

Chapter 2: Running a choir

Contents

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Interviews and auditions | 3 |
| Auditions | 3 |
| Preparation | 4 |
| Interview | 5 |
| Selection choir? | 7 |
| Recruitment | 8 |
| Before recruiting | 8 |
| Who should join a choir | 9 |
| Disability | 10 |
| Recruiting methods | 10 |
| Retaining members | 12 |
| Children and Sunday School | 13 |
| Choir practices | 14 |
| Preparation | 14 |
| Time | 14 |
| Attendance | 15 |
| Time-keeping | 16 |
| Place | 16 |
| Structure | 17 |
| Donkeywork | 17 |
| Leadership | 17 |
| Some basic principles | 17 |
| Winning respect | 18 |
| Leadership role | 18 |
| Admitting mistakes | 18 |

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Setting dates for anthems | 19 |
| Dealing with choir | 19 |
| Introduction | 19 |
| Problem choristers | 20 |
| The foghorn | 20 |
| The arguer | 20 |
| Past sell-by date | 21 |
| Sweet eating | 21 |
| Feuds and arguments | 21 |
| Allocating solos | 22 |
| Practical issues | 22 |
| Choir robes | 22 |
| Being equipped | 24 |
| Some theory | 24 |
| Human resources management | 24 |
| Motivation | 24 |
| Maslow | 25 |
| Dealing with the Congregation | 27 |
| Education | 27 |
| Feedback | 27 |
| Choir v music group | 27 |
| Modern music | 27 |
| Outreach music | 28 |
| Adverse comments | 29 |

Introduction

Being a good organist does not necessarily mean that you are a good choirmaster.

Singing, conducting and choir training are skills that need to be learned separately from learning to play the organ. Moving both hands up and down in time to the music is not conducting. It is unlikely that an organist will be competent in singing, conducting and choir training unless he has had lessons in them. Such training may be complemented by reading books and watching experts, but there is no substitute for having personal lessons.

The musical skills for a singer, conductor and choir trainer are outside the scope of this book, beyond saying that someone with such skills will know:

- the correct body position when singing;
- how to sing from the diaphragm;
- what diphthongs are, and how to sing them;
- how vowel sounds affect perceived pitch;
- exactly where final consonants are sounded;
- how to give a clear up-beat and down-beat in conducting;
- how to conduct using each hand independently;
- when to change the vowel sound to improve tone;
- the different periods of music;
- and much more.

In addition to musical skills, the good choirmaster needs to have the skills of a:

- teacher;
- administrator;
- counsellor; and
- bible scholar.

This chapter deals only with the personnel skills of a choirmaster.

Interviews and auditions

Auditions

To secure a good appointment, it is necessary to submit to an interview and other checking. You may reasonably be asked for references, to take a choir practice and to play a piece on the organ as well as being interviewed.

For the choir practice, you may assume that the choir has been packed for the occasion and that they have been told to behave. Always smile when introduced to the choir and begin by saying that you are pleased to be with them. You will probably be asked to direct them in an anthem. Remember that on this occasion your goal is not to produce a beautiful anthem, but to show them your skills.

Always thank the choir before you leave.

Preparation

An interview starts long before you attend. You should copy everything you send in, including the completed application form.

Write a CV about yourself and send it with the application form, regardless of whether requested. This gives:

- your name, address, date of birth, telephone number, e-mail and marital status;
- qualifications;
- achievements (such as published articles, major performances);
- list of positions, starting with the most recent;
- brief note on other work and interests.

For each position, you should give a start and finish date, job title, and note your main responsibilities. All this can be written on a single side of A4 paper.

Know the church. Visit a service before the interview, preferably before anyone realises who you are. Count the number of people in the choir and congregation. Take away any magazines or notices you can find. Look at any website.

If you know any organists who live near the area, ask them what they know. Don't contact the previous organist, even if you know him. It could prejudice your chances if that gets back.

Prepare a folder of documents to take to the interview including:

- copies of application form, CV, and job advert;
- any certificates of music qualifications;
- copies of any of your own arrangements or compositions;
- copies of choir newsletters;
- sample hymn lists you have compiled;
- any articles or reports you have prepared;

and any other documents which may seem relevant.

For the interview, dress smartly, however Bohemian your normal appearance is. You wish to convey that you are taking the interview seriously. Appear confident and polite. Smile as soon as you see the interviewers, and greet them with a firm

but friendly "good afternoon". They have yet to ask you a single question, but will have already drawn some conclusions.

Make sure you know where the church is or wherever the interview is being held, and allow plenty of time to arrive there early. Appear at least ten minutes early.

Interview

An interview is ideally conducted by a small group, perhaps three people. Fewer can lead to prejudice while more becomes unwieldy. An interview is traditionally structured in this format:

- brief introductory remarks to relax everyone;
- general questions asked of all candidates;
- specific questions prompted by your form or CV;
- tougher questions;
- your turn to ask them questions.

However, organists are usually interviewed by church officials who do not always follow conventions used elsewhere, so do not be surprised if the format proves to be completely different.

Ideally, most interview questions should be open questions, such as "how" or "why" rather than "what". Keep your answers brief. Never comment that something is a daft question. Be relaxed but attentive, and smile.

Do not allow an interview to finish without asking your questions. A relationship is always a two-way street. Ask questions even if you already know the answers. Questions an organist may wish to ask include:

- why did the previous organist leave?
- (if he left some time ago) why was the vacancy not filled sooner?
- how many regular members of the choir are there?
- how many were in the choir last Sunday? [this may be significantly less than the previous answer]
- how many choir members are children?
- have there been any disagreements between the vicar and choir?
- were there disagreements between the previous organist and anyone?
- what hymn book do you use?
- which orders of service do you use?
- do you plan to change your hymn book or liturgy?
- at which services am I expected to play?

- how much pay is offered?
- who chooses the hymns?
- how many weddings and funerals do you have?
- what fee is provided for them?
- is there a worship committee?
- if so, what are its responsibilities and powers, and will I be expected to be on it?
- is there a music group?
- for which services do they play?
- what are the main issues facing your church?

