Cultivating a Choral Culture of Connectedness

Nicholas Daniel Sienkiewicz (he/him)

Indiana University Bloomington – Rehearsal Techniques

Slide Access @: www.nicksienkiewicz.com/resources

PW: sien2021

What percentage of your time do you spend preparing the following items?

1. Planning for content?

2. Planning for methods and materials?

3. Planning for feelings?

I THINK RATIONALLY
(way over here)

LIMBIC SYSTEM
(I feel here)

SPINAL CORD
(enters brain here)

Image borrowed Bradberry and Greaves,
Emotional Intelligence 2.0, 2009

Why is an emotionally intelligent environment so important for musicians?

- Education
  - "All learning is state dependent" (Jensen 2005).
  - Amygdala inhibits our frontal lobe from encoding information (Ven der Kolk 1994).

Mental Health

- "One in four adolescents report feeling nervous, feeling irritable or having difficulties getting to sleep every week." (WHO 2020)

- Suicide is the leading cause of death among adolescents (10-19) in low- and middle-income countries. Suicide is the second leading cause in high income countries in the European region (WHO 2015)

Image borrowed from the WHO, *Adolescent mental health in the European Region,* 2018

Trauma

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)
  - "About 6 in 10 adults surveyed reported experiencing at least one ACE, and nearly 1 in 6 of them reported experiencing 4 or more different types of ACEs" (CDC 1997).
- By taking an emotionally intelligent approach to music teaching, we begin to recognize every musician with a trauma-informed lens
  - Meaning, we are less likely to potentially trigger a traumatic experience
  - Recognizing our musician as an entire human being

Why is choral music the right place?

- Music is an incredibly vulnerable place

- Musicians are often exposed to high degrees of criticism and often are more critical of themselves

- Many of the musical skills we teach, most specifically in reference to listening and perception, can incorporate principles of emotional intelligence

- Our bodies and minds are directly connected to our art form

- The voice is arguably the most personal instrument

Disclaimer

Big Idea

Through music teaching, we as music educators can craft safe, comfortable, and emotionally intelligent environments that empower and value our music musicians, provide a space for positive coping, encourage authenticity and vulnerability, and develop the most self-actualized musical performance.

Safety

- Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

- Safety Needs include…

  - Order, predictability, and control

  - This can be both at the individual and group level

  - Can also include emotional security, freedom from fear, social stability, and health and well being

- *This is recognizing that many of these concepts have been updated and modified

Adapted from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Green and Maslow 1994)

Planning for Feeling: Comfortable Enough for Discomfort

- What if we planned for content, methods, and materials that same way that we planned for the emotional environment? What might that look like?

- Feelings
  - A sense of safety allows for a more comfortable space to take risks
  - A sense of value will empower musicians to ask questions and see their contributions as worthy
  - A sense of challenge will motivate musicians to learn and grow

Planning for Feeling: Picking Some Feelings

- Pick a feeling, or a few, to focus on during instructional periods
    - Ex: I want my musicians to feel calm as this week deals with particularly challenging/frustrating/debatable content

- What ways might we be able to do that?
    - Play tranquil music at the beginning and end of class
    - Use a quieter more focused tone of voice
    - If musicians are to move, instruct them to do so peacefully
    - Take moments in instruction for mindful breathing

