

Shadow Choir

Cleveland NPM Musicians Retreat

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Born from the pandemic, those churches that did not have singing for a long time, or those churches that did not have choirs to begin with. The idea is to build a choir from the ground up, but I would see it as a great way to recruit new people to be part of the music program, maybe not always as regular week to week choir members. Hopefully it will give the average pew person stronger confidence to participate more fully in the liturgy.

- A) Start with pulpit and bulletin announcements, keeping everything very low key, “if you’ve always wanted to sing in church but never knew how, come and join us, we’ll teach you. Keep the dynamics focused on small things repeated frequently, to build confidence and trust.
- B) They must be made to know that they will never have to sing alone or the group would never sing in public as a group unless they were REALLY well prepared. Promise that training sessions will never last longer than an hour. Always respect their time and commitment.
- C) Usually when working with a choir you spend 5 to 10 minutes warming up and the rest of the time on repertoire. When you start out and for a good while with a shadow choir most of the time is spent on warm-ups and the fundamentals of vocal technique, remembering that most of these people have never been singers and have always been **afraid to sing as they were never taught**. On a personal note it would be like me being put into a basketball team and being expected to score points. I was always involved with the arts as a kid and sports were out of my bailiwick. To this day I am not a sports man and have never been trained to be one. Playing basketball, baseball, or doing the high jump are not something that I would attempt as I know I would embarrass myself, and because of that I don’t really get involved. Most of the people you will be working with would be ones who are afraid of singing as they feel they would embarrass themselves. Always keep that in mind when working with them. This is why trust is so important.
- D) In the beginning you might get time within the hour to work on the antiphon from the responsorial psalm and the communion antiphon, but not much more.
 - a. So---Keep your focus on the basics:
 - b. proper alignment
 - c. proper control of breathing
 - d. freedom in phonation

- e. use of the body's resonators
- f. different types of articulation
 - legato
 - staccato
 - marcato
- g. extension of range

Doing these things by example and having them do them—as a group. The least amount of talking possible. These points are important. Take the time for them to experience them many times.

The Nitty Gritty

- A) Begin with body work. Most people bring their day with them, and will need time to “release” the tensions of the day.
- B) Stand tall and loose. Release the tension of the day. Slow even breaths.
- C) Breathe easy and deep concentrating on keeping the shoulders loose and low, paying attention to the motion of the spine, allowing them to elongate with each breath, letting the spine expand as we inhale from bottom to top. Let your ears fall between our shoulders as we reach out hands over the top of our heads gently guiding your head down.
- D) Once we've elongated the spines and loosened the necks. We imitate rag dolls or bobble heads. We not forward first, and then back., not too far or too fast. Then we gradually turn our chins from one shoulder to the other. Leading with our eyes and always releasing the stress slowly as we go. Finally, we shrug our shoulders. And do the exercise, “yes, no, maybe so.” Turn your head slowly one side, and then the other, extending the chin down to release tension in the neck. Use the word release rather than relax. Release seems to let the stress out, where relax makes you tense and be tighter.
- E) Senior citizen jumping jacks. Bring your hands together over your head and clap, counting as you go. 10 or 15 or good to get the blood flowing. Usually there is some laughing that goes along with this.
- F) Next work on alignment
 - a. feet spread shoulder width apart
 - b. weight balanced evenly over the arches of the feet
 - c. knees slightly flexed, this is one that often changes as singing progresses, becoming much tighter, keep an eye on this one
 - d. Pelvis tilted slight under and aligned with the knees
 - e. Shoulders opened wide and brought forward to align with the pelvis
 - f. head floating centered on the spine

g. chin neither forced down nor elevated

h. Breathing

Make it efficient and free

A deep silent inhalation, expanding at the gut, not raising the shoulders

Easy exhale in 4, 8, 12, 16 counts on an easy sibilant s or sh. Not a huge breath or a loud sound, but remember that we are concentrating on a greater control of the release. Sometimes do this until people run out of air. Extending the time and regulating the release of air.

G) Phonation

a. Low hum, teeth apart, lips closed, “aw” not a diphthong as in “o”

b. Vocal sounds using as few vowels as possible, might be helpful to stick to Latin, which only has 5 vowel sounds, as opposed to English which has 25

c. Move in a descending 5 note pattern, continually going down in half steps,

d. ee-eh-ah, placing vowels in front of it. M, v, n, going from closed vowels to open ones. You can make these up.

e.

H) Next work toward extending the range upward—SLOWLY! A little at a time. Using different articulations helps with this (marcato, staccato, legato)

I) Using these techniques, begin singing short responses for use during Mass, keep close attention to vowel sounds and how they are being produced. The group will grow and progress slowly at first, but in time they will become more proficient with singing and more confident.

J) Once they are more confident and have grown to trust you it will be time to open other doors in the music ministry. Given all the work you’ve done, don’t push them through. Slowly allow them to see that there are places for them in the ministry and support their choices. I remember an old music director who always told me when I was younger that, “Singing in the choir is not a life sentence.” Permit people to make their own choices. Be inviting, have fun. In the long run it will bear fruit.