



# Organizational Tips for Directors of Choirs and Vocal Ensembles

The following suggestions are offered from leading Catholic conductors in U.S. Catholic schools and parishes. Additional considerations concerning a variety of topics can be found in recorded webinars produced by the American Federation Pueri Cantores (AFPC) and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA). Webinars may be accessed [HERE](#).

## Choir Organizational Tip

### How to Form a Quality and Health-Based Warmup Routine for your Children's Choir:

As Children's Choir directors we are given a number of tasks in a rehearsal period: create enthusiasm for singing, bring a fun and joyful atmosphere to learning music, teach liturgical concepts through the music, teach sight-singing and musicianship and then most importantly, learn repertoire in various styles, genres and even languages. One other important task is creating a warmup routine that will both be engaging to choristers and foster vocal health and growth at the same time. Here are some structured warmup ideas and concepts you may want to consider for your rehearsal.

How long should a warmup be?

Warming up the body and voice are crucial to ensuring vocal health for your choristers. Think about it like putting together, aligning and warming up any other instrument. Fifteen or so minutes should suffice.

Part 1- Physical warmups:

After we begin with prayer, allow time for stretching and relaxation. For example, I often ask students to reach one arm up and bend over to the side stretching the intercostal muscles so very important for breathing. Make sure breathing is part of this stretch, allowing children to become more aware and engaged with the deep breathing involved in singing. I then ask the children to reach to the ceiling with both arms and then bend over letting their arms and head hang to the floor. We count backward from ten to come back up to a normal standing position, feeling more aligned when we reach the top. Always encourage good posture in a rehearsal with knees loose and shoulders relaxed so that choristers can breathe efficiently for singing. These

concepts of posture should apply to standing and sitting, where both feet need to be flat on the floor and back should feel tall.

Some other physical warmups include twists, shaking arms and legs, taking the neck to one side and then the other and allowing the head to look at the ceiling and then the floor encouraging more stretch in the neck and back.

Follow these exercises with vocal sirens from bottom to top and back down using the head register, progressing higher each time. I often have one student throw a stuffed animal or ball in the air to show how high we can go as a group together. Encourage mouth breathing for this exercise. Thinking of being surprised can help open the mouth and form the breath correctly. Mouth breathing is more efficient for singing than breathing through the nose.

#### Part 2- Breathing warmups:

Breathing games are fun for kids and encourage efficient and deep breathing for singing. Letting them bend slightly forward can engage the back and ribcage more. We take a breath through the mouth in for four counts and then let the air out on a "s" for twelve counts, sixteen and then twenty. Give a pause between each exercise to allow choristers to reoxygenate. I often ask students to practice this at home as well in front of a mirror to make sure their shoulders are relaxed and they are not puffing their cheeks as they exhale.

#### Part 3- Vocal warmups:

1. I like to begin with warmups that allow engagement of the body and the waking up of resonance. Using the five notes of the scale descending (sol, fa, mi, re, do), let students sing these notes on the voiced consonant [v] and then [m]. The [v] encourages engagement of the abdominal muscles, ribcage and back while the [m] allows for resonance in the face and skull. The [m] requires space in the mouth and the keeping of molars apart. Ask students to imagine an egg in their mouths with the round side up.
2. We then open exercise #1 by adding vowels using the same descending scale (sol, fa, mi, re, do, but feel free to come up with other patterns) with [vi] and [mi]. The [i] vowel will warm up the voice well and encourage a bright and healthy sound. Make sure students understand that the [i] vowel is a vertical vowel and does not need a horizontal or smile-like mouth placement. Take this exercise up through the *passaggio*.

3. Diction exercises for example “red leather, yellow leather, red leather, yellow leather, red” on one note or “tip of the tongue, tip of the mouth, tip of the teeth” on one note or “double bubble double bubble gum” on one note can be helpful for articulation of diction. Take these exercises down in the voice, as the lower in the range we go, the closer we are to speech. Make sure to notice when the students are feeling too low in the voice. Do not push on the bottom.
4. Encouraging choristers to develop their head voice with legato arpeggios can be very helpful to opening the top of the voice and creating a healthy sound through and over the passaggio. Use [u] to move up through the head voice or [a]. Take the arpeggios as high as choristers can handle without hearing tension or strain. Encourage more opening of the mouth as the notes get higher. Gesture can be very helpful here, creating the shape of a rainbow with one arm. As students’ progress with this exercise, you may want to try it staccato or add a consonant to each note such as [z] or [f].
5. Scale degree exercises are a good way for students to understand the function of notes within a scale and tonality. An exercise I like to use is as follows, sung on the numbers themselves:  
1, 121, 12321, 1234321, 123454321, 12345654321, 1234567654321, 123456787654321. You can then make this more fun by asking students to get into pairs and clap on scale degree number three. This will encourage healthy singing but also coordination.
6. Finally, we work with our vowels and cut offs. A vowel sequence like [i, E, a, o, u] can be used or [a, E, i, o, u], depending on your preference. You can do this exercise on one note or any musical pattern of your choosing. I ask students to volunteer to be the “fermata holder”, where one of the vowels of the sequence is held. This will encourage students to watch the conductor, hold a vowel for a period of time and then move on together for the others. Feel free to add some consonants to each vowel and then at the end as well, allowing students to feel the cut off together. You may even want to work diphthongs in this exercise, opening the [a] up to [au]. Always encourage proper coordinated breathing within the group and a vertical mouth shape, not smile for a more blended sound.

Some other examples of warmups are lip trill arpeggios or straw phonation allowing students to sing through the straw or sing and blow bubbles in the water.

