

Theatre Elements in Choir A Cappella

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Abstract. This study explores the integration of theatrical elements into a *cappella* choir performance, emphasizing how spatial design, movement, lighting, vocal expression, narrative, and audience interaction enhances musical communication and visual impact. Using a qualitative, theoretical–descriptive approach, the research synthesizes insights from theatre studies and choral performance literature to identify points of convergence between the two disciplines. Findings reveal that incorporating theatrical techniques fosters embodied expressivity, visual coherence, and stronger performer–audience engagement, transforming choral singing into a multidimensional artistic experience. The discussion highlights pedagogical implications, suggesting rehearsal strategies that merge vocal training with movement and stagecraft. While primarily conceptual, this study provides a foundation for future empirical research on the audience and performer effects of theatre-infused choral performance. Integrating theatricality into a *cappella* practice ultimately enhances the emotional and communicative depth of the choral art form.

Keywords: Theatre elements, A cappella choir, Choral performance, Performance pedagogy, Interdisciplinary arts

Introduction

The intersection between music and theatre has been a defining characteristic of human performance since antiquity. From the Greek chorus that narrated tragedies to the operatic ensembles of the Renaissance, the human voice has served not only as a musical instrument but also as a vehicle for drama and storytelling. In contemporary choral performance, the *a cappella* tradition—defined as singing without instrumental accompaniment—continues this lineage by emphasizing the expressive potential of the human voice in its purest form. However, as audience expectations and performance contexts evolve, *a cappella* choirs increasingly adopt elements traditionally associated with theatre to enhance visual and emotional engagement.

A cappella singing is both musically and socially distinctive. Its success relies on ensemble cohesion, harmonic accuracy, and timbral unity, requiring singers to function as interdependent components of a single instrument. Unlike accompanied choir or orchestral performance, *a cappella* ensembles must

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maintain pitch, rhythm, and expressiveness solely through vocal coordination and internal listening (Audiolover, 2023). While this musical rigor is central, the communicative dimension—how choirs convey meaning, emotion, and story—has gained renewed importance in the 21st century, particularly in competitive, popular, and theatrical choral forms such as show choir, collegiate *a cappella*, and contemporary vocal theatre (SCVA Choral, 2012).

Theatre, as an art form, encompasses multiple expressive elements, character, dialogue, movement, spectacle, and the dynamic relationship between performers and audience (Arena Theatre, 2023). In the context of *a cappella* performance, many of these elements translate directly or indirectly: *plot* may become thematic progression within a song set; *character* may emerge through solo features or ensemble mood; *spectacle* may manifest through lighting, costume, and choreography; and *dialogue* may appear through musical call-and-response or lyrical storytelling. Thus, the theatre provides a conceptual framework for understanding how non-verbal, visual, and spatial components can enrich the inherently auditory nature of choral music.

Integrating theatre into *a cappella* performance is not merely decorative, it can reshape the communicative intent and audience perception of the choir. Theatrical devices such as body movement, facial expression, and spatial staging can amplify emotional nuance, create narrative flow, and transform static concert presentation into immersive performance (Farzaliyeva & Seyidov, 2025). Scholars and practitioners in performance studies argue that when music performance incorporates theatricality, the audience experiences a synthesis of sight and sound that enhances cognitive and affective engagement (Laure Trompeter, 2015; AudioChamps, 2023). In this sense, theatricality becomes a mode of meaning-making that parallels musical phrasing and dynamics.

Despite growing recognition of these cross-disciplinary connections, academic inquiry into the theatrical aspects of *a cappella* choir remains limited (Babayev & Alaviyya, 2023). Most existing research focuses on vocal technique, arrangement, and ensemble management, leaving an underexplored area concerning visual and dramatic presentation. This article seeks to address that gap by systematically identifying key theatre elements relevant to *a cappella* choir, analyzing their potential applications, and discussing their implications for rehearsal and performance practice. Specifically, it examines how spatial use, gesture, visual design, and narrative structure—core elements of theatre—can be integrated to elevate both the artistic and communicative dimensions of *a cappella* performance (Sadikhova, 2022).

