

Essential Choir Training I



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Table of Contents

Introduction

So What does a Conductor do?

Diction

Punctualissimo!

Working in a Positive Atmosphere

Know the Enemy!

Choir Performance

Is your Choir growing healthily?

That ol' rustling sound

Are you a Choirtrainer or a Choral Conductor?

How to sing Colin Mawby's music

Choir Adventures

... Crescendo!

Performance Note 1: *Ave verum* - Mawby

Performance Note 2: Preparing a Hymn for performance

Performance Note 3: *Ave Verum* - Elgar

Fine

Introduction

There's long been a need for a sound and practical guide on choir training and choral organisation ... and this book is it! It's written with humour, insight and wisdom and will quickly become an essential for all choral directors.

Some of the pieces in **Essential Choir Training** originally appeared in **Vivace**, the monthly newsletter from www.Music-for-Church-Choirs.com but there are also new articles as well as three **Performance Guides** to help you get to grips with a piece before inflicting it on your choir!. The book is written from many perspectives and covers most of the subjects which choral directors find puzzling.

Colin Mawby writes: "I've conducted choirs for over fifty years and have worked with all types, from the great choir of Westminster Cathedral to the children's choir in a small Irish rural parish. I've worked with amateur and

professional singers, students and older people, and I'm now eager to share my experiences with you!

"Choir training has been a source of joy to me and I've met many remarkable people because of it. The sound of a fine choir is thrilling and wonderful - it gives pleasure to millions and inspiration to all.

"I hope you enjoy this book and find it a help and guide in your own - so important - work."



So What does a Conductor *do*?

Let's start by defining the purpose of the conductor.

He's the servant of both the music and the choir and should aim to achieve the best possible performance of the work being sung. This implies adherence to the composer's instructions, a strict avoidance of effect for the sake of effect, no cult of personality and a total dedication to the piece in hand.

The conductor must create an atmosphere in which a choir can feel at ease and concentrate on musical excellence. Distractions caused by personality or arguments will detract from the level of performance.

In choral conducting strict adherence to the correct way of beating - for instance, giving a clear downbeat on the first beat of a bar - is unimportant. With orchestral conducting it's essential as players working from single line parts need to know precisely where they are.

Two points to remember – be economical in gesture and always be aware that any action made by a good conductor will inevitably have a reaction – often unintended!

As a conductor you need to be relaxed and encouraging – don't make the choir tense. Developing a warm personality is helpful with this. The choir need to feel that you totally appreciate their effort and musicality. They must have total confidence in you, and they'll feel this if they're sure that you know the music backwards, they can rely on you to indicate entries accurately, and - so important this - that you love what you do.

Make sure that you have a good upbeat – it's helpful to breathe in time with it – get the choir doing the same. Encourage maximum concentration and do this through your own example. In a mysterious way this gives the choral sound individuality – the "personal sound" often referred to by listeners.

Know the music, know your singers, have a clear idea of your interpretation and remember that your singers are human beings - not music machines. Don't let your nerves interfere with the flow and tension of performance. A good conductor is what can turn a competent choir into something of genius.



Diction

If your choir sings in a large church with a good warm acoustic, it can be very satisfying. Just to hear the sound echoing around is *moltissimo exciting!*

But this means you'll have to think about clarity of diction ... How important is it? Can it be improved? There are different answers to these questions – some choirmasters rate the importance of diction highly, others seem to be unaware that there may be a problem.

I feel that diction is very important – after all, the congregation needs to know what the choir is singing about! So, what's the best way of approaching it?

First of all the choir needs to know and understand what it's singing about. If the *choir* doesn't know, then no-one else will. I find it helpful to get individual choristers to speak the text to the choir and then get the whole choir to

Speak it back as soon as they've all agreed where the accents and stresses fall.

It can also be helpful to *talk* about the text – the more the singers are conscious of the words, the clearer their diction will be. Make sure that they don't breathe in the middle of words or accent unaccented syllables!

You have to get unanimity in vowel sounds and in the pronunciation of diphthongs (I, rail, brown, for instance). It's often useful to sing a passage on vowels only. This allows everyone to hear what the sounds are like without being distracted by the meaning.

