

GUIDELINES FOR CHOIR DIRECTORS

This section provides conducting guidelines and skills for choir directors. It includes information on (1) advanced conducting techniques, (2) selecting appropriate music, (3) making simple hymn arrangements, (4) teaching music to a choir and holding effective rehearsals, (5) principles of good singing, and (6) giving successful performances.

Skills for Conducting a Choir

Whether you conduct a congregation or a choir, your basic duties are the same: keep the singers singing together and help them interpret the music. A choir should sing with greater artistic refinement than a congregation, though, so you must use conducting skills beyond those needed to direct a congregation.

The skills you need to successfully conduct a choir are—

1. Effective preparatory beats.
2. Meaningful facial expressions.
3. Conducting with the left arm.
4. Knowing when to use a baton.

Using these skills, you can conduct a variety of tempos, dynamics, and musical styles. The choir can respond to your signals by singing with added feeling, making the music come alive for the listeners.

THE PREPARATORY BEAT

The preparatory beat and the moments just before it are when you get the music off to a successful start. As you take your place in front of the choir and raise your arms to conduct, make sure every member of the choir and the accompanist are ready to begin. In this brief moment, feel the rhythm and mood of the music. Feel the beat in proper tempo or count a measure of beats to yourself.

When all is ready, conduct the preparatory beat. Let this beat reflect your intentions for tempo, dynamics, and emotion. If the music is slow and solemn, the preparatory beat should be slow and give a feeling of solemnity. If the music is joyful or bold, the preparatory beat should show these moods. The choir can then respond from the very first note, singing with the musical expression you desire.

FACIAL EXPRESSION AND EYE CONTACT

Facial expression and eye contact are two of your most important tools. Use them constantly. To do this, you must know the music well enough to look away from it much of the time. Use your eyes and face to tell the choir what expression you want them to put in the music. Before the music begins, give an alert and encouraging look. When the music ends, show an expression of appreciation and approval.

USING THE LEFT ARM AND HAND

The left arm and hand are very important tools in conducting a choir. Here are some ways to use them:

1. Use both arms to give the preparatory beat and downbeat. Continue conducting with both arms for a full measure or more, letting your left arm mirror your right. Then drop your left arm to your side.

2. Use both arms for cutoffs and for mirroring the beat pattern for emphasis (especially when slowing or quickening the beat).
3. Use your left arm and hand to clarify the style, mood, or phrasing.
4. Sometimes one or more vocal parts do something different than what the rest of the choir is doing. Use your left hand to

signal instructions to the choir while your right arm conducts the beat. These hand signals are listed under “Choral Conducting Techniques” on page 75.

Using your left arm and hand can improve your communication with the choir. But don't overuse it. When you only need to conduct the beat, use your right arm, letting your left arm rest at your side.

USING A BATON

If you are conducting a large choir, a baton helps singers see what you are doing and stay together. But a baton cannot express what the hand can in interpreting the music and is not as useful with smaller groups.

Choral Conducting Techniques

Musical Characteristic	Conducting Technique
Loud (<i>forte</i> or <i>f</i>)	Use a large beat pattern, holding arms away from the body. Hold the left palm up, or let the left arm mirror the beat pattern for emphasis.
Soft (<i>piano</i> or <i>p</i>)	Use a small beat pattern, with arms close to the body. Hold left palm down.
Fast (<i>allegro</i>)	Use a quick beat pattern, with sharp motions and crisp bounces on the beats.
Slow (<i>andante</i>)	Use a slow beat pattern, with graceful motions and soft bounces on the beats.
Getting louder (<i>crescendo</i> or <i>cresc.</i>)	Use a beat pattern increasing in size. Hold the left palm up and push it upward, moving the arms away from the body.
Getting softer (<i>diminuendo</i> or <i>dim.</i>)	Use a beat pattern decreasing in size. Hold the left palm down and push it downward, moving the arms closer to the body.
Speeding up (<i>accelerando</i> or <i>accel.</i>)	Make the beat pattern faster, with motions becoming more crisp and the beat more pronounced.
Slowing down (<i>ritardando</i> or <i>rit.</i>)	Make the beat pattern slower, with motions becoming more graceful and the beat less pronounced.

