

Essential Choir Training II



Colin Mawby

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Introduction

Following on the success of the articles on choir training and choral organisation selected for Volume I of **Essential Choir Training**, we continue this sound and practical guide with Volume II. It's written with the same humour, insight and wisdom that Colin Mawby brought to the first book, 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 more 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.

As **Colin Mawby** wrote in his Introduction to Volume I: "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."



What shall we sing?

Of all the minefields you will have to cross in your choir-directing career, none is more explosive than the decision on what your choir actually sings.

The repertoire is, after all, the lifeblood of the choir, and the choices made here are essential to the success of your work. Everyone will have an opinion on what should be sung, and you should indeed listen and consider all views, but when it comes to the crunch, the last word should be *yours*.

Before accepting a new Organist's appointment, you need to agree with the Priest or Minister that the responsibility lies with *you* for the choice of choral music. This should be part of the contract and not be left vague. If it is, problems could well ensue. A good organist has a vast and evergrowing knowledge of repertoire and this must be respected and used.

Once the principle of choice is clearly established, you'll want to consult. Both the choir and the congregation will have views, and it's worth bearing in mind that what works in one church will not necessarily work in another.

Don't throw out well-loved pieces because you don't like them. By all means introduce new and challenging music but it should never replace old and loved favourites – don't interfere with a congregation's sense of spirituality. They will more readily accept the new if they can still hear the old. Always remember the old Latin tag *Festina lente* - "Make haste slowly".

To start with, your choice of music is naturally limited by what is in the **choir's library**. So one of your most important jobs will be to familiarize yourself with its contents. You also need to be aware of those pieces that the choir actually sings. This will give a complete overview of the group's active repertoire.

Once you know what you've got, you'll be able to see what you need. A budget for New Music is another area that should be arranged with your minister at the time of your appointment. It needs to be practical ... and relate to the cost of new music now - not what it cost ten or twenty years ago!

Work out how quickly your choir can learn new pieces, and to what level of difficulty you can aspire. Then you'll be able to select pieces which appeal to both choir and congregation, and fit your budget. Choose pieces which have a definite liturgical place, and keep the balance of old and new.

Prepare a music list covering a three-month period and ensure that it is prominently displayed at the back of the church as well as in the practice room. You can have a repertoire suggestion box ... but don't expect to find much in it! But the mere fact that it exists will reassure people.

Choosing repertoire is one of the foremost jobs of an organist. It needs time, research and thought but if it is well done both congregation and choir will benefit enormously.



Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks

After you, who automatically has the last word, who else is most concerned with what the choir sings? The choir itself, of course, and they'll love to be asked for suggestions.

You can be specific. Ask them, "Does anyone know a good setting of psalm 150?" for example, or whatever it is you're looking for.

The important thing to remember is that if you don't introduce new music your choir will become stale and bored. They need your inspiration and expertise. Give them something good to sing.

Choristers love a challenge but they can easily become discouraged. You have to strike a balance and this is where your skill comes in!

So how far should you challenge a choir with new repertoire? There are two judgments to make, and you'll need to get them both right:

1. Is the piece worth doing and will the choir enjoy it?
2. Is it within the capability of the group?

The first one's easy. You have to like the piece yourself and be able to enthuse your choir about its excellent quality. You have to be totally convinced that they will thoroughly enjoy it. If you have doubts, simply don't do it. You need to be 100% certain.

The second judgment is more technical. Obviously a challenge is good but you have to be sure that it's a challenge to which the choir can rise. Again, if you have doubts don't do it! There's nothing more demoralising than having to abandon a piece because the choir's not up to it.

So don't rush into a new work without careful thought. When your choir has mastered and performed a new piece - especially one which

is more difficult than they're used to - they'll be left with a wonderful sense of achievement. You can build on this.

Do remember that a challenge successfully mastered is always a great incentive for further excellence.



A Choir of Many Colours

Would you agree that the sound a choir makes is one of the most important aspects of performance? You can have an excellently-drilled group who make a sound like a ghost having a bad night or a not so well-drilled choir who make a sound which thrills and rivets! Which is better? My money is on the second group.

When it comes to the crunch, it's the *sound* of the choir that most people will remember, not the delicate placing of consonants.

You need to see that your choir creates a bright sound through the control of breath support and resonances. You need a wide and rich tonal palette. The best way to develop this is to have singing lessons with a good teacher who you trust. Listen to what your teacher says and put it into effect with your choir.

