



THE AMERICAN FEDERATION PUERI CANTORES

*Bringing together youth choirs throughout
America to sing the Peace of God*

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

Over the past 16 months a few music directors have found ways to gather their choirs together to sing in-person. Most of us, however, have been in the midst of a likely 19-month pandemic-imposed hiatus or have been primarily interacting with our choirs virtually. As we are more and more facing a safer future, many of us are considering strategies as to how to return to choir-deciding if we will be masked or unmasked, standing shoulder to shoulder or distanced, working with our full choirs or just with smaller ensembles, deciding if we will need to rehearse in more ventilated rehearsal spaces – even outdoors, or if we can go back to what we remember as a vague idea of ‘normal.’

And when we do finally return, do we plan for summer camps for our youngest singers and informal Summer Sing evenings for our adult choirs or do we just begin when we begin? Perhaps most pressing for me, is the nagging question: WHO will return to our ensembles? It occurs to me that in this period of forced hiatus, our singers, both youth and adults, have moved in many and varied directions these past months, picking up new hobbies and ways to spend their free time, and we simply cannot presume that they will all return. It is my recommendation that we take these weeks prior to start of the Fall choral season to re-recruit our choir members, yes, recruit our choir members, both adult and teen, children and youth, singers in our chant scholas and resurrection choirs, and not simply presume that they will return to the fold out of habit.

Our youth choirs have, perhaps, taken the biggest hit. Over the near year and a half of dormancy, our older, most experienced singers have graduated out of their ensembles, and have left our choirs a bit in tatters, with some Lent and Paschal-time repertoire not being sung for two years, and a large chunk of the rest of the repertoire for a single year. There has not been the careful building of pedagogy and technique, and the invaluable modeling from the older, more experienced voices to the younger singers. No new music has been learned. Many of our traditional choral events have gone silent, be they lessons and carols, or end of year concerts, or the myriad sung liturgies in seasons throughout the liturgical year. Our 6th graders in March of 2020, are now entering as our 8th graders in the Fall of 2021 and will carry the weight of responsibility for that modeling as the year progresses. These are the choristers who have not sung for a year and a half, nor thought about posture or tall vowels, or deep breathing, or any of the repertoire. That’s a lot to put on the shoulders of those choristers. We must carefully, and without presumption, build back our programs, both in terms of the reclaiming of those singers who were in our choirs, of inviting those who have graduated out of their choirs to join the ‘next’ ensemble, of the recruitment of new choristers of all ages, being aware of our choristers vocal changes that may have occurred over the past months, of jump-starting the learning of new and familiar repertoire, and simply of reinvigorating our children and youth choral programs (and their parents) and reclaiming all those glorious traditions.

In terms of recruitment, we must be both energized and creative. Traditional methods such as the parish bulletin and parish website certainly should be utilized to their fullest, and yet also taking things to the next level with regard to social media, and perhaps a YouTube channel, and Facebook page. Engage your returning choir members, both adult and youth, to beat the bushes in this rarefied time. Ask your pastor for some time at a weekend's liturgies to be able to speak to your community about the return of the choral program and encourage potential voices to sit in a rehearsal. Plan a choir cook-out or an evening or weekend summer event with your youth singers and their families. Be engaged with your local parochial school principal, to garner a speaking spot during Curriculum Night or the Welcome Back Social and take every opportunity to speak with parents about the parish or school's teen, youth, and children's choirs.

There has perhaps, never been a more important time to hold a children's choir camp, both to reawaken your choirs, and make up for lost time, to begin to reform choral and liturgical traditions, to establish healthy singing habits, to have a dedicated and extended period of time for the study of music theory and sight reading instruction, and have an equally protracted period to begin to learn and re-learn the repertoire to be sung in the season ahead. All these components provide an important jump start to the season ahead and can help re-commit your former choristers and engage new voices in your program.

Of real concern for we directors of choirs is what sort of vocal shape our singers will be in upon their return to the choral fold. This pandemic, spread through airborne respiratory transmission, has silenced our singers, and their dormant vocal instruments will need a period of reawakening and revitalizing to get back into shape. Just as one should never run a marathon without an extended period of training, our choristers shouldn't expect their voices to move as fluidly, nor their breath to be as robust, nor their range as full without a similar period of preparation.

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 get to know them 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. 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 five 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 2019 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 warm-up the 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 plan on a slow, careful vocalization period of 10-15 minutes, so as to build back your choral ensemble's sound, in the individual, within the section, and across the entire choir. Should you be looking for a helpful resource, I can highly recommend my teacher, William Ferris' *The Care and Feeding of Singers* published by the World Library Publications division of GIA Publications. I have used this for years with both my adult and children's choir and find it an invaluable tool.

God's rich blessing to one and all.

Let us, in the wake of this horrible pandemic, go forth and SING!

Choir Organizational Tip brought to you by Paul French
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