You must also work on consonants. The difference between *t*'s and *d*'s should be explored and quieter-sounding consonants like *f* need some extra work. The choir needs to know how to cope with the *s* and *h* sound. Time spent on consonants will not be wasted. Language has a natural rhythmic flow and some composers excel at reproducing it ... others don't.

The style of the music too has a great bearing on clarity of diction – obviously, in complex polyphony with different lines singing different words, the text will be lost. Hence the oft-repeated dictum of "one syllable per note".

As choirmaster, you should decide when clarity of diction is possible and then seek to produce it. In some church buildings it may be a waste of time because the acoustic will never allow clarity. In others it will be possible for every word to be crystal clear. Take care not to overstress consonants – it can sound very stilted.

Try and make the diction as natural-sounding as possible. Get a friend to listen to your choir and ask him to repeat the words just sung. Yes! you may need to do a bit of work before you even invite your friend to play this particular game!

Sensitivity, understanding, and careful pronunciation are the keys to good diction.

And good diction is one of the hallmarks of a fine choir.



Punctualissimo!

Rehearsal starts at 6.30 and there you are, prepared, keyed-up, ready to go ...

It's now 6.30 and 25% of the choir still hasn't arrived. What on earth should you do?

If you wait for latecomers to arrive before you start, your 6.30 rehearsal will start at 6.45 ... then at 7.00 ... then at 7.15. Pretty soon your Tuesday night rehearsal will be taking place on Wednesday!

We all recognise this problem and we need to handle it correctly.

I'm convinced that it's essential to start all rehearsals on time – even if you're the only person there!

Choirs need to know that that's your policy and that's what's going to happen!

Singers don't really like coming in late – they feel conspicuous. Everyone looks at *them* and, poor dears, they feel uncomfortable. But there's no need to make remarks publicly at latecomers. And it's even worse to complain about latecomers *before* they arrive - you're complaining to those who are already there and by definition punctual!

The choir needs to be trained to be in their seats *five minutes before* choir practice begins, pencils in hand, voices at the ready and raring to go!

Some people seem to be unable to get anywhere on time. This can present a problem. It's a good idea to warn persistent latecomers that your patience will snap and that they'll be out on their ears (not in those terms though!) if they continue to arrive after starting time. This always creates an impression.

Some choir directors make sure that there is something interesting and attractive going on

before the rehearsal begins. It could be simply chatting and socialising, or it could be giving out awards or allocating solos. Anything that involves the whole choir and captures their interest will ensure that they are there well in time.

You'll develop your own way of dealing with this but you do need to take on board that some people have a genuine excuse for lateness. Treat all cases on their merits but never lose sight of the golden rule that rehearsals begin and finish *on time*.



Working in a Positive Atmosphere

Of all the essentials for a choir reaching its full potential, possibly the **most** essential is a positive atmosphere.

No matter how expert the singers, or how supportive the church, a positive atmosphere depends entirely upon the attitude of the choirmaster and his approach to the work in hand.

Like all humans, choirs respond to encouragement and this is the basis of creating a positive approach. So always phrase your requests positively.

Rather than say, "Don't sing that note out of tune," say, "You've nearly got the note, just take it a little higher". Instead of "Not so loud," try "Quieter!". Not "You're staying till you've got this right", but "Let's get this bit right then we can have a break". It takes time to learn how to do this but it's immensely worth the effort.

It's so very easy to make critical remarks but not nearly so easy to offer encouragement. Choirs are sensitive bodies, respect their sensitivity.

Ensure that your rehearsals are efficient and well ordered. A choir responds to this – after all you are using their time and this has been given freely to you. Know your music and always, even in the most trying of circumstances, be cheerful. Always have a joke on hand and don't waste the singers' time.

A positive approach is one of the most important things that a choirmaster can bring to a choir. A few can do this naturally but most of us have to work at it. Self-control is not always easy, but do remember that what's been said can't be unsaid.

You'll be surprised at the great results you'll achieve if you work at being positive. Your

rehearsals will become lively, invigorating and memorable ... and you'll get the unchallenged loyalty and devotion of your choristers.