Practice on vowel sounds – perhaps keeping the same sound for whole passages – an *ee* sound to create brightness or an *ah* sound to achieve sonority. Experiment with other vowels and judge the effect.

Working this way releases an imponderable but vital thing: intensity in rehearsal produces its own sound – the more intense the rehearsal the more intense the sound.

You often hear it said that a conductor “has his own sound“. In a discussion about how Toscanini created such a personal orchestral colour, Sir Adrian Boult put it down to his intensity in rehearsal and his power of total concentration.

Work hard at colouring, get a clear idea of what you want and go ahead and achieve it. Never be disheartened!



The Queen of the Night's last agony??

Scree-eech!*&^* Squawk!**&!

The choir's fluffed a top note again!

What can you do about it?

First, stop tearing your hair out ... and then face the psychological fact that choirs don't like singing top notes: they feel exposed and they nervously await the strangulated noise that they fear they are about to make.

Therefore, it's up to you to give them unshakeable confidence – you have to be seen to believe in their ability to sing thrilling top As.

If you don't believe in them - they won't believe in themselves.

At each choir warm-up ensure that they sing a third higher than they are expected to go in performance.

For example, take the Sopranos up to a top C. I use the vowel sound Ah – it's the best for this type of exercise. Altos could go up to F, Tenors to C and Basses to F.

Never let your singers stretch up to a high note. They must think *above* it and come *down* to it. (So much in singing contradicts what seems the obvious way of doing things). A lot of graphic pointing while you demonstrate where the note is placed in the head and its "direction" will involve and amuse your singers!

Lastly, get a really good singing teacher – the touchy-feely type – to give your choir a half-hour singing lesson concentrating on high notes. This will make the choir face the problem and will give them the confidence to overcome it.

You will soon find that your choir soars up and up without problems.

They will just accept that they can do it.



The Rhythm Method

Persuading a choir to sing rhythmically can be one of the most difficult challenges you will face - but its achievement can be one of the most rewarding. *Playing* rhythmically is so much easier. This is partly due to the fact that singers have to cope with words that often seem to militate against a good rhythmic flow.

Start from the premise that most people have a good sense of rhythm, and it's just a question of bringing this out and developing it.

As choirmaster, you have a very important role in shaping a choir's rhythmic sense. Your beat needs a spring to it and it must create a feeling of drive and energy.

It's a good idea to regularly practice really rhythmic music and get the choir to appreciate what a joy it is to sing in time. Until your choir realises the thrill of rhythmic singing you will get nowhere. It is, after all, the choir that has to do it!!

I have always found it difficult to achieve precision with dotted crotchets. One handy trick is to get the choir to sing in time "one-and one-and" while holding a dotted crotchet and see that they move precisely on the second "and".

One of the difficulties is the varying length of consonants. You need to get the vowel *on* the beat and the consonants *slightly ahead*. Once you've established this habit it's easy. It's also helpful to substitute *ta* or *la* for the text. This produces a consonant of similar length which will help to place the vowel in the correct place.

Lastly, don't allow sloppiness in attack. Notes must be of a precise length. The cut-off before a rest and the entrance that follows must be exact. And the *length* of a rest needs to be accurate. How often it is that entries after a rest are poor!

Intelligent breathing before an entry is essential. Get the choir to breathe "in time" so that the breathing leads naturally into a rhythmic entry. Always demand total rhythmic precision and don't be satisfied with less. Create a habit of singing rhythmically so that your choir does it naturally. This will take time but the end results will be superb.



Listen ...!

Singers love hearing themselves sing. So it's not too difficult to get them to listen to themselves.

But persuading them to listen to the other singers in the choir can be a lot more difficult .. though essential!

When they're singing, the sound resonates in their head, it is part of them, it sounds magnificent, it gives them a sense of power ... but unfortunately it totally drowns out what the other singers are doing. This is a barrier to choral singing which has to be overcome, and it will call for understanding and courage on your part.

Why should singers listen? Listening ensures good intonation, fine blend and great sensitivity in performance. Imagine a football team in which the players never perform as a unit – they're just a collection of good footballers. No passing, no strategy, no teamwork. This is the

sporting equivalent of a non-listening choir. Unlike a football team your choir won't be booed off the platform ... but there will probably be boos in the hearts of the listeners!