I hope that some or all of these ideas will help you to build a warmup routine that encourages vocal health, the building of range, coordination and ensemble. Make sure to apply these concepts to repertoire, often practicing just on one vowel, especially [u] if you are looking for more quality of tone in the head voice. Remember to encourage students to open their mouths and form vowels in a vertical mouth shape for a more homogenous vowel quality.

Enjoy!

*Choir Organizational Tip brought to you by Andrea Covais  
Director of Music, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Parish, Tenafly, NJ*

## Choir Organizational Tip

As I reflect on important organizational tips that have proved helpful and successful in my parish and Cathedral ministry with youth choirs, I find three pillars especially important.

- **Plan and prepare quality sacred music repertoire** from plainchant through the modern era with your youth choirs, while taking an opportunity to renew your Sunday assemblies' participation in sung prayer through Christ-centered, profound hymnody and service music. When we were compiling suggested repertoire for the "Lauda Anima Real Music for Catholic School Culture and Devotion" project while serving as the Director of Music at the Cathedral of Saint Raymond Nonnatus in the Diocese of Joliet in Illinois, we examined the recommendations of the US bishops in *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (2007) while discerning the treasures of our Roman Catholic sacred music tradition that would incorporate more fully the youth into the liturgical life of the entire Church. This repertoire included plainchant and traditional hymnody, including hymnody that could be adapted for multicultural liturgical celebrations in English and Spanish (for example, "Lift High the Cross" / "Alcen la Cruz").
- **Model great choral singing through championing musical excellence** with your parishes' other choirs while striving for robust congregational singing as well. Planning and preparing quality choral repertoire using superior technique and musicianship inspires the vocation of sacred music within your faith communities. Cultivating a strong culture of prayer and liturgy is essential for nurturing vocations while serving as a vehicle for evangelization in the modern world.
- **Strengthening communal and personal prayer lives** allows us to be open to the Holy Spirit in our ministries. For me, I find great spiritual comfort and fortitude in praying the Liturgy of the Hours. Other colleagues have shared with me their joy in *Lectio Divina* in the

presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Certainly, beginning and ending every rehearsal with prayer is intrinsic to the ministry to which we have been called by Jesus Christ. Praying with choral texts, particularly with quality translations of texts in Latin and other languages, creates more personal, profound meanings while animating the musical potential for our choirs. I have found it spiritually enriching for choristers and other liturgical ministers to have an additional day focused on spiritual formation as part of their yearly schedules as well.

May God bless us in our ministries during these holy seasons of Advent and Christmas as well as in the New Year!

*Choir Organizational Tip brought to you by James Grzadzinski  
Director of Music and Liturgy, Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Milwaukee, WI*

## Choir Organizational Tip

### Forming Character and Virtue through Children's Choir

I provide each of my youth schola members a syllabus in the front of their binders that we review together at the beginning of the choir season. (Teenage and adult choristers receive something similar, adjusted for their age). The syllabus includes practical and logistical information, but also the following. During rehearsals, we often turn to our list of **virtues to know and practice**, especially when I observe behavior to be improved upon.

#### **30 Virtues to Know and Practice**

1. Charity: Showing my love for God and others by my thoughts, words, and actions.
2. Confidence (Trust, Faith): Believing that God keeps his promises and that he gives me his strength.
3. Courage (Fortitude): Being brave. Standing up for what is right, even if it's hard.
4. Docility: Willingness to be taught, to learn, and to grow. (Latin docere = to teach; doctor, doctrine.)
5. Forgiveness: Letting go of grudges when we are angry or upset.
6. Generosity: Making sacrifices for God and others with a joyful spirit.
7. Gentleness: Having a compassionate & tender response to people, especially when they are struggling.
8. Gratitude: Having a thankful disposition of mind and heart.
9. Thoughtfulness: Being of service to others, noticing and assisting their needs.
10. Honesty: Always telling the truth, no matter what.
11. Hope: Desiring the kingdom of Heaven, eternal life, and happiness with God forever.
12. Humility: Remembering that I am not more important or special than others.
13. Industriousness: Being diligent and working energetically and whole-heartedly.
14. Joy: Showing a cheerful and thankful attitude.
15. Justice: Giving to others what they are rightly due.

16. Kindness: Showing respect and care to others.
  17. Leadership: Being a good example and building up the team with my gifts.
  18. Loyalty: Taking my commitments seriously.
  19. Modesty: Purity of heart in action, especially with dress and speech.
  20. Obedience: Paying attention to and cooperating with my teachers and parents.
  21. Orderliness: To be neat and organized with my time and possessions.
  22. Patience: Being kind even when people or situations are annoying.
  23. Peacefulness: Finding calm by keeping our eyes on Jesus.
  24. Perseverance: Staying on track even when I am tired or feel discouraged.
  25. Prayerfulness: Connecting with God often in my mind and heart.
  26. Purposefulness: Being focused and putting our full energies toward a goal.
  27. Respect: Recognizing the worth and dignity of every single person.
  28. Responsibility: Giving my best cooperation to my duties and assignments.
  29. Self-Control: Managing & directing our desires and wants to the good (the right thing at the right time).
  30. Wisdom: Paying attention to and learning from the word of God and the experiences of each day.
- Bonus: Moderation: Finding the wise and healthy amount of something good or neutral.

I also leave a few blank lines under the list so when another virtue comes up in class, we can write it in.

### **Chorister Cornerstones**

1. I sing to worship the Lord with my whole heart, mind, body & soul. The spotlight is on him, not me.
2. God deserves our best. I take what I did yesterday & improve on it today. I pursue excellence.
3. I am a respectful student and teammate. I encourage and don't compete with my fellow students.
4. I offer the gift of my voice with love and reverence for God and His people.
5. I pursue virtue in all that I do. A virtue is a firm attitude to know and do what is good and holy.

