

# Faith Conversations: Shanley choir director uses music to enliven souls of students

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- [Rebecca Raber directs the choir](#)

Rebecca Raber directs the Shanley High School choir at St. Peter's Church during a March visit to New York City. Kevin Wolf / Special to The Forum



- [Roxane Salonen](#)

Roxane Salonen

Fargo - Arriving at Nativity Church for a Saturday morning interview, I find Rebecca Raber, Shanley High School choir director, in the sanctuary just to the right of the altar and large, metal crucifix that dangles midair.

Natural light falls from ceiling windows, softly illuminating the music corner where she and a student are rehearsing.

As I slip unnoticed into the back pew, the student plays a moving piano rendition of "A City Called Heaven," trying to decide whether he'll accompany or sing it in his final performance of the song at an upcoming concert.



"It's up to you; just let me know," Raber says, understanding the weight of his decision. He's a senior, after all, and this song has become something of an endeared theme to the choir.

As he plays, Raber begins singing, her back to me, and I find her voice hauntingly beautiful.

I'm a little embarrassed by the tears dripping down my cheeks, but there's no stopping them now.

My soul has been awakened by music.

Process, not performance

"Do you miss singing?"

It's the first question I ask. I've often wondered if artists who teach feel the loss of not performing as much themselves.

"No, I really don't," she says. "I'm a very nervous performer. Maybe it's tied to my wanting to get everything right all the time."

Besides, she loves the process, the planning, even the rehearsals. "That's the fun for me," Raber says.

During a phone interview later, her husband, Michael, affirms what seems a rather unique drive for someone so musically gifted.

“The teacher part of her wants to keep working and molding the kids,” he says, “so the performing part isn’t the pinnacle, and I really admire that about her.”

Her sweetheart from their University of Jamestown days (then Jamestown College), Michael knows well how much she puts into her work, including summers poring over potential pieces, all tailor-chosen for the coming year’s unique voices.

This strong work ethic emerged during her childhood on a farm near Pisek, N.D., where she was raised the fourth of five children.

“I tease her about colored pens and notecards and files,” Michael adds. “But I could learn a lot from her in terms of organization.”

### Wooing young souls

Raber started down the road of music in eighth grade as a trombone player and vocalist.

“I took about a year of piano, but I was terrible,” she says.

The music program at her school was almost nonexistent until Darla Sheldon, an instructor from Park River, walked in and saved the day, greatly impressing a young student known then as Becky Lovcik.

“She basically came in and started everything from scratch,” Raber says. “Maybe that’s why that kind of thing doesn’t scare me. I love building programs.”

She also recalls when, preparing for a regional music competition in high school, a neighboring director noticing her nerves said, “Just say a prayer, open your mouth and let the song come out.”

“Even then I knew that was something special,” Raber says. “And I thought, ‘Of course! Why have I not realized before how these things are connected?’ ”

Ever since, she’s been keenly aware of the tie-in between music and spirituality, which is evident in all kinds of music, not just sacred music, she says.

“Whether you choose to recognize spirituality in your life or not, you are still a soul. And I think there’s a way God taps you on the shoulder through music that makes you stop in your moment,” she says.

### A beloved instructor

Raber says she enjoys bringing disparate people together and helping them produce something beautiful that they could not have accomplished as individuals.

Though she’s taught at the college level, too, she finds the richest, most fulfilling opportunities in younger grades.

“In middle and high school they are still young enough that you are just opening up the world of music to them.”

Nick Kasper, a 2010 Shanley graduate, first had Raber as an instructor in sixth grade, and credits her for having inspired him to pursue music in college.

“She helped us see that music can have a profound impact on us as individuals, and she used music to help us express ourselves and profess our faith with all the different texts we sang,” he says.

Bethany Loock, a Shanley junior, says Raber encourages her students to sing from the heart, in part by taking time to really teach them the meaning of the songs they sing.

“It’s easy for us to be excited about it when she’s so passionate about it herself.”

A gift to others, too

But the students aren’t the only ones who admire Raber.

Maria Hennen, mother of two Shanley choir students, Alex and Hannah, recently volunteered as a chaperone for the group’s spring tour to New York City. What she witnessed only fortified conclusions drawn before the trip.

“She’s the perfect embodiment of why some families choose Blessed John Paul II schools,” Hennen says. “She’s allowed to use her beautiful soul and teach the kids ways they can listen to Christ through song and to pray through song...And you just can’t put a price tag on that.”

Raber’s expertise allows students to receive more of a college-level experience in high school, she adds. “And her soul is so beautiful and natural. It’s not pretentious in any way. It just beautifully flows out of her.”

But Raber squirms at compliments. She wants it to be about the students, she says, and quickly points out a few imperfections.

For example, though she’s not one to raise her voice, she admits to having mastered her scrutinizing eye – “the look” – in order to return order to a boisterous class.

She’s also very aware of the jabs students make at her propensity for sharing quotes and other expressions of wisdom. A recent “top 10 list” in the school newspaper noted, “You know you’re at Shanley if you’re learning more life lessons in choir than you do in actual life.”

Raber just giggles along, knowing someday they’ll see how well those life lessons have held and realize the profundity of the gift of music.

“There’s nothing like when everybody’s on the same page and you start rehearsal and all of a sudden it’s dismissal time, and you don’t know where the last 50 minutes have gone because you’re in it together,” she says. “It’s the most magical thing.”

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