Musical Characteristic	Conducting Technique
Solemn, reverent, or legato	Use a smooth, rounded beat pattern with soft bounces on the beat.
Bright, joyful, or staccato	Use an animated, angular beat pattern, with sharp bounces on the beat.
One vocal line is more important than the others	Use the left hand to signal palm up to the important vocal group, palm down to the other groups.
One part of the choir sings while the other is silent	Face the group that is to sing.
Part of the choir cuts off while the other part continues to sing	Before the cutoff, look at the group that is to cut off. Give the cutoff signal with the left hand (the right hand continues the beat pattern), and then face the group that is to continue singing.
The silent part of the choir joins the singing part	First look at the singers who are to begin singing; then do a preparatory beat with your left hand and bring them in. Mirror the beat pattern with your left hand for a measure or more.
Part of the choir sustains a note while the other part sings other notes	Hold your left hand, palm up, in the direction of the group that is sustaining. Continue the beat pattern with your right hand.

Choosing the Right Music

Choosing the right music means choosing music that is right for the occasion and right for the choir.

MUSIC THAT IS RIGHT FOR THE OCCASION

Most choir performances will be in sacrament meetings, but there will also be other occasions when a choir might be asked to perform and would need to sing music appropriate for the setting.

Sacrament Meeting

Sacrament meeting music should enhance the sacred nature of the occasion. Usually music for sacrament meeting should be our Latter-day Saint hymns. When you use other music, choose a text with an appropriate gospel message and music that reflects a religious quality rather than a popular or worldly style. It is better when the pieces are short and uncomplicated. By coordinating with the music chairman and the bishopric, you can choose music to fit the theme of the meeting or the message of the speakers.

Other Occasions

A choir might also be asked to sing for stake conferences, firesides, funerals, talent nights or other activities, and community

events. Considering the season, theme, or purpose of the meeting or event will help you choose the best music. Stake conferences and funerals will have the same sacred, spiritual nature that sacrament meetings have. Firesides, too, can be very sacred but they can also concentrate on more seasonal subjects. Activities and community events can give a choir an opportunity to perform popular selections (make sure they adhere to the standards of the Church).

MUSIC THAT IS RIGHT FOR THE CHOIR

Consider the following when choosing music for the choir.

Size of the Choir

For a small choir (eight to twelve voices) or for a children's choir, music written in unison or in two parts may be best. For larger choirs, choose unison, two-, three-, or four-part music. If your choir is small, avoid music that needs a big, full sound to be effective. Don't use the Mormon Tabernacle Choir as your guide for choosing music. Music meant for large, well-trained choirs would be difficult for most ward choirs to perform well. You can enhance a small adult choir by occasionally having a group of children or youth sing with them.

Ability of the Singers

Consider the ability of the singers in your choir. Avoid music with notes that are too high or low for them to sing comfortably. Be cautious about using music with fast-moving notes, difficult rhythms, or musical lines with many wide skips between notes. You may also want to stay away from unusual harmonies or counterpoint (music which has vocal parts moving independently of each other).

Voice Mix

Consider the number of singers you have for each vocal part. If you have a small number of men, you will weaken their sound by dividing them into bass and tenor sections. It may be better to choose or arrange music that unites the men's voices into one part, usually the bass part.

Variety

Choose music that brings variety to a choir's rehearsals and performances. Solemn hymns, joyful anthems, music for special occasions, seasonal music, patriotic tunes, and inspirational songs all have a place in a choir's repertoire. Choose music not only that you like but that the choir likes; choir members will be faithful and enthusiastic if they enjoy what they are singing.

Adding Variety to Hymn Singing

Frequency of Rehearsals and Performances

Choose music that the choir can learn in the time available for rehearsal. If the choir performs often, choose music that is easy to learn. If you choose more challenging music, make sure to rehearse it many weeks before performing it. When you choose music that the choir can learn in the given rehearsal time, singers will be confident enough to add spirit and emotion to their performance.

Ability of the Accompanist

Be sure your accompanist can play the music that you choose. Allow plenty of time for the accompanist to learn the music before rehearsal.

Most of the music a choir sings is hymns sung as they appear in the hymnbook. Sometimes, though, varying the way a hymn is sung adds interest for both listener and singer and gives fresh understanding of the hymn. These are some ways to vary how hymns are sung:

1. Sing in unison or two parts. Many hymns sound elegant when sung in unison by men, women, or both. Other hymns are better in a two-part combination using the soprano and alto parts. Women or men might sing both parts, or men might sing melody and women sing alto.
2. Change the part arrangement from SATB (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) to all men (TTBB) or all women (SSA or SSAA). When changing parts from SATB to TTBB, use the same notes and assign basses the bass part, baritones the melody (at an octave lower), second tenors the tenor part, and first tenors the alto part (at actual pitch rather than an octave lower).
Change SATB to SSA by assigning first sopranos the soprano part, second sopranos the alto part, and altos the tenor part. For SSAA, raise the bass part an octave for the second altos.
3. Use a solo or a group of voices (*a*) on the melody with piano or organ accompani-

ment, (*b*) with the choir humming voice parts, or (*c*) without accompaniment.