A good place to start on working at listening is in the vocal warm-ups, but do present it in a way which amuses and entertains. Here are a few suggestions:

- Play a three-part chord on the piano and ask the choir to sing the middle or bottom note.
- Play a four-part chord and ask the choir to sing the third note down from the top. They never get this right! To enable them to hear it correctly, play the chord without the note and then with. Now the choir will be able to identify it.
- Get the choir to sing a four-part chord of C major, improvise a few bars of totally unrelated music and then ask them to repeat the chord they've just sung.

- Ask the choir to sing major and minor thirds against a given note – you can also do this with octaves.
- Play a short section of the piece you are rehearsing with a few wrong notes. Ask members of the choir to put up their hands when they hear an error. Then coax them to work out what the mistake was.
- Play a chord of G major followed by the dominant seventh of A flat major. Ask the choir to complete the modulation with the next chord. They will need examples of this before they attempt it.
- Another much enjoyed exercise is for the choir to sing a scale of C major while you accompany with one of D flat major. This one is guaranteed to grip everyone's attention and cause much mirth!

There are many other possibilities - I'm sure you can think of some yourself - but always make them fun. Aural training should become a competitive game between choirmaster and choir.

Train your choir to listen the whole time but particularly when you ask them to. You can often correct intonation in this way. It's far better if the singers work out what's wrong rather than rely upon you to do it for them.

The choir should listen to vowel sounds and, as a general rule, *if they can't hear the person next to them, they're singing too loudly.*

Concentrated work on listening will pay immense dividends in performance and choral security.



I can't get that tune out of my head

Just imagine: you're listening to a great pianist playing an enormous concerto ... Wow! He throws himself totally into his performance – you can feel an electric charge between him, the conductor, and the orchestra.

But how on earth does he memorise it all? And how do you think it would affect the performance if he were playing from the music?

It would certainly make a considerable difference if the pianist's head was buried in his copy! I'm sure you wouldn't be happy with a performance like that. But - when you think of it - isn't this what happens when the average choir performs?

Just think how it would look if your choir sang without music - all eyes on you, the conductor. Nothing in their hands, physically and mentally wrapped up in their performance, in total communication with the audience.

This is the stuff from which sensational performances are made – and you can be the driving force behind it!

Is it possible – can choral music be memorised?

Well, as always, it's horses for courses. The average church choir, singing at one service a week with one rehearsal a week is not going to memorise strings of anthems. However, there is a great difference between a church choir and a concert-giving choir.

If your choir gives concerts regularly and it has sufficient rehearsal time, it's possible to memorise long works. Think of the Choruses in Opera Houses - they have to do this.

Try this idea: every week sing what you have just rehearsed from memory, and you'll get the singers used to memorisation through constant practice. Don't allow them to break down –

judicious use of the piano can help this. Oh, and when the choir sings from memory ... you must work in the same way!

Start with short works and don't get discouraged. Each week longer sections should be sung and at the final rehearsals you'll be able to perform the whole piece.

When you get to this stage you're on your way. Your choir now knows it can commit whole pieces to memory, they'll discover the huge benefits of being in command of the notes and they'll be able to put all their effort into the interpretation – superb music is in the making!



Hitting the Loud Pedal

Have you ever marvelled at the dynamic range of a good choir? From a whispered *pianissimo*, magical and almost inaudible, to a commanding and dominating *fortissimo*, with an infinite number of gradations in between. On the other hand have you ever listened to a choir which has no loud or soft and always sings at the same dynamic level? Boring, tedious – ugh!

How do you achieve this variety of dynamic?

You, the Choirmaster, need to study the score of the piece you're preparing and look carefully at the dynamic levels it demands. Does it say *forte* or *fortissimo*, *piano* or *pianissimo*, *mezzo forte* or *mezzo piano*? Is the *crescendo* from *mezzo forte* to *forte* or from *mezzo forte* to *fortissimo*? Is the *diminuendo* from *mezzo forte* to *piano* or from *mezzo forte* to *pianissimo*?

The really good conductor takes note of all the subtleties and insists that all the gradations are met. You need a clear idea of how much tone you expect - and then ensure that that's what you get.

Don't let the music excite you so much that you lose control of the dynamic level! If you do the music will get louder and louder ... and ever more boring. Make sure that there's something in reserve for the climax of the piece. It will need to be overwhelming and it won't be - unless all dynamics are carefully thought out.