Know the Enemy!

Essential for the success of a choir practice is the thought that you put into the preparation of the scores of the music you're going to rehearse. You need a systematic method or important things will be overlooked or forgotten.

Here's what I do:

First get to know the score thoroughly. Play it through and see where the difficulties are. You can be sure they're in there somewhere, so find them before they jump out at you!

Having located the problems, work out how you're going to deal with them.

If there are difficult entries, you need to work out how you will teach the singers to cope with them and where they get their notes from. If there are rhythmic problems decide how you will help the choir overcome them.

If the work is in another language see that you have a top-rate translation available. Also, decide on your strategy for teaching the pronunciation. I've found that the best way is to find a native singer - or at least a native speaker - to teach it.

Bad pronunciation can wreck a performance and cause much insecurity within the choir. If, for example, your choir is singing in French, it needs to sound like a French Choir. It's all in the preparation ... no, it won't be "alright on the night"!

Mark breathing in the score and underline all unusual dynamic markings. You can use the traditional pencil, or you can go for highlighters.

Work out how you'll conduct difficult sections - using a mirror if necessary. I mark all choir entries in blue pencil. Singers, unlike orchestral players, need to be "brought in".

Liaise with your accompanist before the first rehearsal and work out the speeds you'll want. Point out any choral difficulties you foresee and if at the early rehearsals you need a *cappella* items accompanied, give him plenty of notice.

Don't land your poor accompanist with sightreading an 8-part score without a piano reduction - you will not be thanked! A good mutual understanding with your accompanist will make rehearsals so much smoother and more efficient.

Keep an open mind on interpretation until you have the work "under your skin". Your interpretation will develop as your knowledge of the piece increases.

Aim to know the work backwards before you introduce it to your choir. Your chosen piece is like a cute fluffy animal - it seems so lovely, but when you get close up you find it has sharp teeth! You don't want unforeseen hazards catching you out.

For a stunning result, you need to inspire the choir from the downbeat of the first rehearsal to the concluding beat of the performance. Your choir depends upon your genius and will be immensely grateful for your work, enthusiasm and confidence.

There's no place for feelings of doubt and uncertainty in the rehearsal room – lead like the great conductor you hope to become!



Choir Performance

A choir doesn't just *sing*, it *performs*.

In fact, the main purpose of a choir is to perform and this applies to all of them – church and secular. So it's essential to study *how* to perform. There is obviously a great difference between concert and church performance but the basic principles are similar.

Posture is important and church choirs need to work on this and overcome the many pitfalls. A choir must communicate with its listeners and just as you can't really talk to a person while looking down at your boots, you can't sing to a person if your voice is directed to the floor or the ceiling.

There has to be a sense of communication. Good diction is very important because a congregation needs to meditate on the text being sung and this is impossible if they can't understand a word of it!

If you're singing in church then your choir will need a sense of reverence and to perform with dignity. These are the two qualities on which you can base inspiring performance.

I have so often heard people talk about the "Sacred concert" and complain that they can't worship because the singing distracts them. It never occurs to these blinkered people that they can worship *through* music. Don't let your choir distract people but encourage it to carry a congregation through the excellence of its singing and non-distractive deportment.

Think of the best professional choir performance you've ever been to. When you reflect, I'm sure you'll remember that the bearing and behaviour of the singers formed an intrinsic part of the whole experience.

People love dignity and respond to it. And it's a vital ingredient in the performance of church choirs. Encourage your choir to be aware of the people and always root out any distracting mannerisms.

A positive sense of performance will greatly enhance your choir's work.



Is your Choir growing healthily?

There's nothing worse than a good choir suffering a slow death through failure to renew the singers.

So a continual programme of recruitment is an essential part of choir maintenance. It may sound obvious, but before you start recruiting please ensure that you have a choir that people want to join!

Your new singers will expect to be uplifted and this can't happen if the standards of your choir are low. or the members are elderly, unfriendly or clique-y. A prospective singer needs to see a happy, lively vibrant group who work to exacting standards led by a committed, friendly and dynamic Director who is also a top-class musician.