Art created by Lindsay Braman©, used under a nonprofit license.
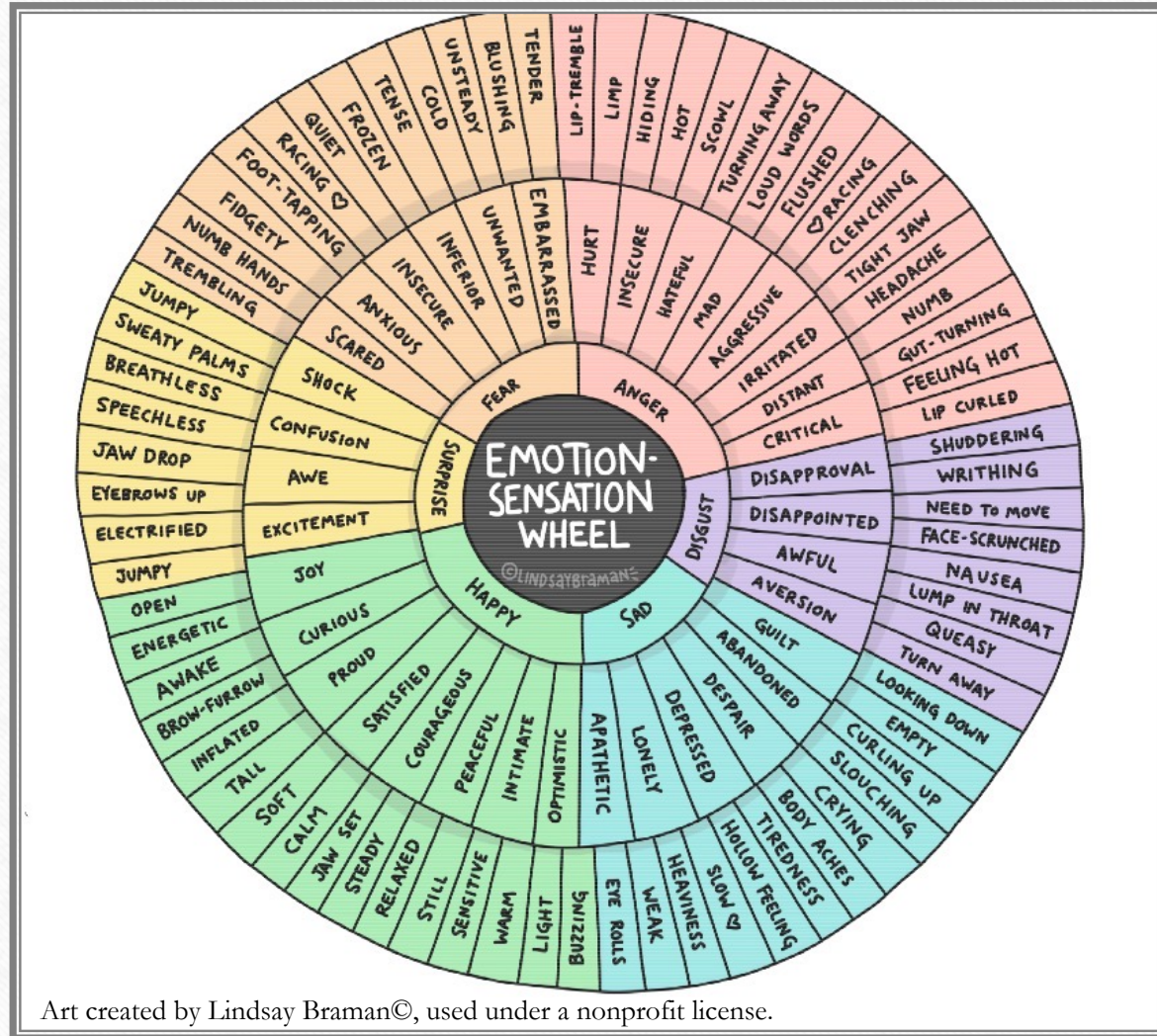
Creating an Alternative Reality

- Making the rehearsal room a separate space both physically and emotionally

  - Examples

    - Shut the door before rehearsal

    - Begin with a ritual

    - Establish reasonable rules

    - Develop a mantra

Creating a Safe Musical Environment: Affirming Identity

- Affirming Identity
  - Simple adjustments including pronouncing a musician's name correctly, asking/using their correct pronouns, and using inclusive language in class
    - For example, rather than saying "male" and "female" voices, using more inclusive language like Sopranos, Altos, Tenos, and Basses
  - Using appropriate gender-neutral language such as "folks," "musicians," "humans," "y'all," etc.
  - Representing compositional identities of various ethnicities, sexualities, genders, and religions across various musical periods as conceivable

Creating a Safe Musical Environment: Belonging Cues

- Belonging Cues (Coyle, 2018)
  - **Non-verbal signals** that humans use in order to create safety, connection, and future within groups.
    - 1. They are a part of the group
    - 2. Reminds them that the group has high standards
    - 3. Assures them that they can reach these standards
  - These signals generally have three factors
    - (1) energy invested in the exchange, (2) showcasing that the group members are unique and valued, (3) signaling the relationship will continue into the future

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Creating a Safe Musical Environment: Belonging Cues (Con.)

