered bus at 4:00 a.m. on Tuesday, July 10, for an eight-hour pilgrimage into an international abyss, Oakwood’s eight-part harmonizers manned-up to battle, with legatos and pianissimos, their highly-experienced, competition-honed opponents:



- 15,000 choristers, comprising
- 362 choirs, representing
- 64 countries and 22 U.S. states, competing in
- 23 different musical categories, performing in
- 5 competition venues, throughout
- Music-savvy Cincinnati – the home to Kathleen Battle, Rosemary Clooney, Doris Day, Isley Brothers, Drew and Nick Lachey and 98 Degrees, Peter Frampton, Antonio “L.A.” Reid and us baby boomers’ black-and-white TV fixture, Roy Rogers! – The first time this event is being held in North America, and facilitated by
- 4,700 efficient and happy-faced yellow Polo-shirted volunteers!

For our un-paid/un-scholarshipped/summer-break-aborted Oakwood performers, their on-site itinerary was grueling. But met. The daily 6:00-7:00 a.m. Ingrid-mandated breakfasts, followed by the 7:15 Vilroy-choreographed back-in-the-day yellow school bus rides from northern Kentucky’s Drawbridge Inn “dorm” into downtown ‘Nati was met with polite, albeit begrudging game-facedness.

The 2010 national classical singing champion and 2012 grad Whitney Morrison, upon the bus’ nosing into Interstate 71/75 morning rush-hour traffic, would stand with a teetering balance in the narrow aisle, declaring, “Hey, guys: we don’t have a whole lot of time; start warming up – y’know, lip drills, scales . . .” – and suddenly, the ear buds would be silenced, and the a cappella vocal symphony commenced, with glares and “whatever’s.” But done.

At rehearsal sites, walkie-talkied and clip-boarded, smiling volunteers would politely usher our choral competitors into, say, “Mayflower III,” reminding us all of the rigidly-timed 30-minute practice room dicta, as brightly-clad petite and single-filed Chinese lads and lasses would be softly “speaking in tongues” outside our rehearsal doors, ready to intone, on cue.

Oakwood University’s campus classrooms may have been shuttered for the summer, but not for our choral collegians. “You need to attend this workshop, ‘Changing Choral Sound through Visualization, Movement, Conducting Gesture, Weight and Color,’” Max suggested (firmly), “Although it will feature his children’s choir, this guy, Henry Leck, is a renowned expert on putting color and passion into your music; you could learn something, here.”

“Boy, those kids were good, real good,” remarked Aaron Manswell, the lanky, pencil-thin Torontonion, “but, quite frankly, all it (workshop) did was simply reinforced what Ferdie’s been teaching us all year. We just have to do it, ay?”

Game Time #1

As we entered the historic and largely mysterious Cincinnati Masonic Temple for our first competition in Music of the Religions (What, all 325 official world religions?), God dispatched Divine three heat waves to melt our individual yet corporate iceballs of uncertainty:

1. Cheery-faced yellow-shirted volunteers handed each of us bottled water upon entering, as they guided us through the labyrinth of cavernous corridors, bedecked with ominous symbols and photographs or paintings of centuries-old Masonic leadership, all white;
2. Although passing and eyeballing warily opposing choirs all vying for the same gold medal, our choristers nonetheless initiated greeting their a cappella adversaries with high-fives, as all were shuttled in and out of holding-to-rehearsal-rooms-to-soundcheck-auditorium under the ever-clipboarded, stopwatching polite leers of the assigned volunteers; and
3. As we sat and/or paced nervously in the Temple’s heretofore-verboden uppermost chamber, and awaited our “show time” call to perform our four selections, the large padded chamber door creaked open and in walked a total and pleasant surprise: former 60s Aeolian and current Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Garland Dulan, a victim-turned-victor of a seven-hour delayed flight!

After practicing flawlessly and repeatedly their auditorium entrance, stage spacing and, yes, “the Game Face,” Alabama’s Finest strode majestically on to the world stage, to politically polite applause.