New choristers want to know that the repertoire is challenging and that the choir is a united group of like-minded people. So often new

members join for two weeks and then vanish. The most common reason given is that "people were so unfriendly". Never under-estimate the importance of the social aspect of your choir!

Marketing Managers all know the value of referrals, and the best method of recruitment is when an existing member says to a friend, "Do come and join - it's great and you'll love it!" This is infinitely better than a million adverts. After all, not many people are like Groucho Marx, who famously declined an invitation to join a club with the remark, "I wouldn't want to belong to a club that would have me as a member!" Effective choir recruitment starts *within* the choir.

If you have a membership drive among the congregation make sure that the Parish Clergy back it and give you the necessary advertising platform. Without their support you will face an uphill struggle. But whatever happens, *don't be discouraged*. Battle on and make sure that you and your present singers offer friendship to new choristers.

You can't force people to get on with each other but you *can* create a happy, open atmosphere in which this can happen. Apart from joining your Choir for a cup of coffee after rehearsal, this will include social events such as the traditional and ever-entertaining "Choir Picnic", an evening out at Christmas - or perhaps a family or children's day for the choirmember's families. And if you can't face the thought of organising all this ... then make sure you recruit a choirmember who will do it for you!

The essential point to remember is that you must have a group that offers musical quality as well as social enjoyment.



That ol' rustling sound

You're enjoying a concert of your favourite music. The Choir has reached the most quiet and beautiful part of the performance ... and suddenly your ears are assaulted by a sound similar to trees rustling in a strong breeze.

The atmosphere is destroyed, the performance momentarily wrecked! What is this infernal noise? It's nothing but the sound of pages of music being turned – and if it's a choir of 200, that's a mighty sound. Trouble is the performers are rarely aware of it ... but the audience usually *is*.

So how can you avoid this horror when *your* choir is performing?

Ask your choir to *memorise* the next page and get them to turn when the music is louder. You need to mark your score carefully so you know what sections have to be memorised. Be precise in your instructions, ask your choir to

mark their own scores and - a very important point this - practice the page turns until they become second nature.

This problem can become even more acute when you're making a recording for radio or CD. I've spent so much time in recording studios having to re-do sections because of noisy page turns. As you can well imagine, your recording will become something of a nightmare if you don't deal with this problem in advance. On some playbacks the page-turning noise is louder than the music!

The real answer to all this is to persuade your choir to memorise the whole piece. If you work with enthusiasm your choir will become so wrapped up in the piece that they'll learn it despite themselves.

It's great when this happens because, when the copies aren't forming a physical and mental barrier, the level of contact between choir, conductor and audience is so much higher.

Without their heads buried in their books, your choir will be able to watch you throughout the piece. Their response will be quicker, and a memorable performance will be born.



Are you a Choirtrainer or a Choral Conductor?

You do both jobs, as do most people running a choir ... but are they the same thing? People often get them confused.

The **Choirtrainer** teaches the choir how to sing, how to perform and what notes to sing. It's not part of the job specification to give performances. Many people turn choir practice into a performance - this is usually to the detriment of the real performance.

The point of practice is to ensure that the choir is in a state of vocal and musical security so that when they perform they aren't bothered by technical insecurity. You have to have the engine correctly assembled before you can fine-tune it!

Rehearsal and performance are two different things. The great conductor Adrian Boult often said that during a final rehearsal it's a good

idea to ensure that a few minutes at performance level are achieved, but no more than this. At a final rehearsal you should certainly have a run-through - but not at fever pitch. The choir *and* the conductor need it for security. How often have I heard it said - sadly - that the rehearsal was better than the performance!

The **Choral conductor** should be able to take the perfectly-prepared choir and give a performance that has spontaneity and joy. Choirs should do things in performance that they haven't done in rehearsal.

A perfectly-drilled performance resulting from drilled rehearsal can be exciting but it won't have the inspiration of a performance that is based upon secure rehearsal. Performance is often unpredictable and dangerous and this gives it a unique quality. Drilled rehearsal will result in the absence of this quality.