Ask to see past music lists or hymn lists (even if you have already acquired one).

We recommend that you ask for contact details of the previous organist or organists to discuss the church with him, whatever reason for his leaving. The church takes up references on you; you are entitled to take up a reference on the church. Ask your predecessor:

- is the vicar co-operative?
- is the congregation appreciative?
- is the choir reliable?
- what problems did you have?
- how did you resolve them?

You should seek to have a conversation, possibly by meeting privately, rather than just get tick-box answers.

Watch out for the halo effect. This indicates the main bugbear of the previous organist. If he was late or rude or inconsiderate, you will be quizzed on that particular aspect, and your appointment will largely depend on how far you seem not to have his failings. This is poor interviewing, but it happens in the best-run organisations, and churches are not always the best-run organisations.

If the interview starts with a long speech about the church or what they are looking for, or they have difficulty of thinking of any questions, they are probably not certain of what they want or may be full of their own self-importance. Another failing by interviewer or candidate is spending far too long on your other interests.

A bad interview does not necessarily indicate a bad job, but you should know what you are up against. Similarly a difficult interview does not mean that you will not be appointed. You could be impressing them without realising it.

However if it becomes clear that the job is not worth a candle, stop the interview and make clear that you are withdrawing and say why. It may make them think about how to treat organists in the future.

Barry Rose was the first organist of Guildford Cathedral, appointed at 25 without formal qualifications. He created a choir from nothing and made it one of the finest in the country. However his interview was a disaster, as he recounts in *The Beat is Irrelevant* (Guildford Cathedral Old Choristers' Association, Guildford Cathedral). He had already argued about whether the post could be combined with school teacher and whether to have daily services, when Dr H K Andrews started to question him about how he would interpret a piece by Palestrina. "I got very cross and said, 'shouldn't we be talking about how you're going to get a choir going within a few months? You won't have anybody at Guildford until September, and the consecration is already fixed for May next year, and you've got to have the whole thing set up, the organ installed and everything.' In the end frustration took over. I said, 'we're wasting each other's time', and I went off and left them to it." Fortunately the cathedral provost had been impressed, and brought him back.

Selection choir?

You have now been appointed and must get on with running a choir. The first consideration is what type of choir you are expected to run.

There are two broad methods for admitting singers to a choir:

- selection; and
- non-selection.

Selection means that a person may only become a member of the choir if the person passes an audition or otherwise demonstrates sufficient talent or potential to be admitted.

Non-selection means that the choir admits almost anyone, and you train them up.

Generally cathedrals and the larger more traditional parish churches use selection, while many other churches use non-selection. Non-selection may be appropriate in churches with no choir or a poor choir. It will make the choir bigger sooner, but may not necessarily be better.

The distinction between the two approaches is not as great as may first appear. In a selection choir, members will still learn and be trained. It can be surprising how many talented and experienced singers have serious gaps in their musical knowledge. In a non-selection choir, it is usually necessary to spend some time with an individual before admitting them, even if just to find which part they should sing.

Nevertheless, you should be clear at the outset which sort of choir you are running. This is a policy which must be agreed with the minister, and understood by the choir itself and the wider church.

You should also be sure in yourself that you have the right aptitude to train and run a non-selection choir.

You should also remember that amateurs frequently have more “attitude” than professionals, and can be more likely to argue with you. Professional musicians turn up and just do what you ask.

Recruitment

Any guidance on running a choir presupposes that you have a choir to run. Recruiting people to join and stay is a problem with most choirs.

We are assuming that it is the church’s wish that you have a choir. If the vicar and church council (or their equivalent) are in favour, you go ahead. There may be a few mutterings from Philistine malcontents, but we deal with that separately.

Before recruiting

Before recruiting members to the choir, you should ensure that you have a choir worth recruiting to. While some people may be persuaded to help set up a new choir, most recruits want to join something which is already successful. Even if you have just a hopeless handful, you can still:

- have choir practices;
- start and finish them on time;
- perform simple anthems (see below);
- be positive to the choir;
- create a social dimension;
- run the choir efficiently; and
- ensure it is properly resourced.

A choir is not sustained on a diet of hymns. There must be anthems also. These need not be difficult. Indeed they should not be difficult until you have adequate resources. The anthem may be in two parts or unison. It could be as simple as finding a hymn not in the repertoire, learning it, and singing it with the organ filling in any missing parts.

The point to emphasise is that the choir must already be functioning before recruiting.

Consider simple hymns and songs where you can provide an interesting accompaniment. Always keep the music within the limits of the choir’s capabilities, but keep them performing.

Never tell a choir it is bad, however true that may be. Choristers are like plants: they bloom from sunshine not beatings with a big stick. Do not say, “this choir is

hopeless, we must get in some decent singers before we can do some proper music”. Instead say, “this choir is the basis for what I hope will be a larger choir”.

Never criticise your predecessor (or successor for that matter). Acknowledge the work of those who have gone before you. There is nothing to be gained by attacking someone no longer there. Doing so will diminish your reputation and antagonise members who will have shown loyalty to your predecessor and be rightly annoyed by your uncharitable remarks.

At some point a chorister will say “but Fred told us to sing this differently”. You point out that Fred is no longer running the choir, you are. There are different schools of singing just as there are different routes to the same place, and there are good reasons for your way. Never say that Fred was wrong.

Who should join a choir

This depends on whether you run a selection choir or non-selection choir, as explained on page 7.

It is still widely, but wrongly, believed that music is a “gift” bestowed on the privileged few, despite overwhelming evidence from educational research that anyone who can speak can be taught to sing.

You should not accept people into the choir unless they are prepared to attend both practices and services. This may seem blatantly obvious, but it is surprising how many choirmasters are asked if Johnny can attend Friday practices even though he is playing football on Sunday mornings. The answer is no. You are running a choir not a child-minding club. It is reasonable to allow a person to attend a few practices to get the feel of the choir or to overcome a crisis of confidence, but this should never start to become a permanent arrangement.