### **The Human Voice**

Our instrument is the human voice: it is the only living instrument, coming from a living, breathing being with a soul. Each of us as human souls, coming together, creates a choir whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Music speaks to the soul, beyond words, and in ways beyond our knowing...but only if we create the music with excellence! It is our privilege and responsibility to create the most beautiful sacred music of which we are capable, and each day to make our best better.

### **Practical and Logistical Information**

#### **Smart Singer Habits**

- Eat a healthy breakfast or snack before you come to class or sing for Mass (observe the fast).

- Use the bathroom right before you leave home or arrive early enough to use church bathroom.
- Bring your own water bottle and remember to take it home.
- Bring a sweater or sweatshirt in case the church is cold.
- Have your hair out of your eyes so you can see the director and the music.
- Do not chew gum, wear caps, or eat snacks in church.
- Have a pencil on hand & mark your score for every breath & instruction. Pencils are not for doodling.
- Be prepared to sit tall & relaxed & to stand frequently during class. Good posture for good sound!
- Not sure of a note, a word, or a vowel? Raise your hand. Questions are good!
- Conversations are for before and after rehearsal.
- Raise your hand to speak in rehearsal. Be prepared if the Director calls on you.
- If another section or individual is singing, pay close attention and you'll learn faster too.
- Know any class assignments (especially listening) and remember to do them at home.
- Hold scores so that you may look at the conductor without moving your head.
- If you have to miss rehearsal the week of a choir Mass, ask the Director if you should sit out the Mass.
- Please do not wear perfume, cologne, or scented personal products.
- Don't drink milk or eat sugar/dairy before singing.

### **Mass Participation**

- For choir Masses, wear complete choir uniform, including appropriate black dress shoes.
- Show reverence to the house of God and to the presence of the Eucharist.
- Whether singing in choir or in the pew, participate fully: kneel, sing & say responses, use OW.
- We do not whisper to our neighbor during Mass. If we need something, motion to the director.

Remember that our youth choristers could get vocal and musical formation in other settings, but a Catholic liturgical choir is the unique setting to receive all that \*plus\* spiritual and character formation that can shape them for life!

*Choir Organizational Tip brought to you by Claire Halbur  
Director of Sacred Music, St. Mary Magdalene Church, Gilbert, AZ*

## **Choir Organizational Tip**

### **Teaching Musicality Through Gesture**

I first learned the importance of this topic in my undergraduate degree when my choral music mentor implemented it in our rehearsals to fix vowel shapes or

phrasing. I remember a “focused [i] vowel” gesture: bringing our hands in at 45-degree angles, eventually meeting at fingertips. Or a “true round [o] vowel” gesture: tracing circles in front of our mouths. There were more, and they got even more ridiculous, but we bought in because we heard the instant change in our sound. Music is a multi-sensory experience. Every movement we make affects our singing.

If this is brand new to you or you’ve just never implemented it in rehearsal, I want to offer a practical example for you to try with your choirs using the AFPC Public Domain piece “Through North and South”. My Cherub Choir is made up of first through fourth grade singers. September was the first time our children’s choirs had gathered since March 2020; I had no idea what to expect. The Cherub Choir usually had around 15 voices; this year, 35 students walked through my door on the first day. Oh, and most of them were first graders! For reasons I think you can assume on your own, this group presented a number of new challenges. “Through North and South” was one of the first pieces we learned. With the “traps” of each phrase in mind, I have attempted to illustrate the gestures I taught in **THIS** score.

1. This phrase has a basic rise and fall shape. It requires good legato singing and gradual raising of the soft palette (from its already heightened place) as the range increases. **Gesture:** trace the slur shape (you could say “trace a rainbow”) in the air from one side of your body to the other.
2. This phrase is almost the opposite of the previous. Despite being in a very comfortable speech register, we want to keep the resonating space open, and, more importantly, avoid plummeting into chest voice on the low note. **Gesture:** trace a straight line across your body or act like you’re pulling a taut string. This encourages evenness in the register without any huge downward shifts. A second gesture—a relaxed, cupped hand moving upward—to keep the resonating space open could be done with the other hand. Two at once!
3. This phrase has two peaks on D and E. Similar to the first phrase where we need to create more resonating space, these two happen more suddenly and require a different mindset. **Gesture:** I had my singers trace three circles of three sizes in one continuous gesture—medium, small, large—almost like a gesture for conducting chant.
4. Singing with crisp rhythm is the challenge of the fourth phrase. **Gesture:** (This was their favorite) Lightly drumming the rhythm on your abdomen. Speaking first with the gesture is always a valid option, but especially in this case. Lastly, you could add another traced slur at the end of the phrase where the rhythm smooths out.

As conductors, we have to think fast, especially when children are in the rehearsal room. I knew within a minute that explaining or even vocal modeling were futile when teaching this song to a room of “green” singers. I came up with these gestures on the fly to teach these phrases and the kids locked on to them so



much that in the weeks following, they did them on their own any time we sang the piece. (No, we didn't use these when we sang at Mass!) I have also used this phrase-by-phrase structure with the "Alleluia Round" by Boyce/Proulx (GIA) and have achieved similar results.

Teaching through gesture happens in every one of our rehearsals, which, by the way, are after school. It's a great way to engage the entire body, which helps get out the after school energy and jitters. I even notice that students will mimic my conducting gesture on their own. That first grader watching your conducting intently could be a parish music director some day. These opportunities cannot be missed! I encourage you to explore this territory with your singers to improve musicality and rehearsal time efficiency.

