

Do's and Don'ts for Today's Choral Rehearsal By Tim Sharp

If you have been conducting your choir rehearsals the same way, year-in and year-out, perhaps it is time to take a fresh look at your preparation and execution of this important weekly routine. It could be time to make a distinction between “personal style” and “being in a rut.” Usually, it is the director that feels that “rut” before the choir does, so if those feelings have been tugging at you, read on!

The following suggestions are offered with the understanding that most systems cannot afford to operate the same way they did years ago, or even one year ago. The nature of change, which factors-in the realities of how people spend their time, how they choose activities, and how they prepare for worship are also a part of changing rehearsal landscape. The following “do's and don'ts” are offered to help in the reevaluation of how leaders help to be a good steward of the important choral rehearsal time resource. For every “DO”, there is a closely-related or complimentary “DON'T” to keep in mind.

The Do's and Don'ts

DO make every piece of music in the rehearsal relate to the choir's mission within the church. Time spent in choir is a prime spiritual opportunity for choir members. There was a time in church life when the same group of leaders did it all when it came to church programs—choir members were teachers in the educational mission of the church; they were the deacons; they were children and youth leaders; and, they were the also choir members. That is no longer the case in many places, and people come to choir as their one choice of programmatic involvement in the church. For this reason, they place high value on the spiritual and worship dimension as well as the musical dimension of choir. For this reason, interpret the music you are rehearsing so that it can be an instrument for spiritual growth and daily worship in the life of choir members. Make rehearsal the choir member's liturgy for daily living. Do this by preparing prayer sheets and devotional guides around the scriptural themes that guide your choice of music and the sermons they hear. Organize this for choir members. Send the choir out weekly from rehearsal with ministry opportunities that have been targeted by choir leaders or ministry staff. Create a choir “hot line” that offers ministry opportunities through the week. Take on ministry opportunities that the entire choir can become involved in. Look for ways to put legs to the anthems, choruses, hymns and songs rehearsed each week.

DON'T allow individual choir members to only sing. Singing within the choir and bringing individual gifts to this musical ensemble is the primary reason for choir. However, as mentioned above, many of the benefits of being involved in various cells of activity in church life are no longer choices made by choir members. Part of our job as choir leaders is to teach a “relational” response to the music. Ask this question often to your choir---“How do you feel about what you are singing, and how does this music move you to action?” To help them develop a response to this question and the music being rehearsed, add another layer to your preparation and presentation of the music. Do this by reading the text on which the music was set; offer your brief commentary as to

how this music will fit not only into the worship service where it will be offered, but how it fits into daily life. Offer a story, a testimony from a choir member or a church member, a prayer, or a ministry opportunity suggested by the text. As choir directors, we must make the rehearsal musical in every way; but, in today's environment, we must also make the music "relational" to the choir.

DO remember that time is one of today's most valuable resources. For this reason, sing more and talk less in choir rehearsal. Write this mandate on a card and tape it on your rehearsal stand—"Sing more, Talk Less." A recent study demonstrated that music directors spend 75% of their time talking in rehearsal and 25% of the time making music. This is directly the opposite of how people learn. Demonstrate often, and in many ways, that you prioritize, organize, and work from a very specific and detail-oriented rehearsal plan, and do it through prompting actual singing from the choir. As you demonstrate a sensitivity toward excellent stewardship of time, help choir members to organize and use time efficiently in rehearsal as well. Create rehearsal recordings not only for seasonal events, but for weekly rehearsals that can be rehearsed at home or in the car. Show the choir that you value their time, and that you will help them manage their time so that time spent in rehearsal is time that is powerfully well-spent.

DON'T deal in generalities—work on specifics. Here is another quote to tape to your music stand—"When we deal in generalities, we will fail; when we deal in specifics, we shall nearly always succeed." Here is a generality: "Tenors—you are singing out of tune." Here is a specific: "Tenors—circle measure 32, and on the Eb on beat three, sing a higher and brighter 'ee' vowel like the vowel sound in the word 'see'." Out of respect for each choir member's time, when we do stop to correct mistakes, we must be prepared to go directly to the problem areas. To stop the flow of a section to draw attention to a problem is what choir rehearsal is about, but this process can be time consuming. For this reason, moving quickly to attention to details, making the most efficient use of time in rehearsal. Think, "the Divine is in the Detail."

DO remember to plan with the choir member's family in mind. As you plan for your choir, get a mental picture of not only the choral singer but also imagine them with their entire family. Individuals are less willing to spend time away from family, so as you plan, consider the broader family picture. Think carefully through weekly rehearsals as well as worship services, retreats, social activities, and seasonal presentations. We normally think of providing child care for such activities, but think more broadly to consider non-singing spouses and the rest of the family, and factor all of this into holiday weekends, high school and college life, and other dynamics that have an impact on the family. As the planning circle widens, new opportunities for ministry and involvement may come to mind for the choir ministry which extends the vitality of choir life.

DON'T forget the real nature of the volunteer choir singer. It is true that you are looking for good singers and teachable singers for choir. But, what you are also looking for as you recruit for choir is a person who is willing to make a 52-week commitment as well as

posses a heart for music ministry. So, what you need to work toward is recruiting committed, service-oriented volunteer singers. It is important, therefore, to teach commitment by having singers register their absence when they must miss a rehearsal or service. If a person wants to sing but cannot be consistent, allow them to sing in an “occasional choir” that recognizes this dynamic, or allow them to sing for a season where they can be consistent with their attendance. Focus on the important service that the choir provides for the worship life of the church, and never let anyone take that lightly. Teach commitment as well as teaching singing, pitches, and rhythms.

DO prepare everything in advance for every new rehearsal. Make preparation time available and sacrifice whatever it takes, but never go into a rehearsal unprepared. Consider every aspect of the rehearsal as you plan the flow of the rehearsal. Think of specific, detailed areas that you need to rehearse, and consider how those areas will be combined over time to make certain the piece is completely rehearsed by time of presentation. Think carefully through your priorities and provide for intense, detailed rehearsal moments as well as restful, affirming periods of singing. Keep “change vs. constancy” in mind throughout the rehearsal to keep the time energized. Let the choir see your organization by sharing your rehearsal outline and priorities visually on an bulletin board or through printed rehearsal outlines.

DON'T miss any opportunity to organize to save time. Time is THE value of our day and no one respects a casual waste of it. Create count-down checklists for big projects that are on the horizon. If additional rehearsals are needed, makes these “family friendly” by organizing childcare or other family assistance that allows a choir member’s non-singing spouse to take care of family tasks or errands during the rehearsal period. Prepare calendars for songs, presentations, and events so that choir members can plan around choir life. Every layer of organization that you can add to your planning and projection for choir will pay dividends in this time-conscious culture.

As choir directors today, time is an issue for us as well as for our choir members. For this reason, these suggestions are not intended to add more work to our life, but to the contrary, these ideas are suggested to help us work “smarter” as well as to provide a way of energizing our planning and rehearsal process.