A question which frequently arises is whether choir members must be Christians. The answer is no. It is normally advisable that the person who leads the choir must be a Christian as he is exercising a Christian ministry, leading worship and representing the church. But that is not the position for a choir member. Someone who is anti-Christian is unlikely to want to join a church choir anyway, but such people are surprisingly few. Most people are tolerant or apathetic about the church.

There is no evidence that a non-believer sings sacred music less well than a believer. Atheists like Berlioz wrote beautiful church music. The issue is one of competence rather than spirituality. The church need be no more concerned on this matter than it should be about the spirituality of the man who checks the fire extinguishers or repairs the photocopier.

But there is another reason for including non-believers in church choirs. A choir is a powerful place to bring people to faith. Music breathes life into words of Jesus’ salvation and of God’s love. A choir brings singers into regular worship where scripture is read, prayers are said and the gospel proclaimed. They are in the regular company of believers. Hundreds of Christians have come to faith through choir membership. Indeed one of the authors of this book came to faith through involvement in church music. Having climbed that ladder himself, he is not prepared to kick it away so that others cannot follow.

Disability

You should accommodate disabled people into the choir as far as possible. Indeed the church could be in breach of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 if it fails to do so. The commonest example is excusing people with mobility problems, such as leg and joint problems, from processing or standing for long periods. Let them take their place before the service starts and sing while seated.

People with sight problems can be accommodated by producing enlarged photocopies of music, but note the copyright implications. Our experience is that publishers are very co-operative in allowing enlarged copies for these purposes.

You should be reluctant to let people with serious learning difficulties join a choir as they are so time-demanding that they will bring choir practices to a grinding halt. Sometimes they may wish to join a choir so that they can wear robes, process, stand at the front, and generally “be someone”. This is a pastoral problem rather than a musical one, and you may need pastoral assistance. A possible solution is to designate them as an associate chorister who “sings nicely” in the congregation. You can give them a badge to wear and possibly provide music and talk to them. That meets their pastoral need without compromising your choir. But do not patronise and do not be dishonest.

Other than for a specific disability, you should be reluctant to make special provisions for choir members. They are either choir members who attend practices and services and do what you say, or they are not.

Many people are discouraged from joining a choir because they are tone deaf. It cannot be said too strongly that tone deafness is not a medical condition. Research shows that anyone who can talk normally can be taught to sing in tune.

Recruiting methods

People join a choir because they are attracted to what it offers. They may be reluctant to join because of the commitment. Successful recruitment therefore involves promoting the attractions and addressing the reluctance. In short, recruitment is about relationships.

The most successful way to promote success is to be successful already, or at least to appear to be. That is why you should get the choir singing anthems and having practices, however small and weak the choir is. People will join something which is successful, not something which is falling apart. A choir which is already large, performing a wide range of beautiful music, performing it well, enjoying happy practices, and having a good social life will attract new members.

Simply putting a notice in the notice sheet or church magazine advertising for members is unlikely to have much response. The best recruiting method is to approach people personally. Identify good singers in the congregation and ask them. They may not say yes immediately as many church members will need to think about it and get used to the idea of fulfilling a new church role. Do not force the issue, as sometimes people say no, and then come back many months

or even years later to say yes. You have planted the seed of the idea, and not all seed falls on the rocks (though it may sometimes seem that way).

It can be effective to invite others to join the choir just for a carol service or major work and then be free to leave. Not only do you have an augmented choir for these significant occasions, but some will stay as permanent members.

For children, it is productive to go into schools and promote the idea of singing in a choir. The church has much to offer in this field, and we should not be afraid of promoting the church in an area where the church is a recognised leader.

In 1994, educationalists recognised the Mozart effect: that the skills needed by children in learning singing or playing music has a significant effect on other learning. It is believed that this is by music’s stimulation of memory and expression, and the reasoning in intervals and chords. The name is taken from the observable phenomenon that listening to Mozart stimulates the brain in tackling puzzles. Research by Agnes Chan at the Chinese University of Hong Kong found that children who learn music before the age of 12 have a higher IQ, better memory, and better grasp of science, mathematics and language, and better reasoning faculties. Subsequent research by Prof Glenn Schellenberg of Toronto University found that 6-year old children who study music improve their IQ by 2.7 points over other children.

It can be profitable to know the local music teachers. You can recruit from local scouts and guide groups, and from the Sunday school and youth group. Liaise with their leaders, and get them on side. Make contact with local singing teachers who may be able to refer pupils to you. Invite the teachers to visit a choir practice, or even to take one. Most schools will be happy to let you come in to talk about music and play the piano for them, particularly if you do so in a way which has general educational benefits rather than being just an advert for your choir.

It is worth noting how many pop stars started their musical careers in church choirs. They include Paul McCartney, Elvis Presley, Britney Spears, Whitney Houston, Aretha Franklin, Norah Jones, Brian Jones (of Rolling Stones), Harry Secombe, Sting, Will Yates, Pete Doherty (of Libertines), Peter Gabriel, Marvin Gaye, Ace of Base, P P Arnold, Ashford and Simpson, Randy Crawford, Patsy Cline, Dudley Moore, Gene Autry and Anita Baker.

Your minister and church council must also be supportive and provide help, such as contacts with local schools. You should never arrange to visit a school, scout group or similar without first discussing the matter with your minister. You are an ambassador for the church, and its relations with outside bodies is a matter broader than the choir. The church exists to reach out into the community. A choir is a wonderful way of delivering the church’s ministry.

Scouts and guides both offer badges to members. These include music badges where choir activities qualify.

Always remember that existing choir members are the best recruiters. They know people who could be good choir members. Choir members have husbands, wives, sons, daughters, neighbours and friends, all of whom are potential choristers.

Organists are often involved with other musical activities where you meet singers who could be good choir members. Invite them to join the choir. In the

first instance, it may be to augment the choir for a particular anthem on one occasion such as when you know you are short of tenors that day.