- Your body
  - Are my arms crossed?
  - Are my muscles tense?
  - Is my posture open/closed?
  - More generally, does my body showcase vulnerability?
- Your eyes
  - Am I making appropriate amount of eye contact?
- Tone
  - An authoritarian tone should be seldom used
  - An overly positive tone may relay as superficial
  - A tone that is playful, suggestive, in a comfortable range, and most importantly *authentic* is key

Creating a Safe Musical Environment: Language

- Feedback
  - Utilize a growth mindset approach to feedback
    - "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them" (Yeager et al. 2014)
  - Using a suggestive, rather than authoritarian approach
    - "Can we try…?"
    - "What would it sound like if…?"
  - Emphasizing the collaborative, rather than the individual
    - Utilizing "we" instead of "I"

- If the issues persists
  - Ask the musicians for more information

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Creating a Safe Musical Environment:
Other Ideas

- Encourage and normalize mistakes

- Be authentic and don't be afraid to get something wrong

  - It's not about whether you *will* make a mistake, it is inevitable. It is how you respond and have modeled mistakes that will impact the culture.

- If you make a promise or set an expectation, do it! Otherwise, provide reasoning for why your perspective has changed

- Be honest

- Add appropriate surprise

- **Don't force connection too soon**
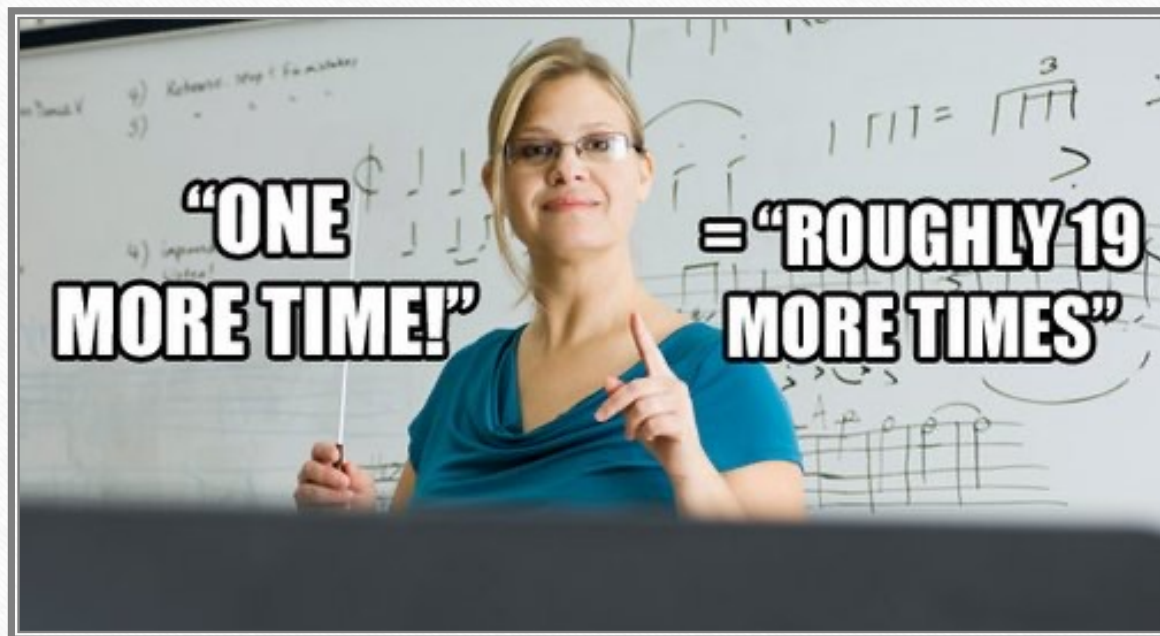
Scaffolding Vulnerability

Ensemble: *Sings through piece* (not very accurately or confidently)

Director: "You need to *feel* the piece. *Connect* to the music."

Ensemble: *Sings again* (basically the same, still with the same musical and confidence issues as of previous)

Director: "I don't understand why you're not connecting. We're emotional people, are we not?"

