

The Well-Planned Choir Rehearsal



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Proper planning is the key to success, whether you're leading a meeting, remodeling a home, or throwing a dinner party. The same goes for executing an effective choir rehearsal. A well-planned and properly executed choir rehearsal results in happy choir members who feel challenged, fulfilled, and eager to come back. Poorly planned rehearsals feel like a waste of time and result in choir members not eager to return.

Here are some tips to assist in your rehearsal preparation.

Create a rehearsal lineup

Create a rehearsal lineup, an agenda for the rehearsal with exact times for each piece. Include the date beside each song for when it will be sung in liturgy. Distribute the agenda to all choir members ahead of time. Email is an excellent tool for efficient communication. Strategically place pieces in an order that will achieve your goals and not tire the singers too much. For example, alternate vocally challenging music with pieces that are less taxing on the voice. Program the more challenging pieces earlier in the rehearsal when the choir is fresh.

In addition to a rehearsal lineup, take the time during the summer break (if you have one) to plan the choir season. My choir sings two anthems/motets each Sunday. I aim to have the entire year planned before the first choir rehearsal. I strive for little repetition throughout the season, but certainly there is repetition from year to year. Consider attending choral reading sessions in your area in order to select the right music for your choir. Planning over the summer choir break allows for a smooth start to the choir season and ultimately reduces planning time.

At the first choir rehearsal of the season, each choir member receives a packet that lists the choral repertoire through the end of the Christmas season. I also include in this packet a calendar of the choir commitments through mid-June. This allows the members to plan their year well in advance and greatly improves choir member attendance.

Prepare the room

Set chairs up ahead of time and write the rehearsal lineup on a white board. Make sure all new music is handed out. Choir boxes are important to ensure all members receive materials and have a place to store them. Music taken home has a great chance of not returning.

Create a seating arrangement

Time will be saved if members know where to sit. In addition, certain voices work better together. "Voicing" singers to create the best seating arrangement can be time-consuming but is well worth it. Consider having two seating arrangements: one for when the choir sits in sections (all sopranos together, all altos together, and so on) and one for when the choir sits in mixed formation (ideally, in quartets). Post seating arrangements in the rehearsal space so they are visible to the choir.

Take attendance

Consider assigning one person from each section to take roll or have a sign-in sheet near the door. Rehearsals are not optional. Several times throughout the year calculate absences and convert to percentages. Speak with those choir members who fall above your established threshold of absences.

Start on time

If you begin rehearsals late, people will come late. If rehearsal begins at 7:00 pm, choristers should arrive no later than 6:50 pm. Music should be in order and each person should be ready to begin on time. Those who arrive at 7:00 pm are late!

Start with vocal warm-ups

Warm-up exercises are very important. Like stretching before physical exercise, they are definitely not a waste of time. Warm-ups keep choristers in good vocal health. Begin vocalizing a minute or two before choir actually begins. Walking in when the choir is warming up will encourage people to arrive early.

Incorporate sight-singing into each rehearsal

Sight-singing is particularly important when building a choir. You'll find that the more they do, the quicker they improve at this skill.

Use time wisely

We live in a busy world and no one has time to waste. Make adjustments as necessary during the rehearsal to make the most out of the time.

Pay attention to your choir members. They may need a break if they are getting fatigued.

Don't let the chatter get out of hand. A little time to chitchat is important; it builds community. Members need to establish friendships, feel comfortable in their surroundings, and connect on a personal level in order to fully share their gifts. However, be sure to bring people back to focus when things start to drift and the chatter becomes unproductive.

Balance standing and sitting

After a long day, people are often tired and need to move a bit during the rehearsal. Sitting for an entire rehearsal will result in lack of breath support and energy. On the other hand, standing for the entire rehearsal may cause additional fatigue and be counterproductive. Mixing things up a bit, such as standing when singing through a piece they know very well and sitting as you introduce a new piece of music, can offer the perfect balance.

Know your music

Adequate score study is a must for running a productive rehearsal. You can't be learning or reading the music at the same time the choir is. Determine places in the music that may need more attention and allow adequate time. Make sure you have combed the score for possible errors or unique notation that needs attention. Admit when you've made a mistake: "I wasn't very clear there. Can you do that again for me?" The more musically prepared you are, the smoother your rehearsal will be.

Be positive and upbeat

Provide constructive feedback in a positive, supportive tone. Constructive comments do not have to be demeaning or degrading. Point out when something needs to change and point out when things go well. Early in my career I made a conscious effort to compliment each section at some point during every rehearsal. In the beginning there were rehearsals that made this a challenge. I didn't want to give false praise since that could be misleading. However, pointing out areas for improvement is easy to do and when the choir has worked through trouble spots it gives them a feeling of success.

Set high standards

Be demanding in a professional, caring way. People want to be part of something that sounds wonderful. Be realistic about the choir's ability. Don't choose music that is too difficult. They will feel defeated. Aim to create a beautiful tone; singing in unison will aid in achieving this goal. Create a balanced repertoire. If all the music is too difficult, they will feel overwhelmed and won't come back. If the music is consistently too easy, they won't be challenged and won't come back. Set high musical standards that are in line with your choir's ability.

End rehearsals on time

This shows respect for everyone. Again, time is precious. Just as you

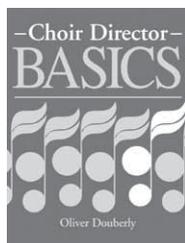
expect the choristers to arrive early so the rehearsal can start on time—thus fulfilling their part of the mutual commitment—ending on time is your way of fulfilling your part: this is the time we agreed to and you can be sure we'll always stop then. That kind of consistency and structure builds trust.

Debrief afterward

What went well? What could go better? Make your next choir rehearsal even better than the one you just finished. Quite often I send an email out the day after a rehearsal thanking them for their hard work and commitment. Showing appreciation goes a long way.

Being part of a choir can be a thrilling experience. It is rewarding to make music with a group of people who share a common love. However, it is a big commitment to be a member of a liturgical choir. Members devote between four and eight hours each week to this ministry. As a director, it is imperative that you plan and execute rehearsals well so as to make the best use of everyone's time. Effective rehearsals result in choristers leaving feeling energized and with a sense of accomplishment. It is my hope that this article has provided some ideas to assist you in planning and preparing for your next choir rehearsal.

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