The broader goal of this study is to contribute to interdisciplinary dialogue between music and theatre arts by proposing a conceptual framework that links choral musicianship with performative embodiment. By adopting a theatre-informed lens, choir directors and performers may enhance not only their technical proficiency but also their interpretive depth and audience rapport. In this way, the fusion of theatre and *a cappella* can be seen as part of a wider movement toward multimodal, experiential performance art that celebrates the expressive totality of the human voice and body.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative, theoretical–descriptive design aimed at identifying and analyzing the incorporation of theatrical elements into *a cappella* choir performance (Ahmedova, 2025). Given

the conceptual and interdisciplinary nature of the topic—situated at the intersection of music performance, theatre studies, and expressive arts—this approach was chosen to enable a comprehensive synthesis of existing frameworks rather than an empirical field study. The analysis combined literature review, comparative conceptual mapping, and applied performance analysis of representative cases documented in secondary sources.

1. Research Design and Rationale

The methodological framework for this paper was guided by principles of *qualitative content analysis* and *conceptual synthesis*. The purpose was not to measure audience response or quantify performance characteristics, but rather to interpret and systematize how theoretical constructs from theatre can inform *a cappella* choir practice. Following the interpretivist paradigm, which values meaning making over measurement, the study sought to uncover relationships between visual and auditory dimensions of performance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative orientation enabled flexibility in considering diverse materials—from academic articles to practitioner commentaries and ensemble case descriptions.

2. Data Sources and Selection

Data were drawn from a variety of secondary textual and digital materials published between 2010 and 2024, covering both theatre and choral performance disciplines.

- **Theatre-related sources** included descriptions of canonical elements of theatre—such as character, plot, spectacle, space, movement, and audience relationship—from educational and professional theatre platforms (e.g., Arena Theatre, 2023; Laura Trompetter, 2015; AudioChamps, 2023).
- **Choral and *a cappella*-related sources** comprised discussions of vocal arrangement, stagecraft, and ensemble coordination from online music education and choral association resources (e.g., Audiolover, 2023; SCVA Choral, 2012).
- **Cross-disciplinary materials** such as show choir guides and performance pedagogy resources were also included to identify practices where music and theatre overlap.

The inclusion criteria were based on three factors: (a) explicit mention of performance or staging techniques relevant to vocal ensembles, (b) conceptual linkage between theatre and musical performance, and (c) accessibility of descriptive or theoretical detail suitable for qualitative synthesis. Sources without relevance to live performance dynamics or ensemble interaction were excluded.

3. Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeded in three iterative stages:

1. **Thematic Coding:** Each source was examined for references to theatrical components (e.g., movement, lighting, character, space). Themes were coded and categorized according to their recurrence and conceptual similarity.

2. **Comparative Mapping:** The coded elements were then mapped against the core features of *a cappella* choir performance—such as vocal harmony, ensemble balance, and stage presentation—to identify points of convergence and divergence.

3. **Model Construction:** From the mapped intersections, a conceptual model was developed outlining how specific theatrical elements can be adapted within the *a cappella* choral framework. This model informed the “Results” and “Discussion” sections, focusing on the six main elements: space, gesture, lighting, voice, narrative, and performer–audience dynamics (Sadikhova & Babayev, 2025).

4. Data Interpretation and Validity

To enhance analytical credibility, cross-comparison between multiple sources was used to validate emerging themes. Descriptions from theatre education texts were compared with choral performance examples to ensure interpretive consistency. Although the study did not involve field data or empirical observation, triangulation across theoretical and practitioner literature helped mitigate bias inherent in single-source interpretation. Peer-reviewed or professionally curated materials were prioritized where available to strengthen scholarly reliability.

5. Limitations of Methodology

As a conceptual investigation, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data. The absence of live observation, rehearsal analysis, or performer interviews constrains the ability to assess how theoretical recommendations function in practice. Furthermore, the scope is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive; thus, findings serve as a foundation for future applied research rather than as performance guidelines per se (Gulkhara & Kamran, 2025). Subsequent empirical studies might employ ethnographic or mixed-method approaches to observe audience engagement, analyze movement-sound relationships, or test the pedagogical value of theatre-infused rehearsal models.