Ensemble: *Sings again* (same musical and confidence issues)

Director: *As the ensemble is singing* "CONNECT! FEEL! CONNECT"

Scaffolding Vulnerability Cont.

- For one to connect deeply **to the music**, they must have a somewhat unconscious understanding of the musical fundamentals

- For an ensemble to deeply connect **with one another**, they must have a somewhat unconscious understanding of the musical fundamentals

- This is ***not*** to say that you can't feel while learning a piece. This ***is*** to say that it is much easier to connect emotionally when we are more comfortable with the piece

Scaffolding Vulnerability: *Microdosing*

- A Good Place to Start
  - Melinat's *36 Questions to Fall in Love*
  - Change how you ask, "how are you?"
- From There
  - Personal Notecard Activities
  - Group Improvisation
  - Connection Building Exercises

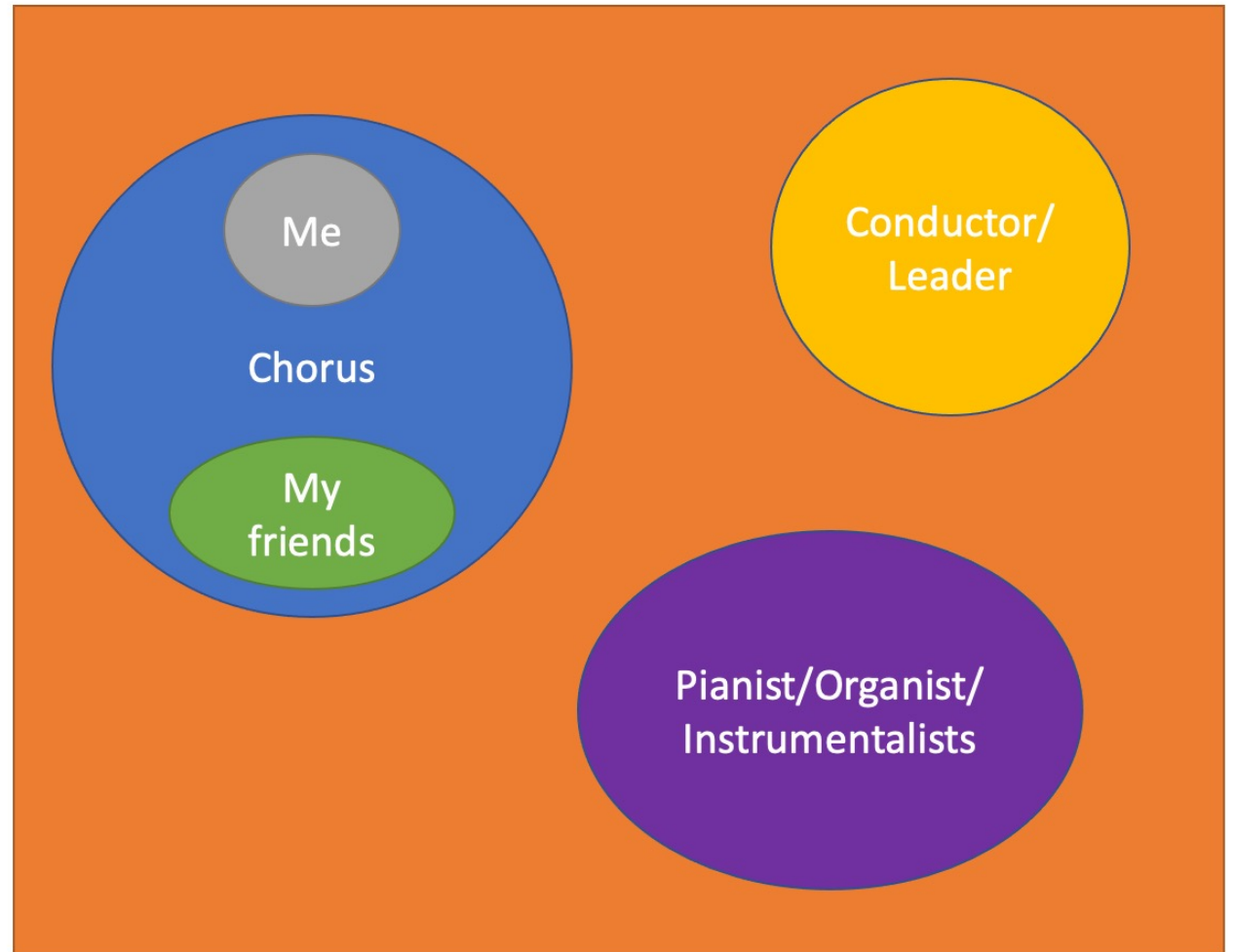# Scaffoliding Vulnerability: Two Important Notes

