

Working With Community Choirs

The role of the conductor

- ✓ If you haven't already, come on a SfP course and get some conductor training. Become the best conductor you can possibly be and then get better! Don't ever stop learning. Every choir deserves excellence and we need to make sure we give them that.
- ✓ It's our responsibility to provide our singers with a quality experience. It shouldn't matter how we might be feeling on the day of a choir rehearsal, we turn up and give everything we've got. Our job is to teach the music but it's also to inspire, to support, to listen, to sculpt and create a good sound. All of this can take years but what a wonderful journey to take!

A Unique Approach

Think of the things that are unique to you and. They are your USP (Unique Selling Point)!

Here are some ways you can do this:

1. Set high expectations of your choir:
 - ✓ Always aim for a good result and be firm as well as consistent with things like word endings, breathing, diction, etc... Much of this will happen through your gestures so make sure they are clear.
 - ✓ Maintain a good pace. Keep your singers as involved as you can so your singers don't have time to chat... You SHOULD be tired at the end of each rehearsal!
2. Choose repertoire wisely
 - ✓ Try to introduce your choir to a bit of everything, including folk, pop, gospel, classical and foreign language songs. Some they will love, some they will hate. Some will never see the light of day again and others will stay in the choir's repertoire forever.
 - ✓ You need to know what works for YOUR SPECIFIC choir and have a vision for them. If you conduct more than one choir, don't assume you can share repertoire between the choirs as it might suit one choir but not the other.



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- ✓ Be firm. Regardless of how much your singers beg you to do a particular piece, don't do it if you know it won't work. But be prepared to defend your decision.
3. Music or No music?
- ✓ If you use sheet music, ask for a volunteer from within the choir to type out lyrics for those who want them. In rehearsal, refer to the music but say "turn to page 9, bar 56 and then give the corresponding word or start of the phrase".
 - ✓ Include lots of songs that you teach by rote (SfP repertoire is fantastic for this). Some great, go-to SfP books include:
 - Golden Rounds (good for the start or end of a warm-up)
 - Camptown Races (simple, 3-part upper voice repertoire)
 - O Lux Beata (with the classic, *Circle March*)
 - Build a Bridge (SATB gospel songs that can be taught, in stages, by rote)
 - ✓ If at all possible, insist that singers perform without music. They might hate you for it but they will certainly see, hear and feel the difference it makes. Plus, there are no issues with copyright (make sure you and your accompanist use proper scores though!).
4. Manage your rehearsals well:
- ✓ Plan your rehearsal. Know what you want to achieve each week, especially if you have a limited amount of time to prepare.
 - ✓ Be realistic without being patronising. Use appropriate vocabulary so you don't leave anyone behind. You might not be able to talk about dotted crotchets or diminished 7ths but you can say, 'see that note with a dot next it? Hold it on for a bit longer.'
 - ✓ Vary your rehearsal technique – Don't start at the beginning of a piece. Jigsaw the piece and the choir will soon learn the whole song without realising it.
5. Keep your choir wanting more.
- ✓ Finish the rehearsal with a piece the choir knows well or something that uplifts or inspires them. Perhaps you've been working on a tricky bit. Finish with that so they can be proud of what they've achieved.

6. Try not to apologise for your choir. Don't say:

- ✓ 'they're really good, for a community choir...'
- ✓ 'they're all a bit nervous so please be nice'
- ✓ 'we apologise in advance but half the choir couldn't make it today'

It's so easy to say these things. Those people have turned up and they will give you their best. If you must make it known that half your choir is missing, word positively. Be proud of whoever you have in front of you.

Your choir enjoy singing for you otherwise they wouldn't come back. Enjoy taking them on their singing journey and good luck!

Ula Weber, April 2020



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