

Children's Choirs – Cherubs and Challenges

<p>Section 1 Welcome</p>	<p><i>The workshop was structured as an ordinary Children's Choir rehearsal so that the participants could see and experience how a rehearsal might be run and understand the importance of each element.</i></p>
<p>Section 2 Why have a children's choir?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Participation: Every baptised person, no matter what their age, has a baptismal right to full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy. Children's Choir has a low entry threshold in terms of skills but possibilities for great development, so it suits a great range of ages and abilities. It is a real and responsible role; it is active by nature; it encourages a direct connection to the liturgy and is inherently educational. It is an effective opportunity for children and young people to participate in the community, as leaders and ministers. ◦ Inspiration: The congregation is inspired by the sight of these young singers, by their commitment, their leadership, and the work that they obviously put into their rehearsals and performance. The singers are inspired by the texts and music they are singing, and by each other. ◦ Nobility: The Choir's singing adds to the nobility and beauty of celebration, by adding music as well as their whole-hearted action. Thus it is very important that the music be good music, well performed. ◦ Growth: Choir provides an opportunity for children to grow in their spirituality and in the practice of their faith, and for the parish to grow by accepting and addressing change in their midst. Growth in children's spirituality occurs through three main areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The search for transcendence, for experiences outside the self, and outside the visible world ▪ Connections to others, especially peers, family, and trusted community members ▪ The drive to make sense of life, death, existence, good and evil
<p>Section 3 Rehearsal</p>	<p>How the basic rehearsal works</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We pray : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ in order to contextualise what the Children's Choir exists for, ie our mission: we are in God's house, we are doing God's work, not as a community choir but a liturgical choir ◦ to create and sustain community – choir is basically all about community; it is in fact a micro-community that arises from and reflects the parish ◦ our prayer includes both fixed elements and personal intercessions, through which we find that we are creating and recording the story of the choir and our community life: babies, birthdays, family changes, sickness, exams, hopes, successes, celebrations
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. We welcome any new people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Hospitality: to be a community we have to at least know each other's

	<p>names and be able to recognise each other.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ We name any new people and each other, recognising and recalling baptismal naming which asserts us in God's eyes as who we are ◦ All advertising for the choir includes the words 'All welcome'. We make this welcome actual and tangible, actively including the newcomer into our community. We have a lower age limit (Year 3) but no upper age limit; singers from any school in the parish, of any ability or with disabilities, any family background are welcomed. There is no charge (the parish bears all financial responsibility) and no audition. There is an expectation that singers will cooperate with the director and each other, that they will attend rehearsals regularly and sing at weekend liturgies regularly. It is desirable that the person be baptised but not necessary. A desire to serve the parish and to serve God is enough. ◦ We use a series of games and activities to help choir members get to know one another better and strengthen the community network. These are incorporated into the rehearsal or in the game at the end of rehearsal.
	<p>3. Warm-ups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Singing is a whole body activity – body/mind/heart/spirit ◦ It's a good idea to alternate sitting and moving, periods of activity with periods of inactivity ◦ Warm-ups are generally <u>fun</u> and are nearly always where the main learning with regard to singing skills and vocal development is done. ◦ We start with large muscle groups, shoulders, knees, hips, etc and move to fine, eg wrists, necks, ankles, jaws, lips, cheeks and eyebrows ◦ We try to incorporate vocal development, pitch awareness, intervals, tone, listening and dynamics into warm-ups, as well as the basics of part-singing. Learning to attend to the director is an essential part of warm-ups. Learning to act as a choir is also important: standing and sitting as one, listening with respect, etc.
	<p>4. Catechesis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Absolutely essential This is where the evangelical work of the Choir is done. ◦ We re-tell the Gospel stories for understanding, asking questions and answering questions, always working towards improving the children's understanding, ◦ We connect the Gospel and the readings to our own lives, ◦ We become aware of the Church's life and the Church's story (liturgical seasons, parish events such as baptisms, conferring of Confirmation, etc, Social Justice Sunday, Mission Sunday, etc) ◦ We connect the Gospel or season to the program for the Mass we are preparing for, so that the children understand what we're singing and why. This continues throughout the rehearsal. ◦ The songs, both the music and the words, are in themselves effective catechesis so long as the children understand them, so it is worthwhile finding time to explain difficult words and concepts to children. ◦ The relationships within the choir are the bedrock of evangelisation in

action. The Director's **RELATIONSHIP** with the children should be truthful, positive, supportive, listening, an expression of your own faith, and above all **loving** with Christ's love. The director by the nature of their role is the face of God to the children and a leader within the parish community. The director, like guardian angels, accompany the children on their faith journey, give specific directions when necessary out of their experience and greater wisdom, and mediate experiences of transcendence to the children.

- **The behaviour of children** towards each other must be a special care. In this micro-community, the participants practise caring, supporting, apologising and forgiving. This is the behaviour which the director models: patient, forgiving, consistent, admitting mistakes, apologising whenever necessary, being ready to learn and open to new ideas and experiences, and always being prepared to take responsibility.

