

Essential Choir Training Bonus



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Where should my Choir sing from?

If you're starting a new choir - or if you want to get the best from your existing one - one big question is about the correct positioning of the choir. This has many implications and is obviously an area of contention.

There used to be no difficulty - a robed choir sang from the Sanctuary and a non-robed choir from the West End Gallery. However, liturgical reform and contemporary architecture have changed this.

There seem to be three main considerations:

- what is the architecture of the church?
- what type of liturgy will the choir or music group be singing at?
- where is the organ in relation to the choir?

- and here I make the strongest possible plea that architects consider the position of choir and organ when drawing up plans for new churches.

If your choir is singing at a more **traditional** liturgy with more traditional music, and the architecture of the church allows it, the traditional position of Chancel or West End gallery are best. Alternatively your traditional choir can sing from the side of the Chancel.

If it's a more **folky** type of liturgy where the music group leads the congregation, then it's best for the group and their instruments to be in front of the Sanctuary. The congregation needs to have real contact with it and be inspired by its enthusiasm and joy!

All choirs and groups must feel comfortable - they mustn't be cramped. They should be able to sing with dignity and conviction - this can't be done if the singers or players are fidgeting because of lack of space, teetering on top of chairs, or balancing on boxes.

The other important consideration is the position of the organ. Ideally the choir should be in close contact with the organist. There

shouldn't be a time lag between choir and organ, and a distant organist is presented with considerable problems of coordination.

The rule is that the position of the choir must give satisfaction to choir, clergy *and* congregation. I've heard of many difficulties arising from the positioning of the choir. These are unnecessary, unchristian .. and should be avoided like the plague.



What should my Choir wear?

Another evergreen question - and it's something everyone has an opinion on!

There are many considerations - to do with warmth and comfort, appearance, age and style of choir, and last but not least - the cost.

And if you have a Children's or Youth Choir, you'll also have to add "parents" and "fashion" to the list!

Some Children's Choirs would be happy in brightly-coloured tracksuits - easy to launder, affordable, definitely comfortable, and acceptable for concerts as well as services. But others would consider this far too informal, so this depends entirely on your choir ethos.

If your choir will be wearing "normal" clothes which need to be prepared each week (i.e. a blouse and skirt or shirt and trousers)

consideration must be given to their ability to look after them. Some children's parents have no interest and will resist the extra work; some students have no access to an ironing board.

The traditional choir is in many ways much easier to deal with. It should have a well-designed choir dress. It doesn't need to be surplices and cassocks - many church furnishers have excellent choir clothes. A robed choir looks good and its members feel that they have an important liturgical role. It has a dignity that people appreciate and the choir will find it easier to communicate with the congregation.

Your robed choir should also process to the place from where it sings. Don't allow it to slide into its place in a scruffy and slipshod manner. The choir that looks good will be listened to with far greater respect than the choir that looks shabby.

Dress and deportment are important. Your church needs to spend money in these areas, so getting your Minister onside will be your first step.

Your choir will be delighted if you take this seriously!



How can I organise my Choir's music?

You all know the scene: several singers trying to read from the same copy, pages missing, different editions with different page numbers .. this can only result in a chaotic rehearsal and a precarious performance.

So, if your choir is to be really successful it needs a well-run **library**. As choirmaster, you need to know precisely what music there is, how many copies there are, and exactly where to find them.

Appoint a Librarian and give him a definite and concise brief. A library without a catalogue is just a heap of music, so the first job is to get it all catalogued. This can be done either in a book, or a card index system, or on a computer.

The catalogue should contain a record of how many copies of each piece there are and where they are. Copies should be put in files and these should be kept in alphabetical order by composer. You should be able to find a set of parts immediately!

Make sure the music is stored in reasonable conditions and not kept in a damp or dirty place.

It's a good idea to include in the catalogue what each piece is suitable for. Is it a motet for the ordinary Sunday, a Communion Anthem or a piece for a Feast Day? Is it suited to a particular liturgical season or is it a general item?

This is where a computerised catalogue is invaluable. A choir director, for example, should be able to see how many Communion Motets or Entrance Psalms are available. The more comprehensive the catalogue the more useful it is.

The ideal entry should contain:

- composer
- title
- voices
- accompaniment
- number of copies
- location
- what season or occasion the piece is suitable for
- length

An important part of the Librarian's work is to keep the music in good repair. This means that every time an item is rehearsed or performed the parts should be checked for damage and repaired immediately.

Your choir library will need a budget - if only to keep it in good condition. Much better if it allows for the *regular* purchase of new music.

You'll find that a well-run choir library will save you hours of wasted time - it's a vital aid to an ambitious and dynamic choir.