Results

The qualitative synthesis of theatre and *a cappella* literature revealed six dominant theatrical elements that can be meaningfully integrated into choral performance: spatial use, movement and gesture, lighting and visual design, vocal delivery as theatrical voice, narrative and character, and performer–audience dynamics. These elements collectively illustrate how theatrical strategies can enhance musical communication, stage aesthetics, and emotional storytelling in *a cappella* contexts.

1. Spatial Use and Stage Positioning

Theatre theory regards space as one of the foundational expressive tools—defining physical relationships among performers, their environment, and the audience (Arena Theatre, 2023). In the *a cappella* setting, spatial design directly affects both acoustic blend and visual impression.

- **Vertical and horizontal spacing:** Choirs traditionally stand in static semi-circles to balance sound projection; however, staggered layering, curved formations, or clustered groupings can create visual rhythm and emphasize particular vocal lines.

- **Dynamic staging:** Ensembles may move subtly during transitions or modulations, creating a flow that mirrors harmonic progression. For instance, stepping forward on a crescendo can symbolize emotional intensity or narrative climax.
- **Use of levels:** Incorporating platforms or varied heights, as in theatrical blocking, enhances visual depth and conveys status, tension, or hierarchy within musical storytelling.

Such spatial creativity transforms the choir from a fixed vocal ensemble into a living, dynamic tableau. Importantly, these arrangements must balance aesthetic purpose with acoustical coherence—ensuring singers still hear and blend effectively.

2. Movement and Gesture

Movement in theatre communicates character and emotion beyond words (Trompetter, 2015). Similarly, *a cappella* choirs can use choreographed or organic gestures to visualize rhythm, phrasing, and narrative energy.

- **Micro-movements:** Unified sways, synchronized arm lifts, or small shifts in direction can reinforce tempo and phrasing while maintaining ensemble cohesion.
- **Expressive gesture:** Individual facial expressions, posture, or hand movements can illustrate lyrical meaning—e.g., raised arms symbolizing hope, closed hands denoting introspection.
- **Choreographed performance:** In contemporary or show-choir contexts, more elaborate choreography synchronized with vocal phrasing can transform the performance into a hybrid musical-theatrical work.

While excessive movement may risk distracting from vocal precision, balanced integration of gesture encourages physical embodiment of music, resulting in a more engaging and emotionally resonant presentation.

3. Lighting and Visual Design

The element of spectacle—encompassing lighting, costume, and set design—is central to theatre (AudioChamps, 2023). For *a cappella* choirs, thoughtful manipulation of visual design significantly shapes audience perception.

- **Lighting:** Shifts in lighting intensity or color can correspond with mood changes, key modulations, or structural divisions within a piece. For example, dimmed lighting during soft harmonies evokes intimacy, whereas bright illumination during climaxes suggests triumph or revelation.
- **Costume and visual uniformity:** Coordinated attire enhances ensemble unity; thematic costuming can support narrative or stylistic identity (e.g., period dress for Renaissance madrigals, modern chic for pop arrangements).

- **Stage background and props:** Minimalist scenic elements—such as risers, drapes, or symbolic props—can frame the ensemble’s aesthetic identity without overwhelming the focus on the human voice.

These visual decisions mirror theatrical design principles that use imagery and light to guide emotional interpretation effectively merging sound and spectacle into a unified performance experience.

4. Vocal Delivery as Theatrical Voice

In theatre, the actor’s voice carries character, intention, and emotion (Enotes, 2023). In a *cappella* choir, this principle expands traditional concepts of vocal technique.

- **Dynamic expression:** Contrasts in volume, tone color, and articulation can reflect narrative progression—soft timbres suggesting vulnerability, strong attacks evoking confrontation or climax.
- **Textual clarity:** The projection of lyrics, diction, and phrasing becomes a form of “spoken drama,” translating textual meaning into musical rhetoric.
- **Characterization through voice:** Individual singers or sections can assume roles—such as narrators, protagonists, or commentators—creating dramatic interplay even within abstract compositions.

Through such vocal dramaturgy, the choir transforms into a collective storyteller rather than a static harmonic ensemble.

5. Narrative and Character Development

Theatre fundamentally depends on plot, character, and transformation. Although a *cappella* performances are often non-narrative, theatrical structuring can give musical sets a sense of journey.