*Choir Organizational Tip brought to you by Stephen Eros*

*Director of Liturgy & Music, St. Clare of Assisi Catholic Church, O'Fallon, IL*

## Choir Organizational Tip

### Recruiting Choristers in the School

As fate would have it, I began teaching vocal music in our parish school in the fall of 2020. Our previous music teacher had agreed to take up a new teaching position a couple of weeks prior to the national Covid shutdowns, and in the uncertainty of the times our principal felt it best to wait to hire a replacement until we knew whether or not vocal music would be allowed when school began again.

The following August we received word that under certain restrictions vocal music was to be allowed, but this good news didn't leave sufficient time to hire a new teacher, so I agreed to step in for the interim and one year has now turned into two.

What began as a lot of extra work has now turned into a graced-filled time of getting to know so many more children as well as their parents and teachers, deepening my understanding of the child's learning process AND greatly increasing the number of singers in the Schola Cantorum. I have shamefully recruited since my first day teaching and what began as a slow trickle has now turned into a small snowball beginning its descent down the hill, which I hope will one day become a large ball rolling down a mountain.

This semester I welcomed 10 probationer girls and 5 probationer boys, which might not sound like a large number, but they are all proficient with basic rhythms and solfege from their time in school, which has increased their learning speed in the choir. I have also had a number of older students ask to join (Yes!) as well as a dozen or so who are now on the fence. This is very different from years past when I asked the music teacher for names of good singers and then would have to call all of their parents and convince them during a two-minute phone conversation to allow their children to give the choir a try. Recently the choir's "mother" and "keeper of the

robes” informed me that we have officially run out of robes in certain sizes—a good problem to have!

I realize that it is impractical as well as impossible for many of my colleagues to teach music in their parish schools, but if there is a way for you to assist the music teacher on a regular basis, I guarantee you that as students get to know you, your chorister recruiting and retention will increase and make your life much easier. I encourage each of you to give it a try!

### **Bucket Drumming Karate**

Through a chance conversation last fall I learned about Bucket Drumming Karate, and after introducing it to my classes, my students immediately took to it, improving their rhythm reading drastically.

As the name implies, students drum on 5-gallon buckets, which are cheaper than real drums (fortunately our classroom already had a full set of real drums so I chose to continue using these), and make their way through rhythms of steadily increasing difficulty from White Belt to Black belt. The teacher can note their progress on wall charts or even give out actual pieces of colored rhythm to correspond to the level of the belt they have achieved—however simple or elaborate one chooses to make it. There are also an incredible amount of free resources online, just google *bucket drumming karate*.

In my classroom each child arrives to find a drum at his place with the instruction that he must use the drum responsibly or lose it for a certain amount of the class. I choose the quietest student to attempt the next belt level and if the student is successful, all the others play a gentle drum roll to congratulate him. This allows all the children to play their drums at regular intervals and they tend to pay attention better because they want to know if they get to beat on their instruments. Then I repeat the process.

I test students on rhythms that we have spent time on in class, so the vast majority pass their levels the first time through. If a child struggles I take a few minutes to help him and give him encouragement for next time. Children who in the past have taken no interest in music usually want to keep up with the group, and after not passing a level the first time through, try much harder the second time and usually succeed. Bucket drumming has become quite popular and because I consider it to have so much “bang for the buck” I gladly do it two to three times a month. The younger children love passing each new level and the older students just like drumming, although be prepared for loud classes (thankfully my principal doesn’t mind the noise!).

A Couple of Online Resources:

<https://guybbrownmusic.weebly.com/getting-started.html> (great introduction)

(easier levels for younger children)

*Choir Organization Tip brought to you by Lucas Tappan*

*Director of Liturgy & Music*

*Most Pure Heart of Mary Church, Topeka, KS*

## Choir Organizational Tip

### Re-forming Your Youth Choirs in a Post-COVID Age

Over the course of this wretched pandemic our youth choirs have taken a tremendous hit. When considering the affect this extended period of vocal dormancy has had on our younger singers, and all the physical and physiological changes that have taken place in their bodies over the year and a half, perhaps the best thing we can do as choir directors is to get to know our choristers and their continually developing instruments.

In this regard the "Vocal Assessment" is an invaluable tool, both to renew our relationships with the children and teen choir members, learn about their interests and potential schedule conflicts, and discover how their voices have changed over the many months. Take care not to employ the off-putting definition "Audition", as that can have negative connotations. In my experience this task is best accomplished by interviewing/assessing two or three singers at a time. Ideally, schedule this series of "Free Vocal Assessments!" in the 2-3 weeks prior to the initial rehearsal, and plan for approximately 5-7 minutes per singer. This assessment is especially important when working with boys who are approaching puberty and are getting an entirely new range of equipment. The first rehearsal back in place is the wrong time to learn that your strongest boy treble from March of 2020 is now an unconfident bass, trying to control a very unpredictable instrument. A gentle assessment will allow the conductor to identify any shift in his range, and thus aid in the placement of the boy into the proper section.

As we, at long last, are able to return to singing, we choir directors will be well served by building some protracted time at the beginning of each rehearsal for an extended period of vocalization, and a review of good choral habits. Don't brush off the warm-up period in a rush to begin working on repertoire, but rather embrace that period as a time to re-form your ensemble and allow your singers ample time to find their voices within the section and remember the thrill of singing God's praise! Review posture and alignment, proper breathing - deep and diaphragmatic - without tension, and remember that the vocalization period:

1. Awakens the eyes, ears, and lungs of the choir member
2. Engages the eyes, ears, and "musical leadership" of the conductor
3. Focuses and tunes the ensemble

#### 4. Releases physical tension and readies the ensemble for rehearsal

For the first 4-6 weeks back in rehearsals plan on a slow, careful vocalization period of 10 minutes, and an additional 5-10 minutes per rehearsal reviewing music theory and sight reading, so as to both build back your choral ensemble's sound, but also their musicianship.

