

MUSIC SEMINAR FOR CHOIR DIRECTORS

MONDAY 1ST JULY 2019 AT REGINA PACIS COLLEGE MUTENGENE

PRESENTATION: CHOIR MANAGEMENT BY POLYCARP NUVI LOMAH

CHOIR MANAGEMENT can be referred to as dealing with the logistics and the control of the schedule of a choir and its activities. It can also involve organizing the individual singers and their voices, choir rules and their enforcement and the organization of choir apparel (dressing). Choir management also has the task of dealing with the finances of the choir, looking for sponsors etc.

STAKEHOLDERS IN CHOIR MANAGEMENT

In our local church setting choir management is in the hands of an elected group of choristers who form the executive body of the choir. These executive members can be further divided into two sub groups: The administrative bench that takes care of the administrative duties of the choir and the technical bench that takes care of its technical activities. The administrative bench of the choir is made up of the president/vice, secretary/vice, financial secretary, treasurer, disciplinarian etc while the technical bench is made up of the choir director and his or her team of technicians. These two sub groups carry out different functions which if well understood and managed will produce a very efficient choir. Two very prominent persons standing at the helm of these two benches are: the President on the administrative bench and the choir director on the technical bench. These two personalities and their team must work in synergy with much collaboration and understanding so as to produce an excellent choir. In this paper we will be looking at different managerial skills that these choir leaders have to exhibit in order for the choir to stand strong. To be a chorister in the first place is a herculean task demanding a lot of sacrifice of time, money and brain work and although we say choir management is in the hands of chosen leaders, you as a chorister have a big role to play to make the work of the managers easy. Therefore before joining a choir group you need to be aware of the task ahead of you and accept to follow the guiding principles that shall make you successful as a chorister. We shall begin by looking at some choir etiquettes which if exhibited by choristers will make the work of managing the choir easy (Remember that you become a chorister before being elected to be a leader). After that we shall discuss some tips for better choir management and at the end we shall have a workshop. It is no longer a secret that in most of our choirs there is always a bone of contention in the functions of the president and that of the choir director and this has caused the downfall of many choirs. So our workshop today shall center on the functions of these two leaders and how these two can handle their functions in order to have an exemplary choir. We shall also be examining some difficulties experienced in the management of

our various choirs and from this presentation come out with ways of overcoming these difficulties. We shall end with a plenary session during which we shall come up with resolutions that shall guide the effective management of our choirs.

CHOIR ETIQUETTES:

1. Attendance

Singing in a choir is a commitment to the director as to the other members of the choir. The choir counts on you being there. It entails a lot of sacrifice of your time to belong. It is a school and unless you become a very regular student you can hardly improve on your knowledge in that school. If you miss at least three out of about ten rehearsals, you might really need to reconsider your commitment and decision to join the choir. You have to take responsibility to attend regularly (and on time), to know your part, to stay aware of rehearsal schedules, to listen to the director's instructions, and so on.

2. Each Voice

Your voice is just as important as the next person's voice, and everyone has to get used to hearing everyone else. As a community choir with no audition requirement, the choir will necessarily have a wide range of skill levels and quality of voices – and that's fine. It's all too easy to let your choir director or other members of your part do all the work. Yes, the director is in charge, but the final result depends on every single individual in the choir. It's no good thinking that your fellow singers will back you up and cover you through the bits you don't know that well. If every singer in the choir thought that, there would be no choir!

3. Rehearsal Time

Three simple words: **be on time!** Arriving late is distracting to the director and other choir members and causes you to miss the warm-up, which is a very important part of rehearsal. It takes a while to build up a safe and creative atmosphere, but only a second to destroy it. If we're doing some focused warm up work, we don't want people wandering in half way through! It's true some people get stuck in traffic or have to come straight from work, but persistent latecomers aren't showing respect for their fellow choir members (or the work of the choir), and are often the ones who would benefit most from the voice training and stress-busting warm up! Communication is very important in cases of excuses for coming late or absence and this should be for very serious reasons e.g. sickness, job, and travels.

4. Strong Scents/ Allergies

Please be aware that many people are sensitive or allergic to strong scents. The deep breathing that accompanies singing worsens the effects of strong perfumes and other personal products.

Also be aware of any other allergies people might have and be respectful.

5. Teaching/Learning aids

Coming for rehearsals with some extra sheets of paper, a pen and most importantly a pencil is highly encouraged as you might always need to write down some important points that could help at home during personal revision. The pencil could be used to mark directions on your music copy especially for new learners. Please use pencils, not pens or highlighters except tape highlighter that can be easily removed.

6. Talking During Rehearsal

Choir singing is a sociable pastime and choirs are full of sociable people! The camaraderie in a choir is one of the most important aspects. Feel free to relax, chat, laugh with friends but it should be before and after rehearsal and during breaks NOT during rehearsal.

It's really easy to start up little conversations with your neighbour during rehearsal.

When this happens, the director has to either talk over you or wait until you're quiet. Chatter slows down rehearsal.