So you can see that it's important to know which hat you're wearing when you approach your choir - the Trainer's, or the Conductor's. A comprehensive understanding of this is essential for great performance.



How to sing Colin Mawby's music

I've had a lot of questions recently from Choir Directors who perform my music - asking how to interpret it. I'm always happy to answer individual queries but in general the following guidelines will be helpful.

- My work is text-driven. Before I write I reflect on the words and the best way of painting their meaning. In joyful music for instance, this is obvious - but with a text that hints at murk or uncertainty the meaning may sometimes be missed. If you have doubts as to how to approach a section always look at the text and work out how the music describes it. This approach will answer many of the questions that I'm asked.
- I always try and make my composition enjoyable to sing. Entries and difficult intervals are always prepared. The organ

part is designed to assist the choir and unprepared notes are rare. I aim to write practical music which is vocally pleasing and doesn't take hours of rehearsal.

- Vocal sonority is an important part of my work. I like rich sounds and always aim for the maximum vocal colour.
- And lastly, I like to write music which speaks to the listener. Always look at my music from the *listener's* point of view. It needs time to speak.

Always seek the spiritual in my work and give this element priority in performance. It's the *text* from which my music springs and it's the *text* which is the key to the performance of my work.



Choir Adventures

Would you like to spend your weekday evenings and Sunday mornings with people you don't feel at ease with? Do you think you'd perform better if you felt part of a team?

One of the essential ingredients in building a choir is the social cohesion of the group. They need to be friends, to get on with each other, and feel a strong sense of belonging.

And what better method of developing this than by taking the choir on tour! This doesn't have to be two weeks abroad - although this can be your ultimate goal. On the principle of "one step at a time", a small local tour is a good way to start.

It's an excellent idea to find out what Cathedrals have visiting choirs over the Summer and see if you can get a week's work with accomodation in one of these fine buildings. A search through the Cathedral websites will give the lead on this.

If you can't aspire to this yet - and you'll need a large repertoire to cover that many services - a couple of concerts in reasonably distant churches is an idea, perhaps on successive nights with a bed and breakfast thrown in. For any tour you'll need to agree well in advance on choir dress and make sure that turn-out, deportment and presentation are impeccable.

The musical secret of tours is to take the same **programme** to each venue – this cuts down on rehearsal time and produces secure performance. Do the whole programme at a concert in your own church before you go elsewhere. Try it out on the dogs, as it were, and make sure the programme caters for all tastes.

Ensure that you have good contacts in the places where you sing and that they are responsible for organisation and **publicity**. You'll have to supply the leaflets and posters. I'd say it's not really possible to have a successful tour without this local back-up.

Make as much use as possible of local radio and papers. And the key to getting free airtime is to come up with an "angle" which makes your concert different from everyone else's.

Do an accurate **costing** of the tour and work out how it's to be paid for. Most people ask the choristers to contribute - after all it's a holiday for them too. See that transport is available, and don't forget to allow lots of time for getting from *a* to *b*. You are now dealing with a flock of excitable but independent sheep!

If you want to tour abroad a **choir exchange** is a good option. Look up choir exchanges on the internet or go to British Choirs on the Net (www.choirs.org.uk) and see what's there. This is a most useful website full of information and worthy of careful study

All tours need thorough organisation so do allow sufficient time for this. If you start small you can gradually make grander tours as the years go by. Use all the expertise that's

available in your choir. You may well have someone who loves organising things - lucky you!

Tours can give your Choir a great confidence boost, give them a social identity, and knit them into a close unit. And to get the best out of them, they must go like clockwork.



... Crescendo!

One of the marks of a fine choir is how they handle dynamic variations. Have you ever found yourself blown out of your seat by a sudden *forte*, when you were expecting a gradual building of sound – a *crescendo*?

Take Bruckner's *Christus Factus Est*, for instance - how often do you hear really fine *crescendos* in it, as the composer intended?

The best performance can be spoilt by a small detail like this.

The answer is to work on *crescendos* in choir practice so that you and your singers both understand what you mean when you ask for a *crescendo*. They need to know, in short, where it begins and where it ends.