Never poach members from another church choir; that is unfair and unethical. However if someone has already decided to leave their church choir, there is no reason to refuse them.

The biggest hurdle to recruitment is commitment. Potential choristers are discouraged from joining because of the burden of being regularly committed to a weekly practice and weekly service, and its impact on their life. The easiest way to overcome this is to limit their initial commitment to a specific period, perhaps two months, or (better) to a particular event, such as until the carol service. It is easy to invite people to join the choir for a special event, and you can keep on having special events. Having attended a few practices, some of your guest singers will almost certainly want to join you permanently.

Retaining members

Recruitment is only half the story of building up a choir. The other half is to retain members once you have recruited them.

You must avoid shouting, hectoring, humiliating and mockery. Never lose your temper, however provoked. Count to five before replying, or excuse yourself and step outside for a minute if you really have difficulty controlling your temper.

As a choirmaster you must say whatever you need to say to your choir, but be careful how you say it. One method is to congratulate them on whatever the choir got right, and then to comment on up to three things which they did not, and say “let us now work on the phrasing” or “that was good, but we can make it better”. If they don’t get anything right, congratulate them for trying. Always be positive.

The choir practice must be enjoyable. If it is, choristers will stay. It’s as simple as that.

Choir practice must be business-like. Members must go away knowing that they have achieved something, that they are better able to sing the anthems. The practice must not be so full of notices, discussions, jokes, prayers and speeches that no singing work is done. There is a place for discussion groups and prayer meetings within the church, but it is not choir practice.

Your style must always be one of encouragement, however discouraged you may feel. Much of a choirmaster’s work is not so much teaching the choir skills as simply enabling choir members to use the skills they already have. Most people have more talent than they realise.

Always comment encouragingly about an anthem sung the previous week, but do not be deceitful. If it was a dreadful performance, thank them for their noble effort and explain that no-one always succeeds. Re-schedule the anthem, so that the efforts in learning it are not wasted. Always congratulate soloists at choir practice.

Another ingredient is the sense of belonging. Always welcome new members at choir practice. When someone leaves, always thank them at choir practice for

their contribution and wish them well for the future. Make sure that the new member has a pigeon hole, robes, hymn book and other items as appropriate. Make sure that their name is written up somewhere in the vestry. They must feel that they belong with you.

Children may receive a surplice after a short introductory period, and should receive ribbons as they progress through their training. Persuade the minister to award these during the church service, perhaps at the end of the notices.

Part of being businesslike is that choir members always know what is happening. Music lists should be prepared in advance and pinned up in the choir vestry. It is useful for a vestry to have a blackboard or whiteboard on which you write up what books are needed for each practice and service. Copies of special music should be put out ready on a table. People like to belong to something which is well-run.

Allow people to make feedback to you, and preferably only to you. This is best done privately. People are easily discouraged if they feel no-one listens to them.

Get to know all the choir members personally, at least by name.

Maintain a social life for the choir. It is good to have events such as a choir dinner once a year, or a choir party. It is also good to have refreshments after choir practice, such as coffee. An electric kettle, coffee jar, cartons of long life milk and mugs can be hidden in most music cupboards. Celebrate everything you can think of – birthdays, wedding anniversaries, successful performances, end of term – with cake and wine. Give children Easter eggs and Christmas presents. Go out together occasionally.

For children, it is possible to build up the choir with social activities such as a youth group or football team. (Several football teams such as Bolton Wanderers and Aston Villa started from churches.) Normally such activities should only be run by someone able to give it the time, which is not likely to be you. It may be an adult in the choir.

Children and Sunday School

There is no reason why the children’s choir and the Sunday School should see each other as competitors. On the contrary, as parts of the body of the church, they have a moral duty to work together and help each other. Ideally, each should help recruit members to the other. Sunday Schools provide basic Christian teaching while church choirs provide Christian training. Bringing up children does not just mean filling their heads with facts; it also requires involvement and participation. Our children are not the church of tomorrow; they are part of the church today.

An ideal arrangement is as follows:

- all children in the choir are automatically members of the church’s Sunday School;
- choir children robe up before the service and attend Sunday School in robes;
- the church authorities determine which parts of the service the children attend. For Communion services, they may come in at the start or end of the Eucharistic prayer;

- children come in or out of a service during a hymn, or while music is played for the purpose;
- children are supervised coming in and out of a service;
- anthems are only performed when the choir children are present.

Choir children can normally have as much Sunday School time as other children. If not, having 20 minutes rather than 30 minutes will not make much difference. If there are sufficient numbers of choir children of a similar age, it may be possible to engage a Sunday School teacher for a choir class.

Choir practices

Preparation

You must prepare for choir practice. Know exactly what music you will rehearse, and make sure it is readily available.

You should have a fair idea of how many weeks it will take to prepare an anthem to performance standard. Do not try to get everything right at the first rehearsal.

Always have a watch or clock in ready sight. The most experienced choirmaster will find that he has spent 40 minutes when he intended to spend 15. The opposite sometimes happens. It is easy to lose track of time when engrossed in music.

It is usually matter of established practice whether a choir robes for practices, though this is now quite rare. Robing is usually confined to a cassock without the surplice. If you do robe, allow time for robing and disrobing.

Time

You should have a weekly choir practice, usually with breaks during summer and short breaks (typically two weeks) after Easter and Christmas. Publish dates of choir practice well in advance.

Choir practices are traditionally held early on a Friday evening. The optimum duration is from 1¼ hours to 1½ hours. That is normally long enough to do the work while not so long that members tired and get bored. A new choirmaster should maintain whatever arrangement he inherits. If the choir has children, it is advisable to have a separate children's practice, preferably overlapping with the adult's practice.

You should be resistant to changing the times of choir practice. A day and time has become established, and choir members can organise the rest of their lives round that. In particular, you should not put back the time of choir practice because members "have difficulty getting here on time". Members who are ten minutes late at 7pm, will be ten minutes late at 7.30pm or 8pm. The problem is discipline not timing.