First, “*John Saw Dub Numbub*,” followed by “*The Prayer*” and ending the foursome with the richly-toned a cappella “*Seven-Fold Amen*.”

The third selection, “*The Holy City*,” was a techno-emotional challenge. Sung to normally-uproarious church throngs who egg on both Maestro Max and his Musicians into thrice-repeated chorus refrains to end this almost-10 minute anthem, Max and Wayne double-teamed to whittle it down to just over 7 minutes, squeezing it tortuously to square-peg it with the other songs into the allotted 15-minute competition space. It worked.

“Although I only managed to see and hear some 30 choirs, I felt privileged to witness such a wonderful event, which I will cherish for years to come. There’s no way for me to forget the magnificent voices of The Aeolians of Oakwood University, from Huntsville, Alabama, as they sang ‘*The Holy City*’ at the Masonic Temple. It was the best rendition I have ever heard.” Lilia F. Brady, Mount Lookout, “Letters to the Editor,” www.Cincinnati.com

The now-enthused patrons rose to their feet, ending their “freshman orientation” to our trademark Oakwood Sound with an uproarious ovation. “We nailed it,” beamed Dulan, punctuated with his clenched fist.

No catch-our-breath break here as Ms. Kim Mann, WCG’s U.S. Artistic Coordinator for Chorus Operations, petitioned Max and Vilroy at the last minute to swap out a Thursday free Friendship Concert in the Park engagement, for a minutes-away mini-concert for a VIP indoor-outdoor reception at the Theodore M. Berry International Friendship Park, on the Ohio River banks.

“Yes, let’s do it,” the tandem replied with little to no forethought; a good chance, they reasoned, to dress-rehearse and iron out some SSAATTBB kinks.

Generous handfuls of “AWE-some,” “Where, again, is Oakwood University?” and five sold “*From Russia With Love*” DVDs later, the formerly-formal, un-tied bow tied and joyously-removed three-inch black heeled Oakwood world ambassadors slumped into grammar-school sized bus seats, headed back to “their ‘Ol Kentucky dorm,” while chattering nervously in self-critique.

But before leaving the Cincinnati shore’s side, a change of original *quid-pro-quo* plans was issued from the WCG control tower: the Wednesday-for-Thursday mini-concert “deal” was rescinded; some “friends in high places” asked that “that group from Oakwood University” still sing at the Washington Park open-to-the-public Friendship Concert.

You already know the Max-Vilroy-Wayne-Ingrid-now-add-Aeolians response.

That Aha! Moment

No Thursday competitions? Good. Therefore, no formal attire? Even better. “But we still need to have a uniformed look – just like the other choirs that win this thing each time,” assessed OU newcomer Ms. Kisha Norris, the Executive Director for Advancement & Development, herself a seasoned vocalist and formerly a juried competitor from her Texas home state college days.

Kisha and Ingrid “volunteered” singers Lindsay Greene and Jackie Clemmons to join their WCG gift-shopping spree. Because this foursome was quick, focused and decisive, they did not miss the group’s turning-the-corner, aha! moment.

Prior to Wednesday’s performance, student chaplain-now-Allegheny-East-Conference-rookie-pastor Richard Martin bulls-eyed the male singers’ role, using the 2 Chronicles 20 account of King Jehoshaphat’s defeating the Moabites and Ammonites with prayer and the singing Levites leading the charge (although, as the upcoming Andrews University seminarian pointed out, no soldiers or weaponry was needed – just God!).

“Remember,” he eyeballed them, “the Levites were all males – so, who

sang the melody/soprano, alto, tenor and bass? That’s right, the men. We, brothers,” motioning with a hand-sweep to the female Aeolians, huddled in prayer across the room, “we must lead our women into battle – for the Lord.”



Twenty one hours later . . . boy, did it ever click.

During the mid-morning tune-up, Jason was straining trying to get his tenors, baritones and basses to grasp that gold medal-winning in this brand-new Spiritual category necessitates these slaves’ descendants mimicking their forebears.