4. Have a children's or youth choir sing with an adult choir or sing a verse or more by themselves.
5. Have a quartet (a singer from each section or all men or all women) sing a verse.
6. Have the congregation join in singing the last verse of the hymn.
7. Have a violin or flute play a verse alone, with the choir humming, or play a descant while the choir sings.
8. Vary the dynamics, singing one verse louder or softer than the others.
9. Vary the tempo by singing a verse slightly faster or slower than the others.
10. Use a specially prepared piano or organ accompaniment as the singers sing the melody in unison.
11. Sing a verse (usually the last) in a different key, moving up a half or a whole step.
12. Combine these suggestions. For example, have the choir sing verse one in unison and verse two in SATB; in verse three have the sopranos sing the first phrase, altos join for the second, tenors for the third, and basses for the last; have a soloist sing verse four; and have SATB again in verse five.

Before the Rehearsal

Before the rehearsal you should prepare yourself, plan the rehearsal, and prepare the rehearsal place.

PREPARE YOURSELF

To prepare yourself, study the music thoroughly. Decide how to interpret the music and make pencil markings to help you teach and direct it. You need to learn the music well enough so you can look up as you conduct. The following steps will help you prepare:

1. Read the text aloud to understand its message and its mood.
2. Go through the music, noting the time signature, the tempo markings (how fast or slow), the dynamic markings (how loud or soft), and any other expression marks. You may want to circle or underline them.
3. Go through the music again, saying the words in rhythm as you conduct or tap a steady beat.
4. Learn the melody line and sing it while conducting, following the tempo and dynamics indicated on the music. Come to a feeling of the style and mood of the music. When adding feeling to the

music, don't overemphasize any one aspect. Keep your interpretation simple.

5. Become familiar with each of the vocal parts, circling any notes or rhythms that may be difficult. Difficult passages will need special attention during rehearsals.
6. Find places in the music where one vocal line begins or ends independently of the other lines or where one line becomes more important than the others. Mark these places in the music so you can signal the singers at the appropriate time.
7. Practice conducting the music from beginning to end, using good technique and expressive gestures. Picture the choir in front of you, visualizing where each section of singers will be seated. Practice facing or gesturing in the direction of the section that will need cues from you. Conducting in front of a mirror may help improve your skills.
8. You could meet with the accompanist before the rehearsal to discuss your interpretation of the music and practice conducting with the accompaniment.

PLAN THE REHEARSAL

To efficiently use your rehearsal time, you need to have a plan. Look at the choir's performance schedule and decide which pieces the choir needs to rehearse. List the titles and page numbers of the pieces and how much time you will spend rehearsing each one. Tell your accompanist what you plan to do. Sometimes pieces will need more time than you planned for; be flexible enough to let rehearsals meet the needs of the choir.

PREPARE THE REHEARSAL PLACE

Work with your priesthood leaders well in advance to schedule the rehearsal time and place. Make sure choir members know about the rehearsal. Then be sure the building will be unlocked at the scheduled time.

Arrange the seating so that every member of the choir can see you and hear the piano or organ. Usually the sopranos are seated on your left as you face the choir and are near the basses; altos are usually by the tenors. But any arrangement that works for your choir is fine.

Arrive early to make arrangements, lay out the music, and greet members as they arrive.

The Rehearsal

Not only are rehearsals a time to prepare for performances, they also help choir members develop the sense of unity and friendship so important for a successful choir. When the rehearsal is positive and enjoyable, members attend faithfully. Since nonmembers and less-active members may be invited to sing, choir rehearsals can be a time of fellowship and learning. A choir fulfills its purpose when each member experiences personal growth through singing in the choir. You can help this happen through effective, enjoyable rehearsals.

THE REHEARSAL AGENDA

The following is a typical rehearsal agenda for a ward choir:

1. Opening prayer (assigned by the choir president)
2. Announcements by the choir president
3. Introduction of new members by the choir president
4. Other choir business
5. Rehearsal time, which usually includes:
 - a. A short warm-up period, using warm-up exercises, a familiar hymn, or another simple piece of music (for example, “I Need Thee Every

Hour” [*Hymns*, no. 98] or “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow” [*Hymns*, no. 242]).

