

Forming and Directing a Choir
Prof. Clare Johnson, Director, ACU Centre for Liturgy

Catholic Church on Choirs

“Choirs must be diligently developed” so that “whenever a liturgical service is to be celebrated with song, the whole assembly of the faithful is enabled...to contribute the active participation that rightly belongs to it.” *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #114

Start with what you have & build from there

- Starting a liturgical choir
- 2 tuneful voices
- Issue direct invitations
- Get your choristers to recruit for you
- Audition potential choristers
- They must be able to sing in tune – all else can be taught
- Choirs need committed members
- Choirs need time and rehearsal
- Important to separate rehearsal time from liturgy

Always warm up the voice

- Always do vocal exercises
- Breathing
- Flexibility
- Diction games

Poppacatapetal, copper plated kettle,
hippopotamuses, Mississippi River

Chester cheetah chewed a chunk of cheap
and chunky cheddar cheese

- Rounds with movement
- Mix up the voice-parts
- It's OK to be silly
- Rehearse exercises that teach musical principles

The Director

- Rehearse for long enough but include breaks to prevent vocal/mental/physical tiredness
- Don't underestimate how long people can sing for, but also be careful not to over-rehearse
- Don't go over and over the same part of the music at pitch or at full voice especially if it is very high or very vocally taxing
- If people come with parts already learned, rehearsal time can be more productive and less boring
- Mix it up in terms of what you are working on: triage the upcoming requirements
- Try to deal with challenges with humour
- Try to finish rehearsals on a positive note - perhaps a sung prayer

Rehearsals

- Rehearse with an accompanist (but not all the time)
- Choirs need to work with an accompanist at the optimal time in their learning
- Always use and encourage good vocal production technique in terms of stance, breathing, placement of the voice, production of a clear, easy tone
- Rehearse voice-parts in different ways
- Building a good choir requires careful people management and the exercise of positive psychology at the optimal time
- Set goals & appropriate musical challenges

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Building Choir Identity

- Choir identity is geared toward group cohesion, and establishing group identity
 - Uniform/clothing/robes
 - Choir folders (<https://www.musicfolder.com/intl/>)
 - Communication mechanisms (e.g., <http://www.graduationmall.com/classic-choir-robe.html>)
 - Discipline
 - Attitude
 - Rehearsal space – have a separate space from the church (if possible)
 - Performance space – have an identifiable space within the church for the choir

The Spirit of the Choir

- Unpredictable yet likely - the Spirit at work
- Bond between people who make music together
- Involves letting down your guard
- Leads to acceptance, care of each other, belonging together

Choir as music ministers

- The service of the assembly is its aim
- Choir sings because it is part of the assembly
- Correct attitude in regard to the assembly
- Support & promote the participation of the people
- Good choirs = good assembly singing
- Harmonizing or adding descants to the assembly's song
- Worthy repertoire for gifted choirs
- Situate the choir within the assembly wherever possible

Music director in liturgy (Lucien Deiss)

- Leader directs & sustains assembly's song & facilitates its prayer
- Needs to be acceptable to the assembly so that she can perform her function without drawing undue notice to herself
- Sets the tempo to best suit an assembly's song
- Calm, confident joy & contagious enthusiasm
- Dress appropriately
- Gesture clearly - move only when necessary or appropriate
- Be visible to the entire assembly
- Minimum intervention, maximum effect
- No one may direct the assembly's prayer if they do not pray themselves!
- Rapport with Choir – choir must trust the director
- Good musicians are the result of training, study and practice – they do not just happen!

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Helpful resources:

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- Archer, Malcolm and Stephen Cleobury. *Advent for Choirs*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
ISBN 0-19-353025-2
- Bullard, Alan, ed. *The Oxford Book of Flexible Carols*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
ISBN 978-0-19-336462-2
- Bullard, Alan, ed. *The Oxford Book of Flexible Anthems*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
ISBN 978-0-19-335895-9
- Dakers, Lionel, ed. *The New Church Anthem Book*. Oxford University Press, 1992/1994.
ISBN 0-19-353109-7
- Dearmer, Percy, Ralph Vaughan-Williams and Martin Shaw. *The Oxford Book of Carols*. Oxford University Press, 1964. ISBN 0-19-353315-4
- Deiss, Lucien. *Spirit and Song of the New Liturgy*. Cincinnati: World Library Publications, 1976.
- Guimont, Michel. *Lectionary Psalms*. Chicago: GIA, 1998.
ISBN 1-57999-041-X
- Harmon, Kathleen. *The Ministry of Cantors*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004.
- Rose, Barry, ed. *More the Hymns: Hymn-Anthems for Mixed Voice Choirs*. London: Novello, 2001.
ISBN 0-7119-8880-3
- Rutter, John. *Anthem Collection: 11 Anthems by John Rutter for Mixed Voices*. Chapel Hill NC: Hinshaw Music, 2003. HMB237
- Natalie Sleeth. *Gaudeamus Hodie*. Carl Fischer Music. N5538.
- Unknown. *The Oxford Easy Anthem Book*. Oxford University Press, 1957/1994.
- Willcocks, David and John Rutter eds. *100 Carols for Choirs*. Oxford University Press, 1987.
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