“Did you guys ever watch ‘Green Pastures’ or ‘Roots’? Have you ever listened to Hall Johnson Singers, and hear those extended moans? Put yourselves in those cotton fields...” And he then went back to Roland M. Carter’s “*You Must Have That True Religion*,” hoping desperately that they’d join him in this freedom march.

Once, but not yet. Jason sighed.

Second time, maybe an imperceptible up-tick.

Before the third strike, Jason offered: guys, all of you come over to this side of the room ... ladies, stay where you are. Still no magic.

Oh Lawd, I murmured inaudibly; c’mon fellas, ... will Max have to dip you seven times, like Naaman the Leper?

He then motioned to alum soloist Christine Jobson, to sing her brief solo interlude, “I’ve been waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay down - ”

And then as if the cruel slave owner Simon Legree from Uncle Tom’s Cabin neared them with a branded whip, our men sat up and reached back into their antebellum roots, and began to moan and groan with a chain gang-like unity and a heretofore harmonic cadence and pathos that simultaneously compelled the women to both finger-snap/fist-bump/high-five each other and form an impromptu Amen! chorus to



support their men finally getting it.

“Ohhhhh, give . . . me . . . tha-a-a-a-a-t old/time/re-LI-gion; give me that OOOOOLD time religion; give me old/time/Religion, it’s good EEEnough for me –

“- Oh, give me that TRue religion, TRue religion, TRue religion, TRue religion, . . .” impersonating an uphill-chugging locomotive.

Quickly, Max layered in the now-charged mellifluous female voices: “OH, give me that ‘ol-time religion/give me that ‘ol TIME religion –“creating a now musical can-you-top-this? males-versus-females’ give-RE-give-and-take-and-RE-take turf battle.

Aha! And everybody knew it. Instantly. Simultaneously.

The World Champion Aeolians of Oakwood University had arrived, finally. And, more importantly, they themselves knew it. And showed it.

Student manager and chorister Riter Danny St. Luc stretched out on the floor, with arms and legs flailing like a five-month-old baby who tried, but couldn’t turn over.

Ladies rushed over and hugged previously-unhuggable dudes, as if they were combat troops finally home from the battlefield.

Formerly-stoical macho-men singers grinned and leaped, chest-thumping each other.

The air was totally electric, but I at once had to be very careful: I was subject to be electrocuted because I was crying so hard.

Everything was now different. Very different.

Before the stopwatch returned, we quickly changed into our new world-stage uniforms: our various sky-blue, dark-blue, orange, green and white World Choir Games t-shirts – different colors, but one singular mindset: glorify God through His giftedness in us.

At the Concert called Friendship

Ironically, Thursday’s Friendship Concert at Washington Park was directly across from the Cincinnati Music Hall, the site of our third and final gold medal competition, against 15 competitors . . . on Friday the 13th. Merely hurdles to be leaped.

As the choir opened with “*Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing*,” a disheveled, gaunt and soiled bandana-wearing aged Blackman, upon hearing the song, snapped to attention, extended his arm in a late-60’s Black Power salute, and counseled the young black children seated between us, “Stand up! That’s the Black National Anthem,” as he hummed and gummed the three verses and chorus.

While most blacks there began a call-and-response cadence with the songs, most whites just sat there in utter silence and observation. And amazement.

However, the “*The Holy City*” finale was more than this diverse crowd could handle. First, Wayne Bucknor created an ever-growing claue coterie of keyboard aficionados who cheered his every run with did-you-hear-that? looks, followed by did-you-see-that? responses; and then with no competition judges or stopwatches to harness him, Maestro Max led his all-too-willing Aeolians into a repeat chorus loop, “JERRRRRRRRRR-u-salem, Jer-UUUUUU-salem, . . .”

The combined laidback/beachchair-and-a-brew and after-work Happy-Hour crowd erupted and sprung to its feet with thunderous applause. “You with this group?” an older black woman asked me. Yes ma’am, I am. “Then, let me hug YOU!” While the blacks cheered and Amen-ed and thank-you-Jesus-ed, the whites stood and clapped unendingly, shaking their heads at hearing one of their rarely-sung 1892 hymns spanked with such precision and, yes, color.