Trust your feelings

Do not ask your ensemble to be more vulnerable than you are willing to be
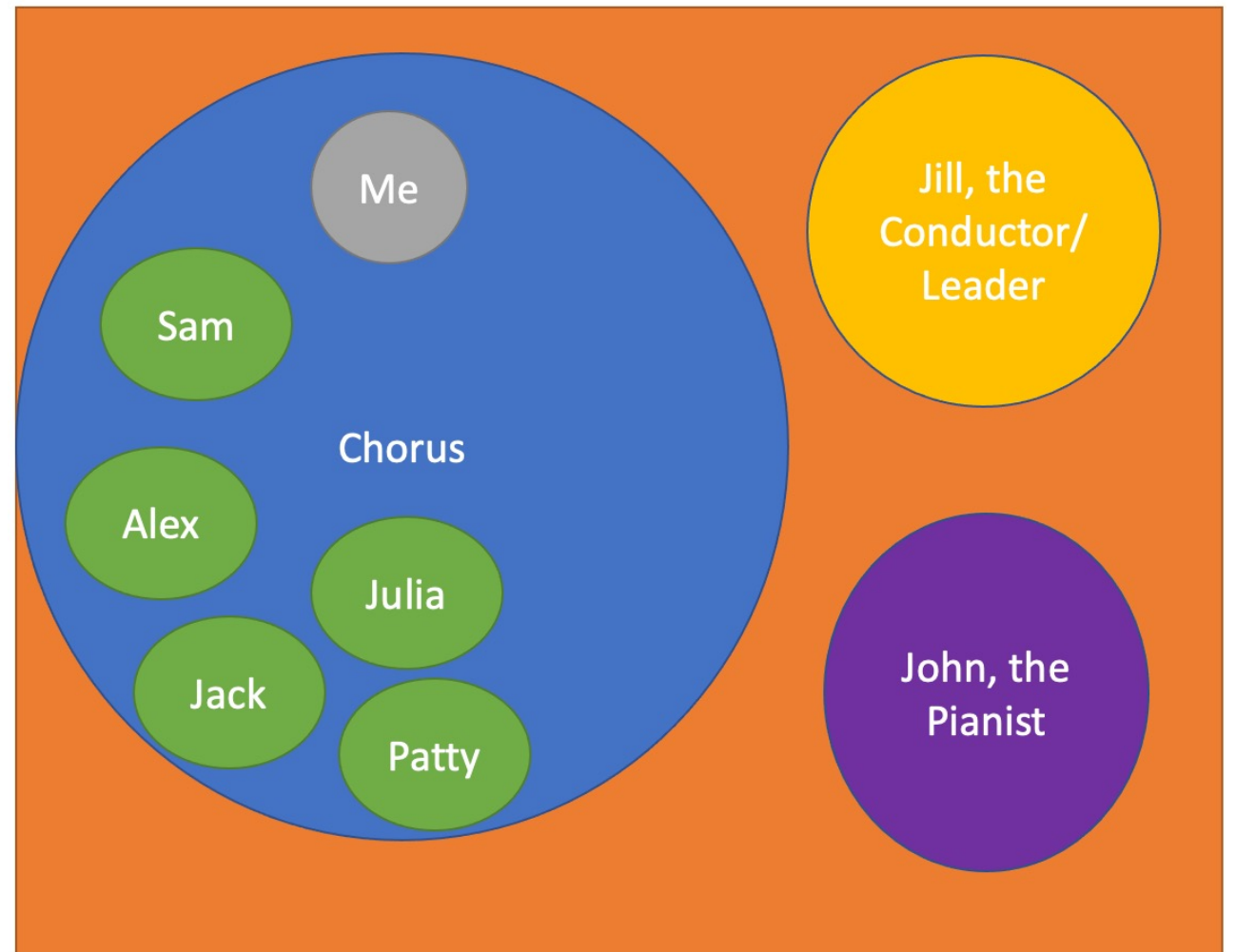
How do I know when the ensemble is ready?

