



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 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

Getting High School Students to Sing Gregorian Chant

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.) 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, a communication tool for all choirs!

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