Thank you, Henry Leck.

The recording industry succeeds by applying this triangular maxim: see them + hear them = buy them. Therefore, we “*From Russia With Love*” DVD hawkers didn’t need to “hawk” at all; we simply and silently held high the somber-blue DVD cases. Instantly – well, within seven minutes – crumbled and/or freshly-minted \$20 bills consumed all of the 18 DVDs we brought to the Concert called Friendship.

“Where’s Oakwood University, again?” “Is it an all-black school?” “Seven days what?” “I got cousins there in Huntsville.” “Where y’all singin’ next?”

And “Simply marvelous” “How can I order that DVD?” “Is *‘The Holy City’* on there?” “What’s your college-er-university’s URL?”

As the singers exited to enjoy the moment, several of us journeyed to the Christ Church venue, to witness the Mixed Chamber Music competition and particularly two of our Friday Spiritual opponents: the Sunday Night Singers and the Jeremy Winston Chorale.

The latter were singers hastily assembled by Jeremy Winston, a former Aeolian with Max and now an accomplished choral director at fellow UNCF school, Wilberforce University in Ohio. His 17 choristers, according to Wayne and Max, were unsurpassed in their top and bottom voices.

The 20-member Sunday Night Singers, however, “sang like four people – not twenty,” Max critiqued with trepidation. Their near-angelic sound forced Wayne to whisper, “The Choral Olympics has just begun.”

Max sat there in the church balcony pew and later on the return bus ride absolutely m u m , shaking h i s head

slowly, and only speaking to remark, reverently, “Amazing . . . they slayed me,” which he repeated eight times en route to the Drawbridge.

When he shared that four-word opposition research with singer Denae Felder, she gasped then immediately offered with a quick but game-face smile, “Well, . . . Guess we’ll be rehearsing this evening!?! See you in the Drawbridge’s London lobby, at 11.”

Did someone say “Friday the 13th”?

Now on one hand, today was the foreboding Friday the 13th. The two-competitions, put-up-or-shut-up Day.

On the other hand, our Aeolians were Games-ready, and we knew it. Plus, today was Max and wife Koretta’s seventh wedding anniversary. And, it was this writer’s 58th birthday.

Away from our immediate families, Max and I each honed in on the perfect anniversary/birthday gifts, spelled G-O-L-D. Times two.

After Vilroy ushered us in hurriedly to a sumptuous lunch buffet at the Hilton Cincinnati Netherlands Plaza Hotel, we zoomed off to our Musica Contemporanea battlefield and our 20 competitors, back at the Masonic Temple.

“And the Gold Medal winner with 81.63 points – the Aeolians Choir of Oakwood University – Jason Max Ferdinand of the United States!”

Now, the crowd was a bit larger – hmm, what did they know? What had they heard?–and the Aeolians began by performing the challenging and just-learned “*Cantate Domino*,” followed with the benediction-like “*Always Remember*,” then the almost comically choreographed “*Shadrach (Meshach, Abednego)*,” and concluded with the Bucknor-composed “*Great and Marvelous*.” The ovation and thunderous applause the choristers barely heard, as we were whisked away to our third and final competition venue.

Secretly, while Max and Wayne expected no awards from the Musica Contemporanea category American Spirituals, originally known as Negro spirituals, could be seen as a slam dunk for an historically black school. But not so, with 16 choral competitors from across the globe – including Wilberforce’s Jeremy Winston Chorale and the slayed-me Sunday Night Singers.

Therefore, the Aeolians needed another surprise visitor-motivator like Dr. Dulan, now returned to Huntsville. Again, Vilroy to the rescue.

As the Aeolians sat pensively awaiting their nod, into their green room strode a special visitor: “*Steal Away*” arranger Ms. Diedre Robinson, who’d journeyed from her home in Washington, DC, to join the group’s rapidly-growing cheering section!