*Choir Organizational Tip brought to you by Paul French  
President, American Federation Pueri Cantores  
Director of Music, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church, Chicago, IL*

## Choir Organizational Tips

### **Recruitment**

I'm finding it's more difficult to recruit new singers to my program these days, so here are some helpful tips: Singers might not just sign up for choir on their own. Sometimes you have to go after them! The school principal and the director of religious education need to be your best friends/advocates. Go visit all the school classrooms and talk about the choral program, then invite prospective new members to an open house rehearsal. Invite the parents as well! Choir is FUN, they just need to experience it in person! Be sure to include a break with some refreshments, and give the singers and parents an opportunity to socialize! During a school or parish Mass, see if you can talk to the assembly about the choral program during the announcement period. If you are connected to a school, attend the music classes and listen to the children sing. Then get the contact information of the kids who are GOOD. Write to the family and tell them their child has a gifted voice, and that joining choir is a great opportunity for them to honor their God-given gift! There are about 700 students in our cathedral elementary school (grades K-8) and about 1,600 in our religious education program. We also have excellent public schools in our town, so these students come to me with some good basic music skills. Not all students will sign up at first. Don't be discouraged! Sometimes the family has to think about it, and then they might join the following year.

### **Be Flexible**

As a member on a sports team, if you miss a practice or a game: "you're out!" Unfortunately, we can't afford to be this stringent with choir. In the eyes of a parent, the most important priorities of a child are completing homework assignments and studying for tests, then family events, sports-sports-sports!, orchestra, school play, and the list goes on. Choir often takes a backseat to these activities. Some of my best singers are also awesome athletes. It's important to be excited about ALL their activities, and then they'll be excited to get to choir as often as they can. Choir is a full-year activity, and other activities are a shorter period of time. If you assemble a strong base of singers, you can survive when

certain ones are away. Ask the parents to kindly communicate the activities schedules of their children so you can plan your choral program schedule accordingly. This is Columbus Day Weekend, and here in New York, I already know I'll be missing a number of singers. I use the Royal School of Church Music training scheme (adapted version) where the choristers get points for each rehearsal, Mass, and performance they attend. The singers receive medals, ribbons, and titles depending on how many points they accumulate. The charts are posted on our bulletin board for all to see. This procedure really helps to get the choristers there as often as possible!

### **Vocal Development**

Have a good knowledge of basic vocal production: body stretching, breathing, consonants, then vocalizes. I start in the center of their range, go up fairly high, then lower in the range, then higher, then lower. Be sure to go lower for the boys whose voices are dropping. They need to feel special, but also develop that part of the range. Then go higher for the ones who can show off those soprano high Cs! We sing in a very large building with moderate acoustical properties at my church. I blend both ranges: chest voice as well as head. I know the "old school" method was head tone only. In recent decades, even the finest British choir masters have incorporated the chest voice into the production for color and power!

Once children find their voices, they LOVE to sing. Parents tell me that their children sing all the time around the house, in the car, in the shower, and while doing homework! Give singers good vocal exercises, solfege, and melodies to practice at home. They also love sustaining! Play a game of: "how long can they hold a note?" Especially when staggering the breath, some can hold it up to 3 minutes!

### **Perform WITH your Adult/Teen Choirs**

At St. Agnes, we have brothers, sisters, cousins, moms, dads, uncles, aunts, and grandparents. What is more beautiful than singing with another family member at Mass? This will build a stronger community, and the singers will learn from each other! Most advanced teens/young adults have great choral skills. Well-developed youth singers have NO FEAR of the high notes. Each age group will learn from the other! There's no need to worry about their voices blending either. I'm amazed, how, in the course of a rehearsal, their various qualities (and indeed varied!) will begin to meld into one sonority! This is especially true if you are training various ages. The younger voices will help to "clean" the production of more mature instruments. The strength of adult voices helps to demonstrate to the young singers the possibility of a healthier production in their voices!

On November 10 at St. Agnes, we will have a "Choir Recognition" Mass, where ALL singers in ALL choirs will sing together and be recognized!

### **Special Events to Build Enthusiasm**

Yes, the primary purpose of choir is to prepare for the liturgy and help people pray with the aid of beautiful sacred music and singing. Singing in choir makes the Mass more enjoyable for singers too!

In addition, "special events" further create enthusiasm in your choir. My program has developed so much over the years and we are doing major high visibility events, such as singing the Mozart "Requiem" in German Latin at St. Stephen's Cathedral with the director of the Vienna Boys Choir! Even a simple pizza party or refreshments during rehearsal break will get the singers super excited! Go get ice cream on the practice after Holy Week or organize a trip to an amusement park to thank them for their amazing singing on Easter. This past August we sang the National Anthem at Citifield for once of the biggest Mets/Nationals Games of the year with 37,000 fans in attendance! This was an unforgettable night with 180 family members and friends sitting together in a reserved area of the stadium!

You can also take your choir to sing during Mass or perform a concert in another church with another youth choir! The exchange is priceless! A Pueri Cantores Festival is a FANTASTIC way to build enthusiasm, interest and continuity in your choir! If you have a small choir and are developing the program, this is a GREAT opportunity to see what is possible for your singers in the future! It's not often that your choristers will get see what it is like to sing in a large combined ensemble!

### **A Few More Thoughts**

Love and value your singers! Consider them YOUR MOST PRIZED POSSESSION! Children are unbelievably intuitive! If you are genuine and treat them with respect, you will get the same in return. Talk to them like you would a friend. Listen to their opinions, and invite them to speak their minds. Allow them time for conversation and socialization, and then when rehearsals start again they will be more focused!

Never embarrass a child! They are revealing their inner person by singing, so make them feel comfortable and confident. Some children are very sensitive! Others can be tougher, so a stronger approach might be needed. Each child is different, and we need to acknowledge and honor those differences.