Dynamics are the life-blood of a piece – careful control is essential for a great performance.



Improvisation

How many of us have longed to be able to improvise - if only for a short time. Maybe just the time it takes for a procession to get from point A to point B. You don't need to give great spectacular improvisations of a symphonic nature - just a few bars!

But the ability to improvise seems to be a gift for the select few ... or is it? It may surprise you to learn that there is an underlying method to improvisation which, like almost everything else, can be learned. That organist you are envying for his ability to improvise for hours on a given theme is working to a plan. Let's see if you can get started on a plan then you too can improvise!

Here's an idea: Improvisation needs to fit into a time signature – chords just strung together sound disjointed and shapeless. I suggest you choose a time signature (say 4/4) and then put down one note in the left hand or pedal which

you then maintain throughout your improvisation. In the right hand play chords which fit with your held note.

In the first instance make each chord a semibreve (this will give you time to think) but always make sure that each chord is held for a strict 4 beats. You then begin to impose upon your work a strict rhythmic structure. Set yourself a time limit – say one minute – and see where you get! Obviously, if you are playing a pedal note on the organ you can use both hands.

When you are able to do this to your satisfaction you can turn your semibreves into minims and fit two chords to a bar. As you gain in proficiency you can introduce more notes.

You can use the same technique to get to grips with passing notes. Put down one note and put over it a passage which contains quavers and other values. This will then be the equivalent of a two-part invention. The more

you do of these exercises the more your proficiency will increase.

Have you ever tried to harmonise a scale without any music? Try it and see where you get. Don't stop halfway through, however odd it may sound. Take time to work out each chord.

And whatever happens, don't be discouraged – you can only improve, even if it does take time. You'll soon find that you're better at improvising than you ever thought possible.



Auditioning the Choir

What a thorny topic!

From a musical point of view the ideal situation is that all members of a choir should be re-auditioned every two years, and that all applicants should be auditioned before entry. This will prevent your choir from ageing and will ensure that members are of a good vocal and musical standard.

That's the ideal. And unfortunately, in many situations it's not possible to implement.

It would be unacceptable, for instance, in a small parish where the choir is minute and there are few - if any - applicants. Also, clergy might object on the grounds that it's a voluntary group and the congregation might very well be unhappy.

And how many choir directors flinch at the task, and perhaps allow sentiment to overtake good sense?

But you need to remember that the incompetent and ageing choir cannot be an inspiration to worship ... quite the reverse! A poor choir distracts worshippers and often puts people off altogether from attending church.

How can you deal with this? The only practical way to approach such an important issue of choir policy is at your interview for the Organist's position. If you feel it appropriate, discuss the problem with the interview panel and insist choir auditioning and re-auditioning is included in your contract.

Also insist that unsatisfactory choir members are asked to retire. You will need to be guided by the vicar as to whether this is possible in the particular circumstances of your parish.

You will in any case need the full backing of the Vicar and the Parish Council. And this is the route you'll have to go if you have belatedly realised your problem.

Once authorised, you must set about what is an unpleasant task and be prepared to accept the inevitable complaints. However, you can rest assured that sensible people will respect this approach and that you will not end up with an elderly and vocally-declining choir who aren't up to their job. If a Vicar won't accept this approach I would seriously question his or her dedication to musical excellence.



Diction revisited

We have already started to explore diction. Time now to re-visit this subject which is so central to the effectiveness of your choir.

We all want our choirs to have perfect diction – every word crystal clear, every nuance clearly understood; but these wonderful ideals are not so easy to achieve.

There are two extremes. In one the choir cannot be understood at all, not a syllable can be deciphered and not a word can be heard. In the other, every syllable and consonant is immaculate but the singers sound mannered and stilted – almost to the point of sounding funny. A middle course must be steered.

The first essential is that everyone understands what the text means. A choir can't achieve good diction unless it knows what it's singing about. This is of fundamental importance! In a

small group - and often in a large one - ask a chorister to read out the text in a conversational style. The choir should listen to the rhythm of the words and what syllables are *naturally* emphasised. You will often find that your understanding of the text is very different to that of the reader. These differences will often affect the understanding of the text.

Ask the choir if they have any ideas about the meaning of what they have heard and discuss difficult points of interpretation with them. Before you start singing the thing, you need to achieve a unanimity of approach and a common understanding of the meaning of the text.