If it is necessary to change the day or time, have a clear and very good reason for doing so, put the matter up for discussion, and allow a long lead time before making the change.

Choir practices should start and finish on time. Breaks for children leaving and adults arriving should be on time and clearly indicated to allow for people to arrive and depart. (Avoid the disruption of people walking throughout the practice.

Pre-service practices of anthems are particularly beneficial. A choir anthem which sounds perfect at the end of a rehearsal on Friday night may not sound so good when approached cold on Sunday. A pre-service practice is best undertaken in the choir vestry and should be finished at least five minutes before the service starts. A pre-service practice should simply be a reminder and warm-up. It is far too late to start teaching notes and rhythms.

Ad hoc rehearsals are additional practices usually for specific events, such as the carol service or a major work. You must give plenty of notice, typically a month, for additional rehearsals. It is unreasonable to expect choristers to rearrange their entire life to attend extra rehearsals, particularly if the need for them is your lack of preparation.

For major works and anthems, it can be beneficial preparing practice tapes. You simply sit at a piano and record the relevant part. You must announce the title of each part and count in the beats where the part is not singing. It does not take long to do. Producing copies can be done yourself or delegated to a choir member. There are machines which copy tapes at double speed. Practice tapes are often much appreciated and will greatly help bring choir members up to standard.

Teaching sessions can also be a useful adjunct to choir practices. Choir members can often have a poor understanding of musical notation and singing technique but be reluctant to admit this. There are various schemes run by the RSCM as well as its Voice for Life scheme which provide an ideal opportunity to learn or revise basic musicianship skills.

If arranging additional rehearsals or teaching sessions, always remember to check with the church authorities that the vestry or church is available. It is not unknown for a choirmaster to arrange a rehearsal at a time convenient for himself and the choir, only to find a baptism or wedding rehearsal in progress, or that the churchwardens have arranged that time for the floor to be resanded.

Attendance

The Royal School of Church Music laid down a standard of 85% attendance for a chorister to be eligible for its Bronze Award. This excludes annual holiday, and equals about six times out of seven. This is the level of attendance you should reasonably expect from committed choristers.

It is disheartening for a choirmaster to prepare for a practice, only to find half the choir does not turn up. This is demotivating for you, but you must rise above it. The one thing not to do is to berate those who have turned up for poor attendance. After all, they are the ones who have attended.

Some choir members may miss practices for proper reasons, such as holidays, work commitments or illness. There is nothing you can do about that. What you are trying to stamp out is absence because the chorister is "too busy". This means that the chorister gives choir practice a low priority. If you have rehearsed on a Friday evening for the last 150 years, why did the chorister arrange a dinner party for that evening?

Confronting a “too busy” chorister is rarely likely to be productive. You should work towards making the choir practice enjoyable. In the meantime, plan music which does not rely on fringe members who turn up when they feel like it. As the choir sees practices being well run, with competent training of a good variety of interesting music in a pleasant atmosphere with a good social side, attendance will improve.

The dates of anthems should be announced in advance, and you should check that sufficient members will be present for the performance and final rehearsals. The longer notice you give, the more members will attend.

Some choirs have a signing-out sheet where choristers can indicate absences in advance. The disadvantage is that this can create the impression that attendance is optional. However a holiday sheet is useful to know in advance how many can attend during summer.

Sickness and last-minute business trips will always disturb the most careful plans. If someone in the choir telephones you to say they cannot attend because of sickness, do not rant about the problems that creates. Doing so achieves nothing and discourages them from letting you know next time and thus being able to address any problem. Instead, thank the person for letting you know and wish them a speedy recovery. That creates goodwill. If a choir is of a reasonable size, a last minute absence should not usually be a problem. Otherwise consider:

- (a) bringing in a singer to replace the part;
- (b) redeploying a singer from another voice;
- (c) covering the part on the organ; or
- (d) cancelling or postponing the anthem.

Ultimately exhortations and quiet words will not secure good attendance. Good attendance comes from properly run choirs with well conducted practices.

Time-keeping

It is disruptive to have members turn up after the practice has started. It is even worse when most of the choir turns up late.

The most effective way of dealing with lateness is to start on time regardless, even if only two people are there. Do not stop for latecomers, but ignore them until the next natural stop. Start and finish the choir practice on time.

Always remind the choir when the clocks go forward and back for summer time (the last Sundays in March and October).

Place

The best place for a choir practice is a separate room with plenty of air and light, chairs either in place or easily moved to place, and a piano in tune. Modern electric pianos are good enough now and have the advantage of staying in tune and allowing you to look at the choir while seated.

The final rehearsal for an anthem must always be in the place where it is performed. This allows you to check sight lines, acoustics and seating. This is

particularly important on special occasions and when you have additional singers or instruments. Someone should stand in the body of the church while rehearsing to check that there is a proper balance between the singers and organ (and any soloists and other instruments). The organ console is often not the best place to judge balance, so the organist should note what registration provides the best balance even if it sounds too loud or quiet from the console.

Structure

A choir practice must always start with a warm-up. There are books of singing exercises provided, such as the Voiceworks books by Peter Hunt (Oxford University Press). However adults can resent time spent that way. It may be more expedient to use the hymns as warm-up material.

The choir practice must be paced so that people are not singing all the time.

A choir practice should not become a source for endless discussion, notices, prayers, anecdotes, jokes, gossip or digests of television programmes. A small amount of such stuff can leaven the practice, but otherwise concentrate on the job in hand.

Choir practice should end with a short prayer. The choristers' prayer is:

Bless, O Lord, us thy servants who minister in thy temple. Grant that what we sing with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts we may show forth in our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

You may prefer to say “The Grace” or another prayer. You may wish to make up a prayer, particularly before a major performance like a carol service. If not happy about doing this yourself, invite someone else to do it for you or even encourage extemporary prayer. However remember that the prayer is simply to consecrate your efforts to God. A choir practice is not a prayer meeting. Jesus said that people should not go “babbling on like the heathen who imagine that the more they say the more God listens. God already knows your needs” (Matthew 6:7-8). Please note.