- Core Motives Approach of Social Psychology (BUC(K)ET)
  - Belonging
  - Understanding
  - Control
  - Enhancing Self
  - Trust

- Transactional Analysis (Imagos)
  - Anticipatory Imago
  - Adjusted Imago
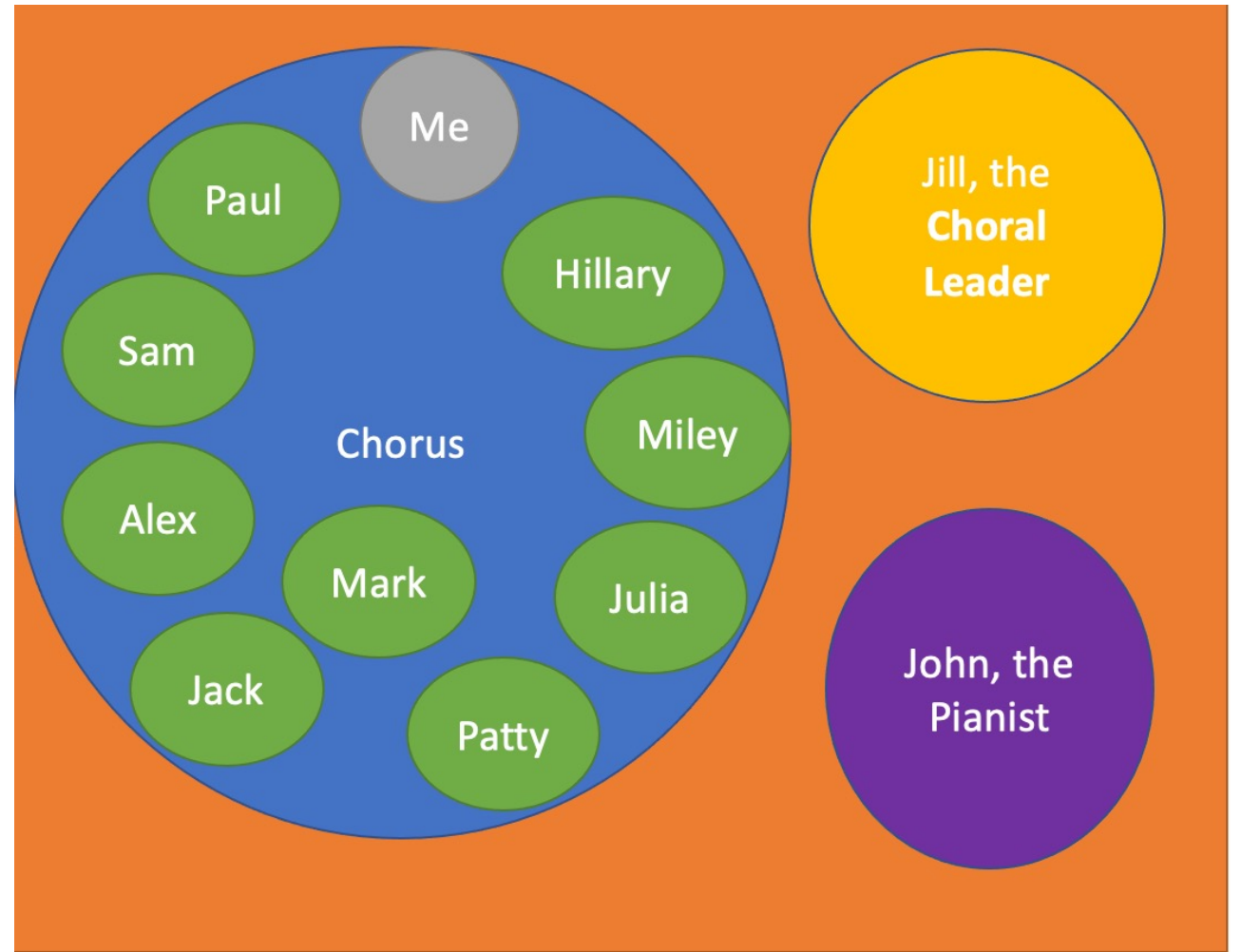 - Attached/Alienated Imago
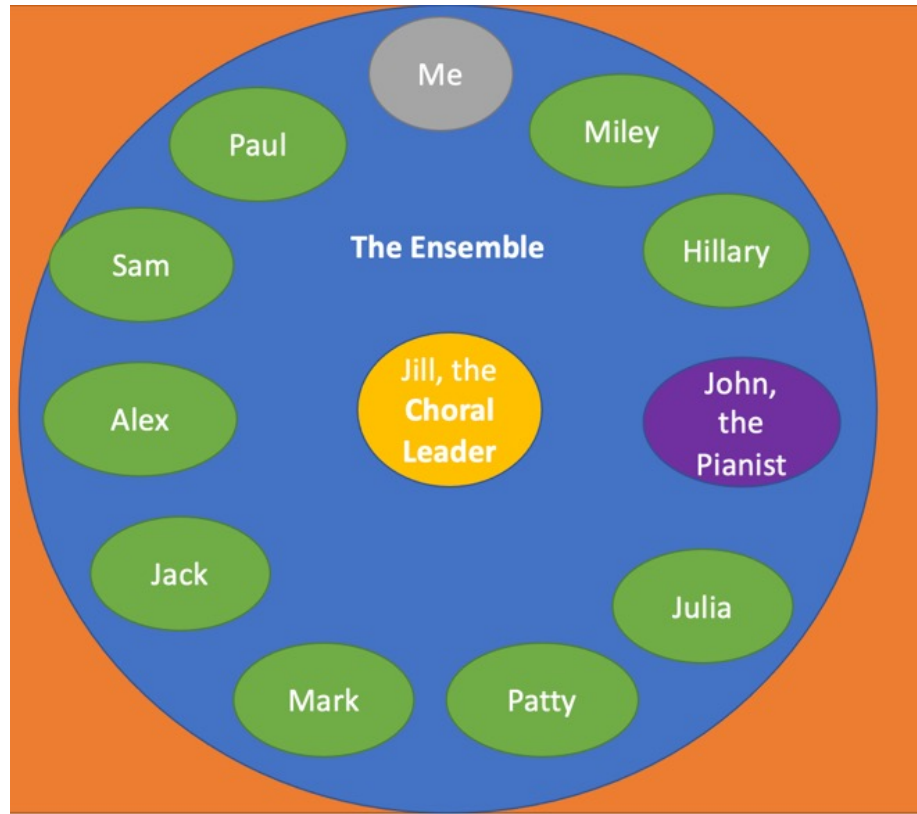 - Adapted Imago

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Anticipatory Imago

Adjusted Imago

Adapted Group Imago

Me

Paul

Sam

Alex

Jack

Mark

Patty

Julia

Miley

Hillary

Chorus

Jill, the **Choral Leader**

John, the Pianist

Attached Group Imago

Trauma-Informed Lens

- By adopting an emotionally intelligent pedagogical framework, you are making the first step towards a trauma-informed environment

- If you are unsure about whether to continue moving up the ladder of vulnerability, here are some suggestions

  - *Always* ask for consent for potentially triggering content

  - Take the time to assess the value in moving forward and the intent in doing so

  - Talk to members of your ensemble

Seeing the Bigger Picture

- By cultivating a <u>choral culture of connectedness,</u> we can…

  - Reduce the levels of MPA, therefore leading to a more technically proficient performance

  - Develop a strong group culture that supports and enhances the individual musician

  - Deeply and intimately connect to the music, therefore crafting a more connected and interesting musical performance

  - Create a safe space where musicians can take risks and be vulnerable without the fear of judgment or negative repercussions

"There is always time for feelings."
-Dr. Jill Rogers

"I have learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them *feel.*"
-Maya Angelou

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