I always like to incorporate *crescendos* into my vocal exercises and choir warm-ups. Get the choir to practice timing a *crescendo*. Ask them to sing one over 5 seconds, 10 seconds etc, on

a vowel sound only - and make sure that it lasts for the whole period, that it develops gradually. The choir must judge the necessary timing and make sure that there is something left to give the end of the *crescendo* a final “kick”.

Whatever they do, don't let them *force* the sound out. It always surprises and delights choristers to find that they can make a much bigger *crescendo* by imagining that they're drawing the sound in and placing it in the right resonances in the face.

The voice is an instrument - use the instrument correctly and use the resonances appropriate to the note. Now your *crescendos* will be overwhelming!



Performance Notes

1. *Ave Verum* - Colin Mawby
2. Preparing a Hymn for performance
3. *Ave Verum* - Elgar



***Ave Verum* - Colin Mawby**

Translation: *Hail to Thee who was born of the Virgin Mary, who suffered death for the redemption of all, whose side was pierced and flowed with blood and water. Help us as we die. O kind and loving Jesus, Son of Mary.*

This piece has become internationally very popular - yet it's not as difficult as it looks.

The accompaniment mostly doubles the voices making performance very much easier. Your choir will need to divide in all parts and good high tenors are necessary. The vocal demands are considerably eased by the skill of the vocal writing and your choir will never sound exposed. With the close writing providing a support to all the singers they won't feel isolated.

Before rehearsal the choirmaster should study the individual lines and sing them through. You must become familiar with the vocal language before the first rehearsal. Points to watch are the changes of key at bars 14, 27 and 36. They are all doubled by the organ and after each one the opening theme returns in the opening key. This gives the piece a strong and secure tonal basis.

Before the choir rehearse let them hear the **Westminster Cathedral Choir** performance on the CD *Panis Angelicus* published by Hyperion. Your choir will also need to become familiar with the piece's tonal language and this is an excellent way of achieving this.

There are no breathing problems, just sing the piece as it comes. You'll need to rehearse carefully the key changes at bars 17 and 18 and also that at bar 36. This bar, 36, needs great vocal control. Much support is needed throughout the work. At bar 37 note that the organ comes off one beat before the choir.

The conductor needs to exert very careful dynamic control. Unless you're careful the piece will get louder and louder and this is not intended. In fact, the first *forte* does not come until page 3. The climax is at *Esto Nobis*.

Make sure that your choir returns to a genuine *pp* when marked – *mf* is far too loud. The choir also needs to distinguish between *mf* and *f*. Four bars from the end the choir needs to sing louder than at the previous *pianissimo* or there can't be an effective *diminuendo* at the conclusion.

Make the most of the vocal sonorities and enjoy singing the piece! The publisher is Kevin Mayhew, and you can order copies from him at www.KevinMayhew.co.uk



Preparing a Hymn for performance

Feedback to Music-for-Church-Choirs.com again and again shows that the greatest concern of the large majority of church musicians is **hymnody**. It's invariably the subject that attracts most interest.

Hymns tend to be taken for granted and are often sung without rehearsal. This can easily lead to lack-lustre performance. The hymn should raise a congregation's mind to God. It is a fervent expression of our worship and unites the community in a unique and wonderful way.

Hymns learned in childhood are never forgotten and they remain deeply loved throughout a lifetime. The first hymn I ever learned was called *Like the Dawning of the Morning* and it lives with me still - even after 63 years. You may treat hymns with deep musical respect.

As choirmaster you need to prepare a hymn with the same care as you would prepare an anthem. How are the verses to be sung? In harmony or unison? Should there be a descant at the final verse? Which is the most suitable one for your choir?

A sensitive and unobtrusive dynamic scheme can help – this will ensure that the last verse is a real climax.

Liaise with the organist about dynamics and ensure that he doesn't play alternative harmonies while the choir is singing the ones in the hymn book! If necessary agree on a suitable speed which takes into account the spirit of the hymn and the acoustic of the building. A hymn of joy needs to sound joyful, one of reflection reflective and one of sadness ... sad.