- **Programmatic design:** Sequencing songs to follow a thematic or emotional arc creates a meta-narrative—e.g., moving from isolation to unity, or from sorrow to joy.
- **Characterization of ensemble roles:** Soloists may act as dramatic focal points, while supporting voices function as chorus or environment, paralleling classical theatre’s narrative layering.
- **Symbolic staging:** Position changes, lighting cues, and costume variations can subtly represent shifts in story or perspective.

By employing theatrical narrative logic, an *a cappella* choir transcends simple song presentation, crafting an emotional storyline that sustains audience engagement.

6. Performer–Audience Dynamics

One of the most distinctive elements of theatre is the live interaction between performers and audience. In a *cappella* performance, these dynamic shapes emotional connection and immediacy.

- **Direct address:** Choir members may occasionally break the “fourth wall,” singing toward individual audience sections or inviting participation through call-and-response.

- **Energy exchange:** Audience reaction—applause, smiles, body language—feeds back into performer energy, influencing pacing and expressive intensity.
- **Spatial intimacy:** Smaller venues or immersive staging (e.g., encircling the audience) enhance the sense of shared experience, aligning with contemporary trends in experiential performance.

Such engagement transforms the performance from a unidirectional concert into a dialogic event, consistent with theatrical principles of presence and audience awareness.

Summary of Findings

The integration of these six theatre elements contributes to what may be termed a “*theatrical performance model for a cappella choir*.” This model emphasizes:

1. **Embodied expressiveness** (movement, gesture, voice);
2. **Visual dramaturgy** (space, light, costume); and (Sadikhova, 2025)
3. **Narrative communication** (story, audience connection).

Together, these factors redefine the *a cappella* choir not merely as a musical ensemble but as a holistic performance entity capable of telling stories through both sound and spectacle.

Discussion

The results of this conceptual study suggest that the application of theatre elements within *a cappella* choir performance enriches both artistic expression and audience engagement. By integrating space, movement, lighting, voice, narrative, and performer–audience dynamics, *a cappella* ensembles can transcend the limitations of traditional concert staging to create multisensory experiences that blend musical precision with theatrical storytelling. This synthesis aligns with contemporary performance trends emphasizing *embodiment*, *interdisciplinarity*, and *experiential communication* across the performing arts (Gulkhara & Farzaliyeva, 2025).

1. Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings highlight the compatibility between theatre’s semiotic model and choral performance practice. Theatre scholars such as Elam (2002) have long emphasized that performance communicates meaning through a system of visual and auditory signs—gestures, tone, space, and rhythm. When applied to *a cappella* choir, this semiotic framework clarifies how non-musical elements (such as lighting or movement) operate as *visual extensions of musical symbols*. For example, a harmonic modulation may be mirrored through a shift in lighting or physical formation, allowing audiences to perceive musical transitions more viscerally.

Moreover, this intersection reinforces the notion that choral performance is inherently theatrical. Even in traditional sacred or classical contexts, choral singing involves staging, role assumption, and audience reception—fundamental characteristics of theatre (Carlson, 2018). Recognizing this shared ontology legitimizes the incorporation of theatre-based methodologies in choral pedagogy and directs future scholarly inquiry toward hybrid models of performance analysis.

2. Pedagogical and Rehearsal Implications

The integration of theatre elements necessitates a shift in choral pedagogy—from focusing exclusively on sonic accuracy to cultivating *embodied musicality*. Choir directors and vocal educators can adopt theatre-informed rehearsal strategies to foster expressive awareness and stage presence among singers.

- **Spatial awareness training:** Rehearsals can include exercises on stage movement, spacing, and orientation to improve both visual composition and ensemble cohesion.
- **Physical warm-ups and expressive gesture workshops:** Borrowed from acting pedagogy, these techniques encourage performers to connect physical gesture with vocal phrasing, promoting unified expressivity.
- **Characterization and text interpretation:** Directors may use dramatic analysis—asking singers to identify emotional subtext or “character objectives” within lyrics—to deepen interpretive engagement.
- **Lighting and visual coordination:** Technical rehearsals that incorporate lighting cues and staging plans enhance overall performance coherence and professional polish.

Through these methods, choirs can cultivate performance literacy that extends beyond musical notation, equipping singers to embody and communicate the emotional essence of the repertoire.