Donkeywork

There is always an amount of donkeywork in a practice, such as collecting up and putting away music, putting away chairs, switching off lights and locking up.

There is no law which says the choirmaster must do it all. Arrange for choir members to help.

Leadership

Some basic principles

A choir should be run as a benevolent dictatorship. You should not attempt to run a choir either as a democracy nor as a tyranny.

Leadership is a function, not a status. The conductor is the “baton part” of the ensemble and he should play his part and only his part in the same way that a flute player plays the flute part and only the flute part.

Your personality is an important factor.

Winning respect

Successful leadership only arises when you have won the respect of those you lead. You do this by showing an acceptable level of competence, combined with a pleasant personality. This is particularly important for a volunteer body, such as most church choirs, where a disenchanting member can easily leave or not attend.

This does not mean that you must seek popularity. If you do your job well, popularity automatically follows. A choirmaster who “delivers the goods” is a good leader.

A new choirmaster is always given a honeymoon period where you have the provisional goodwill of your new choir, and will probably be forgiven mistakes more readily. The new choirmaster must win the respect of the choir before this honeymoon period expires.

Leadership role

Musicians expect to be told what to do, and tend to regard discussion as time wasted. It may be diplomatic to ask the choir for an occasional opinion, particularly where you are planning something significantly different, but do not seek opinions on every last detail.

The ideal leadership style is one where members are neither browbeaten nor argumentative, but follow your direction while feeling relaxed about matters which concern them. It is quite reasonable for someone in the choir to point out that they are having difficulty singing a phrase and ask if you could sing it again, providing they do not do it so often that they take over the choir practice. If that does happen, simply reassure the person that you will look at all the notes in all parts in due course. Occasionally it may be necessary conspicuously to disregard a request from a chorister just to show who is boss.

An interesting perspective on leadership is provided in John Wimber: *The Way It Was* (Hodder & Stoughton), when his wife Carol Wimber writes about her late husband, the church leader and musician John Wimber:

He wasn't very sensitive, in the way of an awareness of what others were feeling or thinking, and I think that was good. He didn't struggle with fears about his own ability or the ability of others, and part of what made him a powerful leader was his ignorance of any other perspective. He wasn't even aware of the fears most of us have about ourselves, and we were glad to give up our thoughts on the subject, in exchange for his, anyhow.

Admitting mistakes

No choirmaster is perfect. You should accept your fallibility with good grace.

It is a curious fact of human nature that admitting mistakes can score you more points for honesty than you lost through fallibility. President Clinton was not

impeached for his hanky-panky with Monica Lewinsky, but for his attempts to cover it up. If you study any scandal, you will usually find that the cover-up caused far more approbation than the original misconduct.

If you keep making silly mistakes, you will appear incompetent. However the occasional mistake, readily admitted, will make you look both human and gracious, without affecting your reputation for competence. Also, admitting occasional mistakes makes it easier for choir members to admit their mistakes.

Setting dates for anthems

Anthems should be planned for at least one month ahead, and ideally about three months ahead.

This allows choir members to put the dates in their diaries to make a particular effort to attend. It allows them to tell you in advance if they cannot be there, and lets you decide if those who can attend are sufficient for the performance. It avoids the nightmare of a beautiful rehearsal on Friday evening, wrecked by finding that all the altos are away for the performance on Sunday.

Once a date has been fixed, every effort should be made to ensure that you perform it on that date. An occasional cancellation is probably inevitable, but frequent cancellations or postponements (perhaps more than one per year) quickly undermines confidence, and will anger choir members who made a particular effort to attend.

Dealing with choir

Introduction

Running a choir would be much easier if it did not contain people, but as it does, you must learn to work with them.

It is essential that there is opportunity for the choir to chat with you. This rarely requires formal meetings. Conversations after choir, down at the pub or while clearing away the music, provide enough opportunity.

If some significant change is proposed, such as changes to the structure of services, it may be advisable to call a meeting of the choir to discuss the matter, or ask the choir to stay after a choir practice.

Any group of people will contain some colourful characters, some who argue, some who have strong personalities and those with firm opinions. That the church should have its share can be attributed to statistical random sampling. Why such people always end up in the choir is less easily explained.

The key is discipline. Discipline in rehearsing leads to a disciplined performance. You should never be reluctant to impose discipline, though you must be careful how you do it. The two basic principles are:

- (a) have a workmanlike approach from the outset; and
- (b) err on the side of being too tough and then perhaps ease up a little.

If you need to administer discipline, consider a stern look rather than saying anything. Sometimes ignoring a person can be effective. If you do say anything, be careful what you say.

Never criticise the minister or any other member of the church in front of the choir, however justified your observations may be. As choirmaster you hold a position of responsibility and trust. If you are seen as being disloyal to the minister, you are establishing disloyalty as an acceptable code. Do not expect the choir to be loyal to you.

Problem choristers

The foghorn

Reginald Frary begins his delightful book *It'll Be All Wrong on the Night* (Canterbury Press) thus:

In the choir of the village church where my bachelor cousin Charlie is organist they've got a man affectionately known as Bodger, who has been there for fifty years and in all that time has never been late for a service, never missed a choir practice and never had the faintest idea how to sing.

The skill in teaching someone to sing here is probably outweighed by the skill in persuading him that he needs to learn.

Asking someone to keep the volume down "because you have a powerful voice" is diplomatic. Playing back a tape-recording can be effective.

The arguer

It is reasonable for a choir member to point out that he or she is having difficulty with a part, particularly if you have not noticed this. However it is not reasonable for anyone to tell you how to run the choir practice.

If someone does try to take over, just say firmly and gently that you will be dealing with those points in a minute, and continue with whatever you were about to do. If someone persists in being quarrelsome, avoid a slanging match. You can say, "please let me run this choir practice". Plain insults are usually best ignored, as other choir members will see them for what they are.