5. SINGING

- And finally we come to the singing. We sing through the program for the liturgy we are working towards, usually beginning with something we know well and then progressing through new material, the psalm, parts and solos.
- We sing: parts of the Mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Holy Holy, Memorial Acclamation, Amen, Lamb of God), Responsorial psalm and Gospel Acclamation, entrance song, communion song, songs at preparation and thanksgiving and recessional.
- Repertoire – the Choir's repertoire (*see Resources below*) is chosen using the same criteria as when choosing music for adult celebrations:
PSALM
 - **Pastoral:** It is important for the core of the Choir's repertoire to be regular parish hymns, so that the Choir effectively supports the singing of the community rather than performing songs that exclude and alienate the community. The Choir needs to learn and sing much of the parish's common musical heritage; the parish needs to learn and sing new music that particularly suits young voices and young spirits. The Choir is perfectly placed to introduce new music to the parish. At the same time, the Director has a responsibility to be responsive to the parish community as a whole, and not impose a completely separate repertoire that is in a range or style unsuitable for general singing. That is not to say that the Choir may not sing a specially prepared item from time to time that the congregation can participate in by listening and reflecting. However the Choir's repertoire should encompass the riches of the parish's tradition as far as possible, given the ages and abilities of the singers. New songs need to be introduced at a frequency that sustains the interest of the children without overwhelming the older members of the congregation.
 - **Spiritual:** At certain times and ages, and under certain circumstances, music speaks to the spirit in more or less meaningful ways. If a given song cannot be sung with authenticity or it does not contribute to the developing spirituality of the young singers, it is better avoided.
 - **Action:** Songs that incorporate actions are fun; they help fix the

texts in the singers' memories; they make more direct reference to involving the whole person, mind, body and spirit, in the liturgy. Many songs have traditional actions, handed down from other times. We can also make up actions that suit the texts. We can also SIGN texts, using Australian sign-language for the hearing-impaired (see Signbank on the Auslan website) as a gesture of inclusivity to the hearing-impaired community. From time to time the Choir members sing while carrying out an action, such as participating in the Entrance procession and placing symbols in a sacred space, or waving ribbons and streamers during the Gospel Acclamation.

- **Liturgical:** A program prepared for a Eucharistic celebration has definite characteristics depending upon whereabouts in the celebration it is to be used. A processional or recessional should bring all the congregation together in song and celebration, should reflect the season, and so on. The song at the preparation of the gifts may either directly refer to the offering itself or it may reflect back on the Liturgy of the Word, the season or the specific nature of the celebration. Education in this kind of liturgical awareness forms part of every rehearsal. As suggested in the *Directory for Masses with Children*, Choir members are regularly given opportunities to choose music themselves, after thorough catechesis about the Gospel and readings and bearing in mind the liturgical framework. This is both a responsibility and a privilege, and they understand that very well.
- **Musical:** Bearing in mind that taste in music differs virtually from person to person, the Director needs to make careful judgements about the musical quality of the repertoire. Like a healthy diet, the music the Choir sings should be nourishing, varied, both simple and complex, carefully balanced and low in sugar. If possible the singers should be given the opportunity to enjoy the experience of singing in parts. The range of music chosen for children to sing should be appropriate; complex rhythms need not be avoided so long as the children can sing them well. Music from a range of sources, including music from other countries can give insights into the universal Church.
 - When we sing the Responsorial psalm, a number of options are open to us. First of all the psalm in its entirety may be sung in unison by the Choir from the Choir area. Alternatively the verses may be sung from the ambo by a soloist, or one soloist for each verse, or two singers for each verse, or a small group may sing all the verses. This has the advantage of providing solo opportunities for the more capable singers, supporting less capable singers while they are learning, and providing good modelling for aspiring soloists. The paramount consideration is that the Word is presented clearly, respectfully and meaningfully.
 - Depending on the make-up of the Choir, songs with solo parts can be chosen, so long as there is still a good balance of music for the congregation to participate in.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ The last five minutes of every rehearsal are given over to a game, which always has a choir-related focus eg. teamwork, aural memory, auditory perception, vocal development, leadership training ◦ If deemed appropriate, the singers can be given a concrete sign of appreciation, eg lollipop, stamp or star
<p>Section 4 Choir Development and other issues</p>	<p>Child Protection For the safety of the children in our care and for protection for adults who work with them, every adult who works with the Children's Choir must have a current Working With Children Check number, and have provided that number to the parish administration before beginning work with children under 18.</p> <p>Parents are expected to communicate with the director if their child is unable to attend a rehearsal or Mass.</p> <p>Creating and Sustaining Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⤴ We celebrate the Choir's anniversary each year on a Sunday around its foundation date. This celebration takes the form of a party after our regular rehearsal AND a blessing and commissioning of Choir members and director during the Sunday Mass. At the end of the Mass, the children are presented with certificates commemorating the completion of a year's commitment (or 2 or 3 or more years) to the Choir. On completing their first year, they are also presented with a medal bearing an image of St Michael the Archangel, because <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ like the angels, the Choir members are a visible sign of God's presence, and witnesses of God's love ◦ they carry out the will of God ◦ they announce God's word to God's people ⤴ Soon after the start of the year, some of the old parents organise afternoon tea for new parents. This is a good opportunity to organise ride-sharing as well as initiating new parents into the way things are run. ⤴ An annual Christmas party (financed by the parish) is held at the last rehearsal. ⤴ Choir news and reminders are placed in the parish bulletin and the weekly school newsletter to inform parents and to encourage new membership. There is regular email communication between the director and choir parents regarding dates and events. ⤴ After our last anniversary Mass, we had a bring-your-own picnic in a local park for all choir families. This was so successful that it is set to become a regular event.

Resources

As One Voice Vol 1 and 2 (*Willow Publishing*)

As One Voice for Kids (*Willow Publishing*)

As One Voice Next Generation (*Willow Publishing*)

Spirit and Song Vol 1 and 2 (*OCP*)

Simple Psalms for Year A, B and C (pas07@bigpond.net.au)

Simple Psalms from the Children's Lectionary (*Willow Publishing*)

Rise Up and Sing (*OCP*)