Let the smart, talented, leaders of the group "Be the Leaders!" These beautiful young Catholics are the ones making the music. Empower them! Work hard, but play hard too! If they are having fun, they won't even realize how hard they are working!

*Choir Organizational Tip brought to you by Michael Bower, Director of Music at St. Agnes Cathedral, Rockville Centre, NY*



It's no wonder many directors have resorted to contemporary hymnals and 'groovier' canticles to keep the youth singing. It's often (and sadly) presumed that the youth recoil from the old as something not in keeping with the times and not 'cool' or 'hip.' I even remember the first time I was forced to join a youth choir in singing the older music of the Church. As a 'cool' eighth grader, I remember my fixed prejudices: "singing is for girls" and "church music is boring." It was only after the first fifteen seconds of joining the choir in singing Handel's Hallelujah Amen (from Judas Maccabeus) that my life was changed forever. The bass line began with tremulous sound only to be joined in by the sopranos, then altos, till all voices joined in glorious harmony. At this moment, it was like a spark lit off in my soul- a spark that would not go out for a long time. From that day forward, I became sacred music addict. From singing in multiple to directing multiple choirs, it's been only a growing experience and I'd like to share with you what I've learned if you'd like to evoke a similar experience to mine in your students.

**1. Realize your position is truly a ministry.** The music of the church is one of the ways we catechize and bring souls to Christ. The only difference is that it's a pathway of beauty instead of spoken truth. Hearing this deep, sacred beauty evokes desire and love in the youth especially when they know the words they sing are the same they profess in their hearts.

**2. Approach every piece of music with enthusiasm.** As a director, you not only teach your students the dynamics, notes, etc. but you also communicate to the students your love and passion for the music. For my students, all I have to say is "listen to how beautiful that harmony/melody is" to get them to hear it the same way. I think I spend about 10% of my classroom time raving about the music, and it is time well spent.

**3. Point the music towards something greater, namely the liturgy.** We often forget as Catholics that the Eucharist is the source and summit of our Faith. What higher aim could we find than bringing our musical gift and talent than before Jesus on the altar! Our students should see every practice as directly aimed at giving the very best for the One who is the very best.

**4. Simple is sometimes better.** Sacred music is often thought to be complicated. However, there are many pieces that are easy and extremely beautiful at the same time; the Corsican Tantum Ergo, Arcadelt's Ave Maria, or the Kyrie from Missa Orbis Factor are great examples. Fundamentally, choose pieces according to the skill level of the choir!

**5. Experiment and mix things up.** With regards to Gregorian chant, there are several easy and soul provoking ways of harmonizing; e.g. singing with a drone or in organum (parallel fifths). Alternating boys and girls for different verses also makes things fun and allows each voice to shine. While Gregorian chant is ancient, the method by which it is sung need not be ancient!

*Choir Organizational Tip brought to you by Giorgio Navarini, Choir Director of the Choir of St. Therese Classical Academy, Santa Barbara, CA*

## Routines that Will Transform Your Choir

Silence and a time of prayer, followed by a quiet breakfast and coffee before my children awake, is quite possibly the perfect morning routine. Not that it happens every morning, mind you, but when it does, the rest of the day follows suit. Such a routine creates a sense of structure and ownership, something no less important for choristers than adults. What might a good choral routine look like?

**Entering the Choir Room:** Choristers should have one consistent way of entering the choir room. ("First I place my school bag there, then I pick up my binder and pencil from that cabinet,

after which I pick up new music from that stand, and finally go to my place.) If so, they will do it every time.

**Calling the Choir to Attention:** If choristers are in place ready to sing when the rehearsal begins, the only thing left is to call them to attention. This could be as simple as speaking the first words of the Sign of the Cross to begin prayer or clapping a rhythm to which they respond. Choristers need to know that once the signal is given to start rehearsal, everything else ceases.

**Standing and Sitting:** How much time do you waste prodding choristers to "stand with good posture," or to "sit up straight on the edge of your seats"? Instead, give them signals for the positions you want them to take throughout the rehearsal. I use the following:

Position 1 - posture for singing while standing, with head erect, shoulders relaxed and feet planted below the shoulders.

Position 2 - posture for singing while sitting, with head erect, shoulders relaxed, seated on the *edge* of the seat and feet on the floor

Position 3 - relaxed posture while seated and NOT singing)

I merely have to say *Position 2* and choristers know exactly what to do.

**Passing Out Music:** Place a table near the entrance of the choir room where students know to pick up new music. Inevitably, though, you will need to distribute music, so I suggest practicing passing out and returning music. Time your choristers (counting out loud is effective) and encourage them to break previous records. Children love the competition.

**Knowing What To Rehearse:** Write on the board the works you plan to rehearse in the order you plan to rehearse them. When moving to a new song, don't mention its name, merely indicate where you plan to begin. Force your choristers to look to the board and anticipate what comes next and plan accordingly. Write on the board the next time the choir sings and which major work(s) will be sung.

**Processing:** Choirs should think and act as a team, so I would suggest having your choir process from the rehearsal room to the church in an orderly manner, allowing your head chorister to form and lead the procession. If your choir is robed it will be an impressive sight and will let others know that your choristers are a highly trained group of musicians who take pride in what they do. Other children will observe this and want to be a part of the team.

Ultimately, each of these processes needs to be rehearsed in order for it to become part of your choir's routine. It takes a large amount of time in the beginning, but saves much more in the long run. I would suggest taking the first week of every semester to practice or review each one. Your rehearsals will then become what they were meant to be in the first place, time spent in the joy of making music!