With their collective iceball now a defeated puddle, the eight-part harmonizers now bellowed out “*Jericho*,” “*Daniel, Servant of the Lord*,” “*Steal Away*” and “*You Must Have That True Religion*” with trademark precision, passion and pathos.

And the Winners are, . . .

The Bank of America Arena was jam-packed that evening, as each choral Olympic competitor waited to hear itself declared a winner and its name flashed on the circular screen. As Honorable Mentions, Bronze, Silver, Gold and finally category Championship winners were announced, cheers mingled with slightly-muffled groans could be heard throughout the cavernous room.

In true Olympic and Christian spirit our Aeolians, each brandishing miniature U.S. flags, cheered bravely each winner, yet their faces queried, inaudibly, “Yes, and . . .?”

With each category winners announced – even though we did not compete in those – the tension heightened and the stomach juice churned, uncontrollably.

Finally, the Music of the Religions grouping to be announced. First, the Honorable Mentions. Nothing. Bronze? Nada. Silver: zilch. Throats that once intoned perfect pitch grew dry and parched. Palms began to moisten. A knife slice-able tension filled section 214. Fixed glares laser-beamed to the stage announcer, making sure her clipped European accent passed through all filters.

“And the Gold Medal winner with 81.63 points – the Aeolians Choir of Oakwood University – Jason Max Ferdinand of the United States!”

Q: who cheered louder – the general audience, or us? We’ll never know. Another defeated puddle, times 45. Max and Vilroy, seated on the arena floor with the other choral directors and managers, strode majestically to the announcer’s podium; Vilroy received the dark-blue encased gold medal certificate, while the Maestro was yoked with the coveted gold medallion.

Quite frankly, little else was heard or remembered that evening, as it was announced the remaining medals would be awarded the following morning.

“Hey guys,” post-critiqued Max on the return bus ride, “Did you notice what the Stellenberg group did?” referring to the WCG veteran South African choristers who won multiple gold medals. “They subdivided

themselves into several smaller groups, and competed in many more categories: mixed males, mixed females, chamber music, . . . Next time, we need to do the same thing, for Latvia in 2014.”

At that moment, I witnessed firsthand the strategic mind-mapping of a now world champion – no longer confined programmatically to just U.S. church audiences and HBCU choir competitions.

An omen perhaps? Before Chaplain and Mrs. Holley left their home in Columbus, OH, to see their daughter perform, their Aeolian Tierza instructed them: “Momma and Daddy, bring an American flag with you – for Saturday morning.”

Matthew 20:16: “So the Last will be First, and . . .”

No, they were not scheduled to perform – well, at least not officially. But they dressed in their formal attire, as if awaiting their chariot for the ball.

There were less smiles and jokes en route – no lip drills, thank you – and, upon returning to the arena, nervous chatter was replaced with that polite, but Game Face.

Again, the drill: the Honorable Mentions, the Bronzes, the Silvers, the Golds and the Champions. And you would think that one-for-one gold medal for rookie international competitors would suffice? A *sforzando* “No!”

Next, the Musica Contemporanea category. Nap time, y’all; wake me when it’s over, OK?

Announcer: “And the Gold Medal winner, with 82.38 points – the Aeolians Choir of Oakwood University – Jason Max Ferdinand of the United States!”

Whoa! That was a truly un-expected gift, as Max and Vilroy took their now new traditional walk to the smaller platform next to the announcer. Vilroy looked up and around scanning the crowd proudly, while Max eyed his feet as though he’d just found something on the floor not belonging to him.

Yes, our cheering was loud and we were joined by others sitting around us. But the roars and high-fives from Alabama’s Finest soon morphed into nerve-wracking quiet. They were no longer merely WCG participants; they were now top medal winners – but with an asterisk.

Each could calculate: 81.63 for 1st gold medal; and 82.38 for the second. B- grades back at Oakwood University, for sure. Was an A to be found on their choral transcript?