It's a good idea to ask the choir to imagine that they are telling a story when they are singing. If they put over a song in this way their diction will improve enormously. The choir needs to think of the words as conversation, particularly if the text is difficult or unknown. The basis of good conversation is a totally natural delivery - keep that in mind as you work.

I will deal with the more technical aspects of diction in another article but in the meantime remember the cardinal principle - a text cannot be put over unless it is understood. Don't perform a piece until you have teased out its textual depths and subtleties.



Choir Competitions and Festivals

If you want to give your Choir a shot in the arm, there's nothing like a Competition or Festival to focus their attention.

They're such a good idea that I strongly recommend all Organists to enter their choirs for these events.

Look for the Sacred Music competition and enter that, but you can also look beyond and take part in other classes. It's excellent for choir morale if you do well and the choristers learn a great deal from hearing other groups perform. They'll also get to meet a lot of people from other choirs and churches, they'll talk together and discuss their directors (you!) at great length ... perhaps they'll decide you're not so bad after all!

Read the rules carefully and choose pieces that you can use in your normal Sunday worship. Make sure you field a full choir - don't

enter a competition if you know that most of your tenors will be away. Do check this before you enter. Allow sufficient rehearsal time and always perform the piece in a Service before the competition so that you can iron out any performance problems. Check that everyone has transport to the venue.

Encourage the choir to mix with other choristers and make sure you also take every opportunity to talk with the directors of other choirs. Your problems will be similar and this is a great way of getting ideas for new repertoire.

Ensure that your choir is turned out well and exudes an air of confidence in performance. Arrange for a warm-up beforehand and put your singers in a good mood. Go on stage in a disciplined fashion and know precisely where your singers are to stand. Don't sing to the floor and do look happy! You need to take the audience and adjudicators with you and make them well-disposed towards your choir and its manner of performance.

Finally, take what the adjudicators say seriously. You can, of course, question their opinions but do listen carefully and if you have a question ask it privately.

This is a wonderful opportunity to get some professional feedback and advice for your choir, mainly from the official adjudicators, but also from the other competitors. You need to get as much as possible out of the competition - both socially and musically.



Preparing a Rehearsal

I am often asked for guidance on the preparation of a rehearsal. So this is what I suggest - it's what I do:

1. You must work out exactly what you wish to achieve during the rehearsal. How much do you want the choir to learn? This will depend upon the music to be covered for the forthcoming services. Don't rehearse for the sake of rehearsing. An amateur choir entrusts you with their time – it is undoubtedly one of their most important possessions. Use it wisely and don't waste it.

2. In the first place, it's essential that you're completely familiar with the music you are going to rehearse. It needs to be considered as a whole and in careful detail, so make sure that you can sing each part accurately and well.

Work out any difficulties that become apparent and ensure that you have a way of resolving them. You'll need to consider how and when to breathe, how to find entrance notes, what tone colour the pieces need, foresee intonation problems and spot rhythmic difficulties. A choirmaster must have solutions at his fingertips.

The trick to preventing problems from happening is to solve them in advance. Every time a mistake is made it reinforces itself, so see that as many as possible are avoided – this is one of the fruits of careful preparation. Note too, that you'll prevent a lot of difficulties if you can point them out to the choir in advance.

3. Make sure that you can play the piece – practice it in advance. Be able to play the vocal parts as well as the accompaniment.

4. Ensure that the copies from which the choir sings are totally satisfactory. Missing or damaged pages can cause chaos, as can

different editions and page numbers. Ensure that all the music your choristers use is up to the job. Don't use separate photocopied sheets – this often leads to muddle. See that they are enclosed in a folder and the pages clearly numbered.

5. Work out exactly what you want to do with the dynamics and tempi. Get an overall feel for the piece. The choir will take its interpretation from you - if *you* haven't one, they won't have either.

6. Your own mental preparation is of the utmost importance. Your choir needs a Director who is cheerful, enthusiastic, inspiring and humorous. It's sometimes difficult to achieve this - there are bound to be times when you don't feel like rehearsing. But as a professional it's essential that you always appear to be positive and vital. Ask yourself the question: "How do I appear to my Choir?"

The two essentials for a good rehearsal are good preparation and an inspiring attitude. Always remember the golden rule: "Don't waste time"!