*Lucas Tappan, Director of Music & Liturgy, Most Pure Heart of Mary Church, Topeka, KS*

## In the Beginning

**Cultivate parent volunteers.** Most churches and dioceses have common sense safe environment policies requiring ample adult supervision. Create a roster for parents to sign to volunteer once a month/semester/per activity. Parents can help with discipline issues, bathroom breaks, sick



students, etc., so that you can concentrate on making great music! Remember that child protection certificates and insurance requirements should meet diocesan standards.

**Publish a calendar for the year.** Parents are accustomed to receiving yearly calendars from schools, sports teams, scouting groups, etc. Your choir needs a calendar, too! Consult your parish calendar and local school district calendar for potential conflicts, and ask parents for input. Here's a copy of my youth choir calendar, if you'd like to use it as a template:  
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/o7opyae26dsmn42/2016-2017%20Choir%20Calendar.docx?dl=0>

**Use incentives.** Reward good behavior and musicianship with a system of points - stickers on a chart, marbles in a jar, etc. When your choir reaches a certain number of points, throw them a pizza party or take them to the local amusement park.

**Sing regularly- every week or two.** If your choir is used to singing once a month, transitioning to a weekly choir will be hard at first, but it's worth it! The level of commitment, not to mention the musical quality, is guaranteed to skyrocket.

**Learn by rote.** While it is every choir director's goal to teach young choristers to sight-sing, learning by rote should not be abandoned entirely. When a child imitates a director, he not only learns notes on a page, but also learns expression, dynamics, and diction, as well as personal comportment and devotion. Learning by rote emblazons a piece of music on a child's heart - never underestimate its worth!

**Sing the Propers.** Most hymns we sing at Mass are actually replacements for the "Propers" - antiphons from sacred Scripture, specifically intended for each Mass of the liturgical year. Start small: maybe your choir could sing the communion antiphon from the Simple English Propers before launching into a hymn or anthem? Here's the link for free downloads: <http://musicasacra.com/additional-publications/sep/>

**Create choir officers.** Like any good team or club, a choir can use a system of ranks or offices to give children more of a sense of pride and responsibility. Perhaps a choir manager can help you with attendance, or a section captain can make sure the music binders are organized for the altos.

**Pray at every rehearsal.** Pray good, solid Catholic prayers. Teach them the Angelus, the Regina Caeli, and the Memorare. At the very least, make sure to recite the traditional **Chorister's Prayer**: "Bless, O Lord, us thy servants who minister in thy temple. Grant that what we sing with our lips, we may believe in our hearts; and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

*Michael Olbash - Organist & Choirmaster at St. Adelaide Parish, Peabody, Massachusetts.*

## Bulletin Inserts for Youth Choir Directors

You know that what you do is important; but, sometimes it's hard to explain to others. Here are some handy "bulletin blurbs" to explain to parents why it's important to enroll their students in the choir. Feel free to edit and adapt to your own circumstances.

### WHY SHOULD I ENROLL MY CHILD IN THE CHOIR?

**REASON #1: Learn the Mass!** Choristers do not sing *at* Mass. They *sing the Mass*. Over the course of the year, they learn the order of the Mass, the structure of the liturgical seasons, and

the Biblical sources of the words we pray. As their understanding deepens they become more and more aware of their mission to bear Christ to the world.

**REASON #2: Make Great Friends!** Choristers not only prepare the notes and rhythms for Sunday Mass, but they also practice collaboration, devotion, and service. Rehearsals feature discussions of theological concepts and the liturgy of the Catholic Church. How many after school activities can claim that? Choristers make strong Catholic friendships that will last a lifetime.

**REASON #3: Free Music Lessons!** Singers receive expert training in diction, vocal technique, and music theory. Annual tuition in a regional treble chorus costs about \$1,000. Private voice lessons can easily cost well over \$2,000 per year. While these experiences are certainly valuable, be sure not to miss out on the exceptional musical training offered right in your own parish or school!

**REASON #4: Learn Some Latin!** Choristers not only learn how to sing in English, but also in Latin and other languages as well. Latin is the building block of many modern languages; and, at a time when people from different parts of the world interact and come together more frequently, it is important that young Catholics have a basic understanding of Latin. The study of Latin has also been shown to be successful in increasing test scores, expanding vocabulary, and helping young people understand grammatical structures in other languages.

*Michael Olbash, Organist & Choirmaster at St. Adelaide Parish, Peabody, Massachusetts*

## A Few Good Men: Advice for Choirs Short on Tenors and Basses

You're excited that your youth choir has so many eager high school and middle school students, but you're not so excited that the girls outnumber the boys by 4-to-1! Many high school and middle school youth choirs suffer from issues of balance and a lack of male singers. Here are some creative ways to deal with a small number of changed boys voices in your high school or middle school mixed choir, while still allowing for opportunities to explore quality literature:

- Be careful with SAB literature. Less parts doesn't always mean easier, and my experience with high school and middle school choirs has proven that the baritone part in these pieces is often too high for a young bass, and too low for a young tenor. If you have even one "true" tenor or bass in your midst, consider attempting SATB literature - your young singers will become more independent, and a tenor or bass singing in the correct range is a much stronger sound than one singing too high or too low. You might consider using obbligato instruments to double the tenors and/or basses.
- Double the soprano line, not the alto line. Consider 2-part music in which your weaker male singers double the melody, instead of the lowest part. The part is often much easier to hear, and sometimes more limited in range.
- Don't get stuck to the score - reassign parts for success. The great composers of the past often rewrote their own compositions to suit varying performance situations!
- Remember that weaker singers are more successful singing melodically, and less successful singing harmonically. Thus, I have found that music in which the male voices sing an independent line is easier to teach than that music in which they sing harmonies in the same rhythm as the upper voices (a homophonic/homorhythmic

texture). Canons and simple polyphony can be great teaching tools! Speaking of canons....