If someone persists in awkward behaviour, speak to them privately, explaining why they are such a nuisance. It is surprising how many times people think they are being helpful or funny. Do so on the basis of "I would appreciate your help at choir practices".

If there is a personal problem with the person, you may consider asking the minister or someone with pastoral skills to help. However this should be an exceptional case. You are the choirmaster and you must be able to work with every choir member. Any problem you have with an individual must be settled between you.

If you do decide that a chorister needs to be rebuked at a practice, say your words and then immediately return to the practice so that the chorister cannot reply without interrupting you. Ignore any attempt at interruptions.

If none of this deals with the problem, deal harshly with the awkward member. As a result, the chorister will either mend their ways or leave the choir. Whatever they do is almost certainly the desired result.

Past sell-by date

A difficult situation in all forms of church life is the person who is no longer capable of doing his job, whether through age or infirmity. The church is in the invidious position of choosing between tolerating incompetence dragging down the body, or of upsetting a long-serving and loyal member.

This problem should be addressed in two stages:

- (a) the decision must consider the choir;
- (b) the implementation must consider the individual.

If a singer really drags down the choir, the singer must go. A choir must never be compromised by a duff member who ruins performances, impedes practices and generally obstructs the efficient operation of the choir. But making the decision is the easy part. The difficult part is implementing it. Singers tend to think they are better than they really are at the best of times.

You can try breaking the news in two stages. First, try to explain that their singing voice has deteriorated significantly. Let the person digest that sad truth first before the second stage of discussing its implications. The person may come to terms with the fact and then discuss with you what their future role should be.

An elderly or lonely choir member may find the choir practice a highlight of the week's social life. There is no need to take that away from them. Allow a member to continue attending and find something for them to do. They can be your librarian. They can walk round the church during the final rehearsals to see if the balance is right. You can give them a title of choir assistant and keep them involved. Sometimes it is possible to allow someone to remain in the choir and sing the hymns and simply sit out the anthems.

Always mark a leaving chorister's leaving with at least some words of thanks, and possibly a certificate of long service.

Sweet eating

You must never tolerate any sweet eating, mint sucking or gum chewing. This prevents the mouth from being able to form the sounds properly. It is also dangerous as the sweet can slip down the open throat and cause suffocation. A sweet must be swallowed or spat out immediately. There is no objection to singers sipping water during a practice.

No-one need suck a cough sweet at choir practice. They can swig linctus before the practice and then sip water. Medically, this is much more effective.

Feuds and arguments

A choir is no different from any other organisation in that clashes between members sometimes arise, often for trivial reasons. These may have nothing to

do with the choir. It can be a broken friendship, a finished romance or a dispute outside the choir or even outside the church.

An argument at a choir practice must never be tolerated. The people should be told firmly that this is unacceptable. You must not become argumentative yourself, but be firm and patient. Never order someone to leave, but in extremis, you may suggest that a person might like to withdraw to calm down. Saying “quiet” and getting straight on with the music can also be effective.

Where there are personality problems, they must be addressed. This should normally be done privately and individually asking people to co-operate for the greater good of the choir and church. The choirmaster should be quick to listen and slow to advise. Often merely listening can solve the problem.

Allocating solos

The task of allocating solos is entirely within the gift of the choirmaster. A solo must never be allocated solely because someone has “always” done it.

It is good to have a policy of encouraging all choristers to consider solos, and to be willing to allow someone to sing a solo for a first time, even in preference to a better established soloist. If this policy is well-known the established soloist is much less likely to feel put out.

There is no reason why one person must sing all the solos for their voice. It is reasonable to share it between people, and for a newcomer first to sing a small part.

Practical issues

Choir robes

There is nothing in canon law covering the robes a choir may or may not wear. Traditionally, choir robes have followed the robes of the clergy.

In the Church of England, rules for clergy robes are contained in Canon B8. The same canon states that the Church “does not attach any particular doctrinal significance to the diversities of vesture permitted by this Canon”. Despite that, a minister needs the permission of the parochial church council to change his form of vesture.

For choirs, there is no law but plenty of custom. Church vestments largely derive from Rome in the third and fourth centuries. Greek pottery from 425 BC shows a choir singing in long flowing robes draped over the left shoulder. The original robes were like a monk’s habit, of a loose gown tied round the waist with a piece of rope-like cord. Some choirs still wear this style.

In the Middle Ages, the cassock developed as an ankle-length black gown with long sleeves which completely covered other clothing. The surplice is a white garment stopping somewhere between the chest and knees, and originally with lace, and with large bell sleeves. The cassock and surplice are sometimes referred to as liturgical robes. An organist sometimes wears a special surplice with split sleeves so that they do not drape over the manuals.

As the clergy adopted this dress, so did the choir. The original reason was not to make the choir appear special, but for the more egalitarian purpose of showing that all are equal in the service of God. The humble farmhand looks the same as the lord of the manor when singing to their creator.

In time, other colours of cassock, particularly blue, were introduced. There are also many subtle variations in style and in choice of textile. There is no truth in the myth that royal sponsorship is needed to wear scarlet cassocks.

At the Reformation, the Geneva gown became the favoured robe of Protestant preachers. This is similar to the academic gown as worn with a mortar board. It is still widely favoured in certain denominations, such as black gospel choirs.

There are some accessories which have been subsequently added. White ruffs (pleated collars) date from the 16th century, and are now commonly worn by choir children. An alternative is the 19th-century Eton collar (large starched white collar) which is sometimes favoured in Catholic churches. A recent alternative is the white cravat which tidies up the neckline for choir men. A man who finds that a cravat irritates his skin should try a silk cravat.

It is also common to wear a medal on a ribbon. This may be part of the uniform, or may be awarded as part of a training scheme. The Royal School of Church Music offers such a scheme, where the colour of the ribbon indicates the level attained in Voice for Life.