Almost instinctively an eye-of-the-tiger, A-game mentality began to unfold, for each of us:

1. I, for example, moved down to the Arena floor and into an empty front-row VIP seat, positioning myself as close to the announcer’s tonsils as allowable;



2. Female Aeolians began easing out of their black high heels – y’know, just in case; and
3. Mrs. Holley slid the U. S. flag to Tierza, as ordered – again, just in case;

However, I began to notice veteran WCG attendees starting to pack up their camera gear, exchanging business cards and saying their farewells. Was I missing something? Or, were they?

At long last the American Spirituals, a final WCG category added for this first-ever North American hosted international competition.

- Amongst us 16 competitors were two other historically black ensembles:
1. The Jeremy Winston Chorale, already the Gospel Championship winner; and
 2. Detroit’s Brazeal Dennard Chorale founded in 1972, arguably the finest seniors’ chorale in the entire galaxy!

Forgive us, but our attention now fast-forwarded past the Honorable Mentions, Bronzes, Silvers (where Jeremy’s group just picked up another medallion, with a 72.63, and the Sunday Night Singers, too, nabbed a silver with a 76.13), and on to the Gold (where director Dr. Augustus Hill just received humbly a gold for Dennard).

. . . And maybe even a bit higher, more ethereal.

Hmmm, . . . two HBEs awarded and now re-seated, . . . the Sunday Night Singers relegated to Silver, . . . maybe, just maybe –

For all the divine lyrics that Aeolians have sung across the eight decades since their founding in 1946, none were as heaven-sent – as like a dove descending upon its newly baptized Candidate – as were those monotone words spoken with a clipped accent:

“The Champion in category 18, Spiritual, with 93 point 38 points – “

She paused for just a millisecond, that seemed like a millennium, tilting her head down and finished, “The Aeolians of O – “

And nothing else was heard.

I instantly riveted my cell camera to the rear of the Arena, from where a cacophonous noise erupted.

All attention – people, still and video cameras, overhead Arena and klieg lights -- traced those shrieks to the rear of the main floor’s wide central aisle, in what appeared to be a remake of TV’s “The Price is Right,” with its trademark, “Come on down!”

Streaking down from the nose-bleed seats in the rafters, and running and fist-pumping and cheering with all the pent-up fortissimo and allegro they could muster came Max’s Marauding Minstrels:

- First, the males bee-lined it to the larger center-stage victory

standled by Eric Samson, carrying and waving that now-unfurled U.S. flag;

- Then, the female Aeolians made quite a spectacle, running barefoot while gathering up their floor-length formal gowns in one or both hands;
- Next, “singing Levite” Richard Martin followed, swinging his white “terrible towel” in lassoing circles above his head;
- Several singers deftly sprinted forward while capturing both sights and sounds with smartphones, hand-telescoped at arm’s length – and all the while cagily dodging quickly-scattering professional camerapersons;
- Ingrid Ennis and Diedre Robinson kept pace successfully with these Olympic singers-turned-sprinters; and finally
- Alum baritone Kayus Dare “cheered up” the rear, sporting his ‘ol school high-top black Converse All-Stars!

While all the attention focused on victory groups’ center platform, Eric detoured to the smaller stage and encircled Ferdinand in the flag, then sandwiched himself between the World Spirituals Champion Maestro and the Manager, all of whom now fix their tearing eyes on the Stars and Stripes now being hoisted mechanically in the rear, illuminated now by a single spotlight and celebrating singularly America’s gift to the world of spirituals: the Aeolians of Oakwood University, . . . Huntsville, . . . Alabama, . . . USA, . . . and now, The World.

As the entire audience stood with these now “Gold-olians” and sang “*The Star-Spangled Banner*,” for the first time in my life, this slave descendant wept unashamedly and un-apologetically while singing – “O’er the land of the fre- EE, . . .” as the sopranos modulated into the Orion on that last word’s new last syllable, . . .

I cried for every Aeolian alum trailblazer; every Financial Aid Clearance stamp-er; every Student Dining Hall sack-lunch maker; for the countless choir bus trips; every professor granting makeup exams for touring choir members; and for every sacrificing parent, music teacher and nameless/faceless village-person who made this victory stage moment come true.

