

November 10, 2021

In the spring of 2021, the **Connecticut All-State Choirs** engaged in an intensive, 2-day virtual All-State experience. This experience was rooted in the music of the [Justice Choir](#) Songbook (as approved by CMEA) and the students engaged in singing, dialogue and activities with some of the nation's leading experts in social justice and music, Tesfa Wondemagegnehu (St. Olaf College and co-founder of The Justice Choir Movement) and Dr. Jeffrey Douma (Yale University). Our conductors masterfully facilitated and modeled how to use our choral art form to engage with complex and thoughtful conversations around present-day events and issues.

The weekend culminated with recording the learned material, and those recordings were combined with video imagery. This video and audio creation was a budget-approved item by CMEA. Our video editor used feedback and suggestions from students to generate visual content that not only encapsulates the themes of the text, but our shared dialogue, and socially relevant imagery. The footage includes historic and modern protest scenes, including signs promoting unity and love, as well as a tribute to past all-state CMEA Choirs - as requested by the students themselves. It reimagines the traditional model of an All-State choir, it reflects the history that is being made all around us, and it embodies a truly unique All-State choral experience.

We wish that you could see this student work. It is brilliant, impactful, and beautifully sung. It was created and ready to be distributed in the summer of 2021. It remains ready to be immediately released.

When we sent the final product to the CMEA Leadership, they replied that they would not publish the video until we removed the words "Black Lives Matter" as they appeared on a sign held by a peaceful protester in a brief moment of stock footage.

After extensive written and in-person deliberation, the CMEA leadership insisted that the words "Black Lives Matter" be removed or blurred out. **After we refused**, the CMEA leadership then informed our choral chairs that they could not publish the video because students had not been provided release forms/opt-out options, prior to the festival experience, for content regarding the historic connection between singing and social justice; therefore, **CMEA would not release the final video product to the public or even to its members and paying student participants.**

There were no images of students used in this video and no identifying attributes of any kind. **There had been no previous communication about said release forms, and release forms were not required of the other ensembles.** Our team inquired about providing these forms retroactively, but the CMEA leadership replied that there would be no further action or communication on this subject.

We oppose CMEA Leadership's desire to exclude the words "Black Lives Matter" from the final product. We and the ensemble conductors stand firmly in support of the work of our video editor (Melanie Cometa) and the selected imagery in this project. We and the conductors have communicated extensively with the CMEA Executive Board, hoping they would change their decision to exclude the visual material, and look to [their mission](#) and [NAfME's very public stance](#) on Black Lives Matter as guide posts.

We are proud to have designed a virtual collaboration with our Connecticut choral students and their All-State Conductors.

This student-centered process and resulting product brings heightened awareness to the historic and present-day connection of singing and social justice. The whole endeavor demonstrates the kind of process, dialogue and experience which can be accomplished by our students when given the opportunity to engage with meaningful and necessary issues of equity and diversity.

Please feel free to share this letter with your choral colleagues who might be wondering why the project has not been released.

Sincerely,

Amanda Hanzlik - Matthew Harrison - Theresa Voss - Stephanie Zak - *2020-2021 Connecticut All-State Choral Chairs*
Michael Carnaroli - Melanie Cometa - Brian Jones - Lauren Verney-Fink - *2021 All-State Cohort Leaders*