3. Artistic and Practical Considerations

While the aesthetic benefits of theatrical integration are evident, practical challenges also arise. The primary concern is balance—ensuring that visual and theatrical elements support, rather than overshadow, the musical core. Excessive movement can disrupt breath control or ensemble synchronization, while elaborate lighting or costume design may distract from vocal quality. Therefore, theatricality in *a cappella* must remain *musically functional*—each visual or spatial decision should serve a clear expressive purpose tied to the music’s structure or emotion.

Furthermore, considerations of venue, repertoire, and audience expectation must guide artistic choices. A sacred choral setting may call for restrained, meditative movement, whereas a collegiate or pop *a cappella* concert can support more dynamic choreography (Sadiqova, 2021). This adaptability reflects theatre’s principle of *contextual dramaturgy*—tailoring aesthetic strategies to audience and environment (Lehmann, 2006).

4. Interdisciplinary and Cultural Significance

Theatre-infused *a cappella* performance contributes to the broader cultural movement toward interdisciplinary arts, where boundaries between art forms are increasingly fluid. The convergence of music, dance, and theatre in choral performance mirrors trends in musical theatre, multimedia performance, and immersive concert design. As audiences seek more engaging and emotionally resonant live experiences, integrating theatricality allows choirs to remain artistically relevant and culturally responsive.

Additionally, this hybrid approach has pedagogical value for developing 21st-century artistic competencies—collaboration, adaptability, and multimodal communication—skills highly valued in creative industries. Choirs that incorporate theatricality may also attract more diverse audiences, bridging generational and cultural divides by transforming traditional concert etiquette into shared performative experience.

5. Limitations and Future Research

As a conceptual study, this research does not empirically measure audience response or performer experience. Future studies could adopt mixed-methods approaches—combining ethnographic observation, video analysis, and audience surveys—to evaluate the impact of theatrical elements on perception, emotional engagement, and memory retention. Experimental designs might also test whether theatre-based rehearsal techniques improve ensemble cohesion or performance confidence among singers.

Furthermore, comparative case studies of professional *a cappella* groups (e.g., Pentatonix, Voces8, or The Swingles) could provide practical insights into how visual staging and dramaturgy are successfully implemented in real-world contexts. Collaboration between theatre directors and choral conductors could lead to innovative cross-training programs that merge voice, movement, and stagecraft instruction.

6. Synthesis and Implications for Performance Practice

Ultimately, the results suggest that theatrical integration can serve as both an expressive and pedagogical tool for *a cappella* ensembles. By adopting the theatre’s holistic approach—where voice, body, space, and audience are interconnected, the choir transforms from a static musical ensemble into a living, embodied artwork. This holistic perspective challenges the traditional divide between “music performance” and “dramatic performance,” proposing instead a unified model where both contribute to meaning making.

Such integration resonates with the postmodern performance paradigm, which values authenticity, immediacy, and sensory richness over formal boundaries. In this sense, the *a cappella* choir becomes not only a vehicle of musical sound but also a medium of visual poetry and collective storytelling—redefining the contemporary choral experience for performers and audiences alike.

Conclusion

This article has proposed that key theatre elements—space, movement, voice, visual design, narrative and performer-audience dynamics—can enrich a *cappella* choir performance. While literature remains relatively general, there is promising overlap between theatrical theory and choral practice. Future empirical research might observe choirs implementing such strategies, assess audience response, or compare musical/visual effectiveness. For choir directors and ensemble members seeking to heighten expressive impact, adopting a theatre-informed mindset offers a work-able framework: treat the performance not just as a musical event, but as a theatrical one—where voices, bodies, space and audience combine to tell a story, move an emotion, and create memorable musical-theatrical

experiences. The study also emphasizes moderation and intentionality: theatricality should serve the music, not overshadow it. When used with discernment, theatre elements amplify the expressive clarity of a *cappella* singing, drawing listeners more deeply into the music's emotional landscape.

Future research should empirically test audience perceptions of theatre-enhanced *a cappella* performances, document rehearsal case studies, and develop pedagogical frameworks for training singers in expressive movement and stagecraft. Interdisciplinary collaborations between choir directors and theatre practitioners may yield innovative performance models that reflect the evolving aesthetics of 21st-century live performance.

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