Performance Notes

1. Psalm 150: *Praise God in his Holy Place* - Colin Mawby
2. Gregorian Chant - sung in Latin
3. *How Lovely are thy Dwellings* - Brahms



Psalm 150: *Praise God in his Holy Place* - Colin Mawby

This piece was written in 1968 in response to a commission from the Grail and is now widely used and very popular. It was sung at the Papal Mass in London's Wembley Football Stadium.

Structured as a **Responsorial Psalm**, the people sing the response led by the choir. The first two verses present no problems, while *verse 3* calls for rhythmic precision and accurate singing and *verse 4* is totally straightforward.

Practice *verse 3* slowly and ensure that the Tenors and Basses are completely familiar with their notes. Get the choir to declaim the rhythm or sing it on one note. The rhythm springs entirely from the words and isn't difficult. *Verse 3* has a tendency to rush -

particularly at the phrase *cymbals, praise him with clashing of cymbals*. The choir needs to feel a strong beat to overcome this. The strongly rhythmic accompaniment helps but it doesn't double the choir the whole time. So the choir will have to appreciate this and realise that it is in some respects independent of the organ.

You'll need a good organist with a strong sense of drive and an ability to lead the congregation with a secure sense of rhythm and using all possible tonal colour in his accompaniment. Psalm 150 may also be accompanied on the piano or keyboard.

The time signature is 2/2 and this throws up the problem of off-beat entries. These must be precise and never late!

Many late entries are caused by singers not relating the physical act of breathing to the rhythm of a piece, and snatching a breath too late. It's essential to teach them how to cope

with this, and the way to do it is to get the choir to breathe in time with the music - on the strong beat before the entry. Don't let the consonants delay entries - it's the *vowel* that has to be on the beat, not the consonant.

I suggest that the choir learn the words from memory and, if possible, also the music. This piece will benefit enormously from this approach.

This Psalm needs to crack on at a good speed - the given metronome mark is far too slow. Ensure that there is a large *rit* at the end. The last response can be slightly slower at its outset.

Rehearse the congregation too, so that it knows when to come in and can respond with ease to the rhythmic impulse of the piece.

The music is published by the Royal School of Church Music. Performance benefits from having brass with the organ. The brass parts

(2 trumpets and 3 trombones) are available from the Gregorian Institute of America and can be ordered through the RSCM. Why not go the whole hog and get the percussion parts too!

Psalm 150 is a song of praise and joy and your performance needs to reflect these qualities. It's a piece ideally suited to a special occasion, and choirs always sing it with great enthusiasm and verve!



Gregorian Chant - sung in Latin

Gregorian Chant - or Plainchant - has again become popular. It combines the profound and the earthy in a unique way. It is intensely spiritual and prayerful and it's these qualities that are essential for good chant singing. All rehearsal should be aimed towards achieving this.

Chant speaks in a direct and wonderful way to all and it should create the sense of the presence of God.

Gregorian notation *looks* complicated but really it isn't. Your choir needs to know where the tonic is and the *clef* at the start of a piece will tell them. If they don't understand the *clefs* they will not know where the semitones are and chaos will ensue! If the *clef* has two notes the line around which it hangs is C; if it has three the line is F - it's as simple as that. You will need to work out a key in which your choir

will feel comfortable - the range of chant can be great, particularly when the *clef* changes midpiece.

Teach your choir the various lengthenings:

- a dot after a note doubles it,
- a line over a note or group of notes does the same,
- and the jagged note (*quillisma*) lengthens the note *in front of it*.

When notes are *on top* of each other you sing the bottom one first, otherwise sing them as they come.

The flat sign lasts for a word *or* until it is cancelled by the succeeding bar line *or* by a natural sign. Very rarely is there a flat in the key signature, but when there is it acts in the normal way and flattens all the notes it refers to.

There are three types of barline: quarter, half, and full. The full means that there is performance gap at that point. The others are unimportant unless their meaning is totally obvious.

Structure the phrases to the accents of the words. They often don't tie up with the musical shape of the phrase, for example when an unaccented syllable falls on a strong concluding phrase or musical stress.

The words must be paramount, particularly in **syllabic** chant, i.e. one syllable per note. In **melismatic** chant - more than one note per syllable - always follow the shape of the musical phrase. The *Alleluias* are an excellent example of this as are also some of the *Kyries*.

Chant must have dynamic variation otherwise it becomes tedious, but don't overdo it. Before rehearsal get a clear idea of what you want in this respect.

Always ask yourself the question: is my interpretation prayerful? Does my choir produce an atmosphere of spirituality and reflection? Could I pray to what I am doing? This last question is most important.