Now, I understand first-hand those quadrennial Olympians’ tears atop the three-tiered gold medal stands, when their national anthem is played.

The funniest, most endearing sight following the national anthem was seeing Richard Martin bear-hugging his flag-draped director and swinging him around in one revolution, like some weightless Raggedy Ann doll.

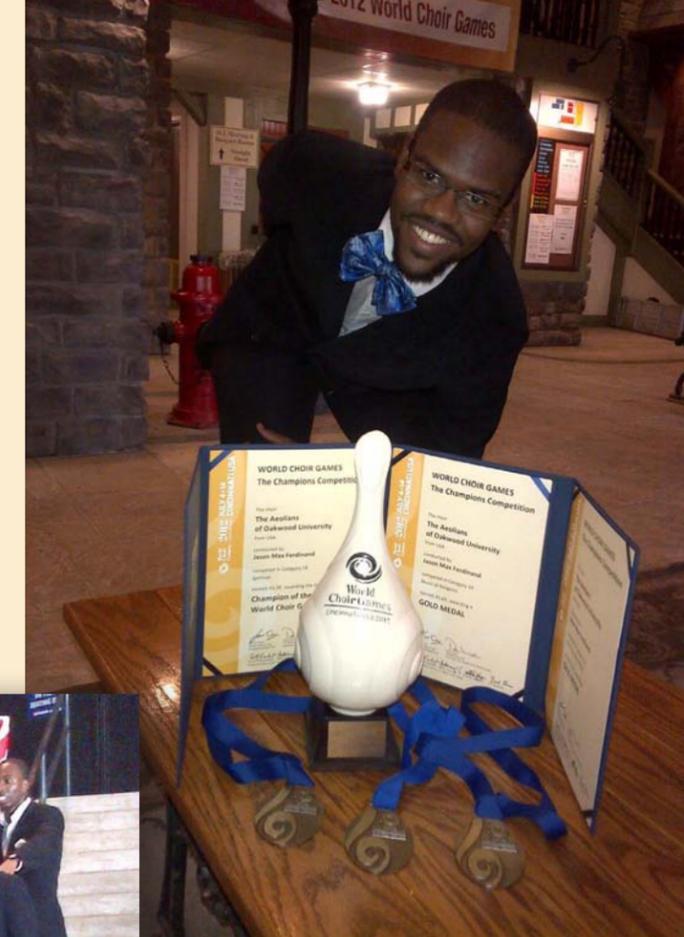
Eric then selflessly handed off to Kayus the Championship Trophy – an elegant 14-inch, bud-shaped cup adorned with a musical staff – who lifted it high above his head, for a photo opp.

And with a few closing words, the Seventh World Choir Games came to an end.

What a finale.

“I mean, we were singers; we had good voices, we could sing. But these students today, this group, Max Ferdinand’s group, they are musicians.”

– Desmond Pierre-Louis
1977-’81 Aeolian



The Aeolians

[13 “Principles of Excellence” according to the Aeolians]

GOD - Keep Him first. Let Him lead.

PRESENCE - Make yourselves known wherever you go but remember to be humble.

IDENTITY - Know who you are and what you represent.

VISUALS - Be visually appealing. Smile.

ENERGY - Keep the music energized with your diction and movement.

COHESIVENESS - You must gel together as a group. Be on one accord.

CONNECTIVITY - Learn to connect with each other inside & outside of choir settings.

MATURITY - Remember that there is a time and a place for everything.

VULNERABILITY - Be malleable. Let the Holy Spirit use you.

POSITIVITY - Encourage one another. Have a positive attitude.

KINESTHETICS - Don't be lazy! Keep it moving (spiritually, musically, physically, and mentally).

CONFIDENCE - Be sure that when you do your best, God will do the rest.

PROFESSIONALISM - Be professional. You represent God, OU, & your family.

AWARENESS - Pay attention! Be responsible for yourself as well as your fellow choir members.

TRUST - You have to trust your leader, section, and fellow choir members.

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