- b. More difficult anthems and other challenging pieces.
- c. New music.
- d. Other music in need of work.
- e. A piece the choir does well.

HOW TO REHEARSE A NEW PIECE OF MUSIC

Following are some suggested steps for rehearsing a new piece of music. All of these steps do not need to be done in a single rehearsal; the process may be spread over several weeks.

Give an Overview

The overview gives choir members a general feeling for the music. Read, or have someone in the choir read, the text aloud and briefly discuss its message. Next let the choir sing or hum through the entire piece. Then briefly discuss the unique qualities, interesting elements, and mood and style of the music.

Teach the Notes

The best way to teach the notes is to divide the singers by vocal group (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) for sectional rehearsals. Sectional

rehearsals save time and keep the singers busy learning their parts instead of waiting for their turn to rehearse. Although it is best to send each group to a separate room, it may be more practical to divide the choir into two groups, men and women. An assistant director can help with sectionals. If it is not possible to divide, work with each section of singers in turn while the others hum their notes.

The following are guidelines to help you teach new music to the choir:

1. Divide the piece into smaller parts and teach it segment by segment. To divide the piece, find places where natural breaks occur or divide the piece into segments of one or two pages.
2. For each segment of music, take each vocal group through its part while the notes are played on the piano or organ. The singers may be able to hear their notes better if the accompanist plays them in octaves. The singers can hum or sing *ah* while learning the notes.
3. Teach troublesome rhythms by having the choir clap or say the words in the proper rhythm.
4. Teach difficult notes by singing or playing them while the choir listens.

Then have the singers repeat what they hear. Try singing a difficult passage five or six times in a row or very slowly.

5. While one group learns its notes, have the other groups study theirs or hum them to hear how they harmonize with the rest of the choir.
6. While the singers learn the notes, have the accompanist play the vocal lines rather than the accompaniment. To find out how well the singers know their notes, have them sing without the piano or organ.
7. When each vocal group can sing the segment of music, join two groups together (the basses and tenors or the sopranos and altos). Add a third group and then the fourth. Listen for wrong notes or other problems, correct them, and move on to the next segment of music.

Put It Together

When each section knows its notes, put all the elements together. Direct the choir through the entire piece, still listening for problems. Give direction to the singers concerning tempo, dynamics, and interpretation.

Use most of the time rehearsing those parts of the music that need attention. This is the time to pay attention to the details of the music, making sure the technical aspects are in place.

Polish the Performance

When the technical elements are worked out, polish the number by focusing on balance, blend, and interpretation. This will add artistic refinement and musical feeling to the choir's performance.

Give a Review

Before ending a rehearsal in which the choir has learned a new song, have the choir sing the song one last time. Then review the new piece in each rehearsal until the performance because some relearning will be needed.

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESSFUL REHEARSALS

1. Repeat only if improvement is needed, making sure choir members understand the purpose of the repetition. Instead of practicing entire pieces, concentrate on strengthening difficult passages.
2. Move the rehearsal along. Talk as little as possible, sing a lot, and don't waste time.
3. When rehearsing new music, don't stop the choir too often. Constant interruptions exasperate choir members and take time away from practicing. Rather than stop for problems, call instructions to the choir while they sing. Work on

one or two problems and save others for the future. For example, if you decide to perfect the notes, ignore mistakes in pronunciation, breathing, or dynamics. Keep in mind that some problems correct themselves through repeated singing of the piece.

4. Keep your instructions short and to the point. When you stop the choir, explain what the problem is, how to solve it, where to resume singing, and then have the accompanist play the note each section begins on.
5. Learn to give instructions by referring to page, line, and measure number ("Altos, please sing starting on page two, line three, second measure"). Always use musical terms the choir understands.
6. Encourage choir members to ask you for help when they need it.
7. Be enthusiastic in praising the choir and positive in pointing out mistakes. Compliment the singers often and let them know you appreciate their hard work. Be tactful when discussing problems; give general criticisms rather than singling out one person. Work hard with the choir, but have fun too. Develop positive leadership qualities that will make the singers want to sing their best for you.

Principles of Good Singing

8. Generally you should not sing with the group. Mouth the words noiselessly during rehearsals and performances and listen to the choir.
9. From time to time, prepare the choir for performances by having them stand to rehearse.
10. Avoid fatigue and vocal strain by taking a short break halfway through the rehearsal. Announcements could be made during this break.
11. Set and keep a regular rehearsal schedule. Keeping the same schedule year round is important to the choir's stability. Even though individual members might take vacation, choirs should not.
12. Develop an attendance policy for the choir. Members should always ask to be excused when they cannot attend, and only choir members who attend an adequate number of rehearsals should expect to perform. Explain this policy early to avoid misunderstandings.