When practicing the chant leave time to master the notes - they can be difficult. Make sure that you yourself can sing it accurately! Unify the choir's vowel sounds by practicing on vowels only, and work out a sensible breathing structure. Staggered breathing can be very helpful in the long phrases.

Ensure that you have a good cantor who can lead the choir's entries. The choir should breathe before the conclusion of the intonation ready to come in immediately unless there's an obvious gap.

People often find the lengthenings difficult to spot. They can be in odd places. This is invariably caused by problems in the engraving of a piece. You can also come across great

gaps in the notation and these are usually caused by having long words on short notes. These are printing issues and don't mean anything musically but they do cause problems when reading. Your choir needs to understand this or they will continue to be caught out.

Rhythm is a controversial subject. I follow the Solesmes theory where the notes are equal. There are many other ideas. You need to decide which theory you're going to follow - and stick to it! This is where prior research will pay off.

There are differing views as to whether or not the chant should be accompanied. One thing is certain: badly accompanied chant sounds awful! If you have a really good accompanist use the talent, otherwise sing unaccompanied.

When you rehearse it's essential to ensure that your choir is totally familiar with the way a piece starts and where the semi-tones are. This is particularly important and needs

practice, particularly if one piece is leading directly on to another. Your choir must feel totally confident in this otherwise disaster will strike!

Chant is the most wonderful thing but it needs careful thought and rehearsal. Your singing must lead the congregation to prayer and into the profound nature of liturgical celebration.

It must carry the people into the very presence of God.



How Lovely are thy Dwellings - Brahms

This is one of my favourite anthems!

The text is from Psalm 84 and the music comes from *A German Requiem* of Brahms. It seems to encapsulate in a short piece many moods and emotions, yet it retains a wonderful unity cemented by admirable counterpoint. I never hear it without being deeply moved and am filled with admiration for the composer's genius and skill.

A performance needs a four-part choir, SATB non divisi, and a good organist. The organ part is an adaptation of the full orchestral score so it's complex.

There are no shortcuts to preparing this piece well in advance. Don't sight-read it with the choir - the extraordinary modulations will catch you out! You must be absolutely on top of it and burning with a great desire to teach the work.

First, your choir needs to get on top of the notes. Look at these passages: bars 33 - 43; 46 - 58; 65 - 84; and 123 - 148. They contain the most involved tonal shifts and they display the composer's involved language. These modulations must enter into the bones of your singers - when they do, they'll become straightforward.

Play a recording to your choir or play the piece on the piano. You have to inspire your singers that this is great and wonderful music and that the sweat involved in learning it will be repaid a hundredfold.

Your choir will need to be totally conversant with the change to the quaver movement at bar 123. It is the crowning stroke of genius of the work but it still manages to catch singers unaware.

While learning the notes you will come across some of the vocal problems involved. These include sustained high lines and long phrases.

Breath support and familiarity will solve these difficulties. The phrases need to be "on the voice" - they must become part of the singer.

Practice must be controlled and unstressed as tension in the voice will make the lines much more difficult. There will be plenty of hard work involved but this will be helped if you can give your singers a clear indication of how and where to breathe.

The tenor phrase 44 bars back from the end needs a genuine *cantabile* and no strain. The singers need to relax into the phrase and know that this will work. A totally convinced performance is the answer to these long and wonderful lines.

Make sure that at bar 24 the tenors are *molto sostenuto*. There are very few genuinely difficult passages but the work makes considerable vocal demand. Always remember that the accompaniment is a huge help.

With regard to speed, the marking is *con moto moderato*. It needs to move or the phrases cannot be sustained. Work out a good speed for the quaver passage and let that dictate the speed of the opening.

Follow Brahms's dynamic marks and let the words dictate the mood changes. A lot of the dynamics are built into the vocal writing. There need to be some quick *diminuendos*: work hard to get the *dolce* at the end of the piece and the wonderful *piano* that precedes it.

How lovely are thy dwellings is a unique example of the composer's genius and inspiration. Let this music overwhelm you.



Fine

We trust you'll agree that these tips from a Master of his Craft are an essential part of your Choirtraining toolbox. Look out for further Volumes soon.

If you missed *Volume 1* of **Essential Choir Training**, now's your chance to complete your collection by ordering it from us at **www.Music-for-Church-Choirs.com**