- Sing lots of canons and rounds! You can split these up in a zillion different ways to accommodate your balance issues, and they are great tools for teaching independence. These don't have to be easy: if you have advanced musicians in your choir, there are liturgically appropriate canons by Johannes Brahms and Thomas Ravenscroft that are as musically sophisticated as anything you'll find in the literature, and some of these work very well as prelude music or Communion meditations.
- The less able the choir, the more parts you should teach! Why not split your girls into three, or even four, parts? And if you have a single bass that can only drone an F, why not write a part that suits him as he learns to find his voice?
- Be positive and don't give up! Even beginning singers know when they don't sound great, so choose music that allows them to be successful. Those male singers who have joined your choir want to be good, and they are dealing with physical changes that have caused them to have to re-learn everything about singing. As your choir grows, more male singers will come out of the woodwork to be a part of your successful choir. Keep smiling and always respect their efforts!

*Dr. Richard Robbins, Director of Choral Activities at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, Chorus Master of the Duluth-Superior Symphony Orchestra, and Choir Director at the Cathedral of Christ the King in Superior, Wisconsin.*

## Striking Accord - Sports & Singing

When Karlene Krause the Choir Director at Bishop Luers High School asked me if I could help chaperone our students to the Pueri Cantores Mass and Festival at the Cathedral [of the Immaculate Conception in Fort Wayne, IN], my initial response could have been, "Come on Karlene you know how busy Athletic Directors are in the spring!", but because I knew she needed help I said sure, not really knowing what I was about to witness. That morning we loaded the students on the bus, took roll, prayed and set off for the Cathedral. There was a buzz in the church as students filled almost 3/4 of the church.

During the morning, I watched a great coach take a group of superstars and mold them into a team. As 3 pm approached and the Mass was ready to begin, I watched, and as all great coaches do, the conductor turned the day over to the students and it was magical! I know that the groundwork for the day was laid by the local conductors who do the initial teaching and by the talented students who work hours and hours with their teachers to produce the music that they sing, but I watched a group of students from different schools become one. The "chord" that was struck in my mind is that great coaching is great coaching, no matter what the game!

*Jim Huth, Athletic Director, Bishop Luers High School, Fort Wayne, IN*

## Sing and Serve

Nationally, conductors are encouraged to consider doubling the size and outreach of their choirs by;

\*Talking with/giving personal invitations to sing in the choir to individual students in the school/parish (and their parents). This should be an ongoing effort.

\*Visiting CCD and other classes for students. Ask who likes to sing. Invite those students individually and hand them a prepared letter to pass to their parents. Be sure to follow up!

Need a recruitment incentive? How about offering your singers the opportunity to travel to a regional Pueri Cantores Festival or sing at a city or holiday event. Join with a choir at another school or parish, sing at a hospital or retirement facility. Stop at a favorite pizza or fast food restaurant on the way home. Spread the love. Serve your community. Add some fun.

*Jan Schmidt, Executive Director, American Federation Pueri Cantores*

## Save Time, Prepare Music

There is never enough rehearsal time - period. To maximize the minutes we do have with our choir, have everything ordered in binders (or in slots, on chairs, etc.) before the singers arrive. The minute or two or three that it takes to pass out the new materials - when added up over the course of a choir season- can be time better spent working on repertoire, polishing tone/blend/pitch, etc.

*Paul French, Music Director, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, Chicago, IL.*

## Back to Basics

Prepare your singers for the special needs of festival rehearsals and concert/liturgical singing. Singers should *practice standing still in rehearsal while singing, keeping their eyes on you!* Folders should be held at chest-height, with the left hand on the spine of the folder and the right hand free to turn pages. These basic presentation skills add a look of professionalism to your choir and improve concentration during the performance.

Notify sports coaches and principals and parents NOW of obligatory performance dates and that EVERY SINGER is expected on those dates. Provide everyone with a printed performance schedule for the year-including parents. Lead, don't ask. Anticipate questions and needs. Consider requesting a meeting with coaches and principal to establish a schedule that will allow at least a one hour rehearsal per week.

Create a detailed budget for school and parish administrators to add clarity and professionalism to your performance schedule either now or at the appropriate time. Be clear about goals and costs. Include the list of dates when your choir will perform at liturgies and elsewhere. Allow enough time for discussion about your submission and necessary changes to give it a realistic opportunity of being included in the overall budget. This might work well to the music program's advantage since last minute requests often meet with negative responses. Remember to include your regional Pueri Cantores Festival and other offsite performances in your schedules! (The Festival Calendar will be available in mid May at [www.pcchoirs.org](http://www.pcchoirs.org).) Also, check this website for public domain (no cost) repertoire resources.

Encourage the accurate perception that MUSIC IS A CORE SUBJECT, NOT JUST AN "ACTIVITY." Develop a historically balanced and inclusive repertoire. Teach music from honored composers and folk music traditions. Avoid "catchy" compositions without academic or historic value. Think of parallels in books and literature. Few classes teach tabloid content.

SUPPORT THE STREAM EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE ADOPTED FOR ALL CATHOLIC SCHOOLS.

*Jan Schmidt, Executive Director, American Federation Pueri Cantores*

## Spread the Word

OH NO! Do you want to distribute a last minute schedule change or reminder to all choir members of this week's "IMPORTANT" rehearsal? Or do you want to contact individual choir members who were missing from rehearsal? Consider investing in the PhoneTree System, a telephone messaging system designed to deliver information to each and every member of all your choirs with the ease of the push of a button. No more hassles with unread email, busy signals or answering machines. Visit [www.phonetree.com](http://www.phonetree.com), a communication tool for all choirs!

*Lee Gwozdz, Music Director, Corpus Christi Cathedral, Corpus Christi, Texas.*