7. Practice at home is important especially when preparing for a concert, learning some difficult songs etc.

Choir members are encouraged to practice at home. It may be practicing the music or it can only be learning the words, reading the words out loud at home. It helps you concentrate on the music, if the words are familiar.

8. Generally:

- It's by paying attention to what you're doing that helps you to learn and improve. When the director points out that you're tipping your head back, then check in with your own body and see what that feels like. When your fellow alto complains that you're singing too loudly in their ear, check in with yourself and make a note of how it feels in that moment and what you can do next time.
- Some people find it very uncomfortable to be in the middle of a learning process. When you first start to learn a new song it can feel frustrating that you can't quite nail the tune. Even

when you've been singing a song for a while, you might still keep tripping over some of the words. Try not to get frustrated, but give yourself up to the process and trust that it will come out right in the end. Similarly, if the director's new structure for a song seems bizarre, trust that he/she knows what he/she is doing. Just throw yourself into these processes wholeheartedly and trust them, you'll surely come out successful.

- Always be attentive to the choir director (or you might miss your cue), the singers around you (you don't want to breathe at the wrong time), the overall choir sound (make sure your part is not louder than all the others), and what your own responsibilities are (don't miss your solo!).
- Respect: Respect for your fellow human beings and hence respect for what you and other choir members are doing and therefore respect for the choir as a whole. Choirs are all about team work. Remember what it was like when you first joined the choir – help out new members. If someone in your part is struggling, don't feel superior because you've nailed it – stand next to them and help them out gently.
- Paying attention to what you are hearing during rehearsal is very important. You can begin to hear when you are getting the notes right and when you are not. Listening to others in your part will help you stay in time, blend better and work as a unit. Reaching out to hear the other parts will help you stay in tune, enjoy and get a better understanding of how harmony works. And finally, listening to what the director has to say can only be a good thing!
- It's no good relying on the director to give you feedback all the time. It's also no good to just focus on those singers around you. It's much more pleasurable to reach out and try to get a sense of the whole choir. Hear the harmonies working, check the blend, get the volume balance of each part right, wait for the choir to take a single in-breath to start the next song, feel part of a creative team – a living organism.
- Sense of humor: Keep smiling when all around you are struggling. Laugh off the umpteenth time the director has pointed out that you're getting a phrase wrong. Find the humor in the man standing next to you who constantly sings the wrong note – loudly! Relax, be playful, make it fun. After all, although you take the whole choir thing seriously, it's only a bit of singing!

SOME CHOIR MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

As a choir leader, know that musical aptitude is just part of the set of skills you need in order to successfully lead your choir. Below are some skills that you will probably need to acquire in order to better manage your choir.

1. ORGANIZATION

Running a choir effectively takes good organizational skills. There's score preparation, rehearsal plans, performances and membership management for starters. All these elements take planning and administration to work well, which in turn keeps members happy and returning to the choir. The behind-the-scenes part of running a choir is far more time-consuming than actually turning up to rehearsals.

Make a concrete program for each rehearsal. If for example your rehearsal has to take 2 hours, you might plan take the first five or ten minutes for prayer/meditation on a bible verse, about 10 to 15mins for voice training then choose which pieces you want to rehearse and put them in order. Get one old piece for voice clearance and inspiration, and then you can progress from new to newer, ending again with a familiar song. Always making sure you keep the choir interested and engaged. Decide how much time you want to spend on each piece in advance and keep track of time as you go. Include one thing you can cut if you run short on time and one thing you'd do with an extra five minutes. In all don't forget to always include chatter time at the beginning and at the end of rehearsals.

2. DIPLOMACY

If there's one skill you will need as a choir leader it's diplomacy. Dealing with a group of people will inevitably involve coming across many different characters and preferences. It will be impossible to please all of them all of the time. When problems do arise it's essential to remain calm and deal with things in a fair and diplomatic way. A ranting and raving choir leader achieves nothing but alienating their singers. Diplomacy is not just needed to deal with complaints, it is also essential to have a good manner when dealing with general queries, either during the rehearsal or when members approach you elsewhere. Always give valid reasons for your answers which acknowledge the query and offer a solution, or explain why something is not possible. However trivial an issue might seem, never forget that it's important to that person.

Strive to be the strong, silent type. Generally in the school milieu, teachers who are least effective at maintaining discipline are those who shout the loudest and most often. The teachers who are obeyed and more respected are those who rarely or never raised their voices but are firm in action.

Only their stern gaze gets full attention. I'm not suggesting that you treat your adult singers like school kids, but you can very effectively employ the power of silence. I warn you though, it takes some guts if you're not used to it. When your choir finishes singing for a moment, and the inevitable chatter begins, you just stand there, ready to conduct (possibly with a conspiratorial glance to your accompanist) and wait. When you employ this technique for the first time, it will feel like an eternity, but stay strong. Make eye contact with the choir and let them know that you're ready to conduct. And then wait some more if necessary. The ones who cotton on to your readiness will "ssh" the chatterers until there is silence. This technique is very powerful because you don't undermine your authority by shouting or, worse, pleading with the choir to be quiet. After a while, the time needed to bring the choir to silence in this way will shorten and your singers will know that there isn't time to chat until they have a break. Don't forget, while you're employing this technique, to smile. It's not you versus them. They're just having fun, and anyway they're probably talking about the piece.