Make sure that you know the ATB parts as well as the tune, and spend time getting the notes right with the choir. In advance of rehearsal, check if there are any metrical problems and

have the solutions at your fingertips. A fine tune like *Slane* can cause difficulty as does Holst's *In the bleak midwinter*. There are many others. The secret is to look at the full choir version and see if it contains small or bracketed notes. This is the give-away.

Iron out pronunciation problems and ensure that the singers are familiar with the words and their meaning. This is an essential ingredient of great hymn-singing.

Ensure that your choir punctuates sensibly. Don't overdo this or the result can sound very stilted and fussy. Fussiness is not a part of hymn-singing and, as a friend once said to me, it sounds like a "centipede with a wooden leg".

Your choir must communicate confidence and this will considerably uplift the congregational singing in your church. Hymns are exciting and should thrill all who sing them. They express our deepest emotional and religious feelings.

Keep abreast of new hymn books and new hymns. Some are first class. A book should be wide-ranging in content, easy to carry, light, and clear to read.

For descants I recommend Noel Rawsthorne's *200 Last Verse Arrangements* and my own *Hymns for Occasions* published by Kevin Mayhew.

And why not try your hand at writing your own descants and last verse arrangements? This can be great fun and give you new insights into the structure and meaning of hymns.



***Ave Verum* - Elgar**

When Elgar was a young man his father was the choirmaster at St. George's Catholic Church, Worcester. He wrote some beautiful short motets for the choir including this *Ave Verum*. There are also two wonderful settings of the *O Salutaris* - the one in F major is sublime.

His *Ave Verum* has been widely known since its publication in the late 19th Century. It's a very simple piece, beautifully shaped and exquisitely crafted. All choirs can sing it but few sing it well.

To achieve a memorable performance the prime essential is superb *cantabile* singing. The first thing to do in rehearsal is to see that your singers are all making the same vowel sounds. I suggest you rehearse the opening line on vowels only and slightly under speed. Listen for any distortions and correct them. The vowels need to be open and Italianate - the brighter the better.

Unusually for Elgar there are few dynamic marks. The opening tune is so well shaped that it doesn't need great dynamic variation. Let it speak for itself and do nothing more than the *crescendo* that the composer demands. Resist the temptation to embellish!

At the entry of the full choir, note that the dynamic mark is *pp* – quieter than the opening dynamic of *p*. The *crescendo* to *Esto nobis praegustatum* needs to be large. *pp* to *f* in five bars is not very long. The first time it comes it's sung by the ladies only. It's then repeated by the full choir, and this is undoubtedly the climax of the piece. Again the writing is sensationally effective – a perfect example of economy of means.

You need to judge very carefully the *diminuendo* after *Esto nobis*. It must only go to *p*. *pp* is reserved for the following phrase, *O dulcis Jesu*. If this subtle point is not observed *O dulcis Jesu* will fail to make its point. Elgar was a master of dynamics. When you get to

O clemens the speed changes to *piu lento*. This must be carefully observed.

You will need to work with your choir to achieve the *crescendo* from *pp* to *f* in the bar *fili Mariae*. It's not easy to bring this off. Don't distort the shape of the phrase. I would start the *diminuendo* slightly before the penultimate bar.

Note that no *rit* is marked at the end. Make sure that your organist follows the composer's instructions as to the use of the pedal. I cannot overstress that ***cantabile*** and **expression** are the cornerstones of this piece, plus a highly sensitive approach to dynamics. Do what the composer says!

This is a simple piece that repays the care taken in rehearsal. It's the work of a great composer, and even in Elgar's early pieces his mastery of writing tunes and his appreciation of beauty are clearly to be seen.

Strive for a performance of sincerity, conviction and shape. I have conducted this piece on many occasions and have never failed to be profoundly moved by it.

Copies are available from Music Sales at Novello.



Fine

We think you'll agree that these tips from a Master of his Craft are of unparalleled value in your work with your own Choir.

Now you can learn more from Colin Mawby's vast experience by ordering *Volume II* of **Essential Choir Training** from us at www.Music-for-Church-Choirs.com