Good singing includes correct posture, breathing, tone quality, blend, balance, and diction. Every director should teach these principles and continually remind the singers of them. When one singer improves, the entire choir improves.

POSTURE

The correct posture for singing is standing with feet slightly apart, back comfortably straight, and head held easily erect. The shoulders are back and down, the chest and rib cage are high. Singers should hold the music up, arms away from their bodies, so they can see the director just above it. Singers should stand without stiffness or tension, the body alert but relaxed. If singers are seated, they should sit upright and away from the back of the chair.

When you direct, hold your body in an example of good posture as a reminder to the choir.

BREATHING

Proper breathing is essential to good singing; it helps the singer develop beautiful tone quality, sustain musical phrases, and sing consistently in tune. When singers breathe,

they should open the throat and inhale deeply, filling the lungs to capacity. As they sing, they should let their abdominal muscles support and control air flow. There should never be a tightness in the throat; an open throat is essential for a free, relaxed tone.

As a director you decide where the choir should breathe—usually between phrases or at a comma or period—and the singers breathe together. In longer passages singers should stagger their breathing in order not to break the flow. Singers may want to mark their music with a pencil at the points where they should breathe.

TONE QUALITY

The sounds singers produce are called *tones*. When singers have poor tone quality, the sound is thin and breathy, has a nasal quality, or is unsteady. Good tone quality sounds resonant, rich, and precise. These are some ways to develop good tone quality:

1. Sing with an open, relaxed throat. Think of using body energy to sing and consider the throat only as an open tube.
2. Support the breath with a firm diaphragm. This eliminates wasted air that creates a breathy tone.

3. Keep the tone vigorous and firm, even in soft singing.
4. Do not think of the vocal tone as coming from the chest or the throat; think of it as coming from high in the head. Try to focus it there for a rich, resonant sound.
5. Carefully shape and control the vowel sound. All singers should shape the vowel the same way.

BLEND AND BALANCE

When a choir blends well, no individual voice stands out but there is a unified choral sound. When a choir is well-balanced, no

section stands out either. The following are some ways to achieve blend and balance:

1. Ask singers to listen carefully to those around them and try to match the sound they hear.
2. Stress uniform pronunciation of vowels and words and legato singing.
3. Make sure each section is heard clearly and in proper relationship to the others. For example, the altos should not be louder than the other singers unless their part has more importance in the music. The melody is the most important and should always be heard clearly.

4. Notice how the size of each vocal section affects balance. If there are only a few basses, they may need to sing louder or the other sections sing softer to create a balanced sound.

DICTION

When singers have good diction, they clearly enunciate the words they sing. Good diction is essential for the audience to hear the words and understand the message.

The Performance

The choir spends most of its energy and time rehearsing, but it exists to perform. The best choirs rehearse and perform regularly. Weekly rehearsals and at least two performances a month are suggested for ward choirs. A performance at every sacrament meeting is even better.

Always strive for musical excellence and spirituality. Even with limited talent the choir can be well-balanced, well-blended, and in tune. If each singer focuses on worshipping the Lord and inspiring the listener, the choir can enhance the spirituality of sacrament meetings.

Following are guidelines for successful performances:

1. Hold a brief warm-up session before the performance. If this is not possible,

have the choir sing prelude music for the meeting. This warms the voices and sets a worshipful mood for the meeting.

2. Stress good appearance. Singers should wear appropriate dress and avoid making distracting movements while they sing.
3. Before the meeting, distribute the music and clarify the order of the numbers.
4. When it is time to perform, you and the accompanist take your places. You signal the choir to stand and after the song you signal them to be seated. Then you and the accompanist return to your seats.
5. Ignore mistakes during the performance. If a major mistake occurs and the singers cannot continue, stop the music, tell the choir where to start, and begin again at that point.

Ingredients of a Successful Choir

In summary, these are the ten ingredients of a successful choir:

1. Regular rehearsals
2. Short, work-intensive rehearsals
3. Learnable, enjoyable music
4. An enthusiastic, well-prepared director and accompanist
5. Dedicated choir officers
6. Support from priesthood leaders
7. Regular performances
8. Growth in vocal skills
9. Unity and fellowship
10. Spiritual rewards and joy in service