3. TIMEKEEPING

Keeping to time is one very important and necessary skill of a choir leader. It's essential that you are set up and ready for your rehearsal before your choir starts arriving. As hard as it can be with people coming in late, we've found that it's important that rehearsals start on time. If you let the start time drift, people will get used to that and start coming in even later. If you start on time, those coming in late will probably feel a bit awkward and make a note not to do so next time.

Of course, sometimes lateness is unavoidable as members with jobs and families have busy lives and may struggle to fit in choir activities, but as a rule starting on time is good for the whole choir. That is why making rehearsal plans is very important so as to achieve everything needed within the time available and not keep members late or leave them unsatisfied that they've not covered everything they needed to.

4. SELF-DISCIPLINE (TEACH BY EXAMPLE)

A choir leader is like a lamb standing on a lamb stand that shines and gives light to the whole house. Everybody looks up to the lamb in order to see. You must be the first to obey all rules and follow all instructions you give. It's a truism that choir is very time consuming and if you're not careful it might interfere in your many other activities including your family programs. Always make sure you look at all the tasks you need to achieve, break them down into manageable segments for each day and make sure you stick to a daily plan. Be realistic

when setting these tasks and allow yourself breaks. E.g. if you are a student is it possible to manage your program in such a way that you can be writing your exams and still lead your choir?

5. ENTHUSIASM

This is one of the most important skills for a choir leader to have. A motivated choir leader creates exciting opportunities, makes rehearsals enjoyable always strives to improve. All these attributes will be reflected back to you from your choir, who are much more likely to stay for the long haul and recommend the choir to their friends. If you are working alone it can be hard to motivate yourself. To maintain your drive and creativity, it's great to make contacts and meet other choir leaders. Unfortunately in many cases the greatest problem of choir leader is another choir leader and some rather than building enthusiasm, kill it not only in them but in others. You can never know everything and once you start feeling that you know too much or you spend your time finding faults and criticizing others rather than holding their hands so that they in turn hold yours where you are weak, you are bound not to grow. One of the most important virtues of a choir leader should be humility and willingness to learn even from those below you.

6. LEARN TO SAY NO

Whether your choir is amateur, charitable or professional, offers of engagements are very hard to turn down, but you're not doing yourself or your singers any favors if you end up with a glut of events in your calendar. This is particularly the case if a series of events requires very different repertoires. It is a difficult balance to strike. You'll always want to challenge your choir with new and interesting music to learn, some very difficult and demanding much concentration and time. So even if a proposal seems too good to let go, think carefully about the demands that it will place on you and your choristers. Will it bring out the best in you, or will you be guaranteeing a mediocre performance?

7. WORK LITTLE AND OFTEN

Most choir leaders have other jobs as well. Some are musicians, some are music teachers and others have jobs in non-musical fields. If that applies to you, it's unlikely that you have long, uninterrupted chunks of time to work on the management of your choir. If, like me, you are a bit of a perfectionist, this can lead to major procrastination. I have always been plagued by the mindset that unless I can finish a task to perfection, I may as well postpone starting it.

8. DELEGATE STUFF

You are, no doubt, an ace at what you do. Your singers worship the very ground you walk upon. Audiences rise to their feet as one, lauding you to the rooftops. We all like to think we are indispensable, but the sad fact is, we're not. Some overzealous choir directors have this feeling reason why in some choirs you always have that clash between the choir director and the president. Know that much of what we do could be done by others.

It is advisable to concentrate on the stuff that only you can do'. If you think through all the things you do for your choir, how many of those tasks can only be done by you?

Let's assume that you both manage and conduct your choir: there'll be things that only you can do, for example prepare a piece to conduct: concentrate on it and delegate any other. Handing off some activities might also help promote a sense of cohesion and discourage indispensability.

9. AUTOMATE STUFF

Many of us have formed group chats especially on Whatsapp and Facebook. This is quite good as it enables you communicate with your choristers and keep track of availability for performances and events, or share an online calendar so that your choir has an always-updated rehearsal and performance schedule. Group – chats has made online practice sessions possible. Your choir will know where to go to get the information they need without contacting you directly saving you and them time and making you look super-organized and professional.

Finally the different leaders should have a mastery of their job description and make sure you don't step in another leader's function. Respect of the other leaders working with you is very important!

WORKSHOP

1. Let's take some practical activities of a choir and look at the work that the different leaders have to put in for the activity to go through successfully

Role of administrative bench and technical bench in preparing a choir for

- a) Sunday masses and invitations for occasions like funerals, marriages etc
- b) Musical concert
- c) Choir's social events like births, deaths, choir come together, general meetings etc
- d) Choir projects e.g. buying of uniform, choir instruments.

2. Difficulties in the management of our choirs and some proposed solutions.