There is a separate style of ladies’ robe, though there is no reason why ladies cannot wear cassocks and surplices. The traditional ladies’ robe is of the same colour as the men’s cassock, with ribbing on the back and front, and is worn with white sleevelets and jabot. There is a more modern style which is a plainer garment more tailored to the female form, such as with a waist, and worn without a surplice. All robes are worn at full length regardless of current fashions; there were no mini-cassocks in the 1960s. Girls in choirs wear the same robes as boys.

Hoods are part of the normal wear of the clergy and are often worn by choristers. It is advisable to sew a button to the front of the cassock near the top for this purpose.

Choir dress is when all choir members who hold an academic qualification wear a hood over their robes, regardless of the subject. There is no theological or legal reason against wearing hoods for Communion services. The arguments about humility in approaching the Lord’s table would equally serve to exclude RSCM ribbons, medals and badges.

Developments in modern liturgy mean that sometimes the choir appears in normal clothing of a common design, such as all wearing an ordinary shirt in a particular colour with black trousers or a black skirt.

Robes should be acquired in various sizes. These sizes do not need to be too accurate as robes are loose fitting garments which cover several sizes of normal clothes. Particular attention needs to be paid to children’s robes as children tend to stay in the choir for a shorter period and tend to grow while there. Arrangements should be made for the regular laundering of robes.

Another aspect of choir dress relates to clothes worn underneath which may be partly visible. It is normal to require choristers to wear black, brown or dark shoes, and not to wear trainers, sandals or plimsolls. The requirements of

Anglican clergy dress were considerably relaxed during the 20th century, when it abolished the rule banning vicars from sleeping in embroidered night-caps. Canon C27 now states that a minister must wear "suitable" clothing at all times, except for recreation and other justifiable purposes. These days, it is difficult to see what clothing would be regarded as unsuitable.

Being equipped

Pencils should be provided by the church, as choristers will never remember. Always keep a stock; they do not cost much. If you have pencils, you also need erasers and pencil sharpeners. It is advisable also to keep mending tape. Invisible Sellotape or Scotch tape on a dispenser is ideal. Ordinary Sellotape dries out and falls off after a while, and can attract dirt which obliterates the music. It can also be useful to keep paper clips for marking the pages in anthem books or choral scores.

Some theory

Human resources management

The day-to-day running of a choir requires skills now known as human resources management (HRM). This is now recognised as a separate business management skill, which goes beyond personnel and payroll functions.

The two main elements of HRM are:

- motivation; and
- leadership.

Motivation

Motivation is the psychology to make a person perform better.

The psychology involves identifying both motivators and hygiene factors. Both of these take the form of meeting a need.

Motivators are those factors which encourage better performance, such as recognition and sense of achievement. These are sometimes called positive motivators.

Hygiene factors are those factors whose presence does not promote better performance, but whose absence leads to worse performance, such as pay and working conditions. The term is an analogy from the world of medicine. Good hygiene will not make you healthier, but poor hygiene will make you less healthy.

Conflicts of needs should be avoided as it will inevitably lead to at least one need remaining unsatisfied. For example, asking someone to lie for you leads to a conflict between loyalty and honesty. Frustration of needs is when a need cannot be met for reasons outside your control.

For business, Frederick Herzberg identified these positive motivators:

- achievement;

- recognition;
- responsibility;
- promotion prospects; and
- the work itself;

and these hygiene factors:

- pay;
- relationships;
- quality of supervision;
- company policy;
- working conditions; and
- fringe benefits.

Maslow

Most HRM commentators have adopted Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which depicts five levels of human need:

- (a) self-actualisation;
- (b) esteem;
- (c) social;
- (d) safety;
- (e) physiological.

This hierarchy is named after A H Maslow, an American psychologist. There are other models, sometimes with a different number of levels, but the principles behind them all are similar.

The theory behind Maslow is that needs must be met from the lowest level upwards.

The main physiological needs are warmth, food and shelter. Until these are met, the individual is not interested in any higher need. In other words, if someone is hungry and cold, they are not easily motivated to do anything except find food and warmth. They are not interested in any of the higher needs, the meeting of which provides motivation. So don't rehearse in a freezing church, and allow for meal breaks and comfort breaks.

Once physiological needs are met, the next need is safety. Once people are fed, clothed, sheltered and warm, they need to feel safe that this will continue. Any threat to what someone values becomes at least a hygiene factor. For a choir, this can include the slightest threat to disband the choir.

The third level up is social needs. These include love and friendship. Assuming that your choir is neither freezing nor threatened with disbandment, this is the level where most choirmasters start considering motivation.

The second highest level is esteem. This includes self-confidence, sense of achievement, recognition and respect. Many choirs wear robes and sit in a special place in the church. This in itself can meet the esteem needs of members.

If a choir performs an anthem well, all members of it should share the sense of achievement. Never tell a choir that a good performance was solely or primarily down to you, the composer, the accompanist, the soloist or someone else. Always tell a choir that a good performance is always a team effort and they should take pride in being part of that winning team.

Saying "thank you" is a cost-effective motivator. It meets this high level of personal need while costing nothing. Ensure that you always say thank you to the choir for a good performance. Thank them for a good effort for a bad performance. (Never pretend a bad performance was good. The choir will know when they have performed badly, and will not respect you for saying otherwise.)

Self-actualisation is the highest level of human need. This is the need to realise one's potential for continued self-development. This highest level can only be achieved when all four lower levels have been met.

For a choir, self-actualisation is when you have no serious problems with absenteeism, new members join without being recruited, and members ask you about courses to attend. At this point, you can motivate yourself by the knowledge that you have reached the top of Maslow. All you need do is stay there.

This happy state does not mean that you will have no problems, just that you have exchanged the problems of failure for the problems of success. These include finding enough music, robes and seating, and dealing with congregational grumbles that the choir is taking over the church. At least you will be sufficiently motivated to deal with such problems.

Children have a different perspective on life from adults. Their needs must be met from the bottom upwards as for adults, but sometimes these needs are addressed differently. Their safety needs include not being overlooked, particularly when the children rehearse with the adults. They get bored if most of what you say goes over their heads.

Esteem needs can be met by ribbons, badges, prizes, certificates and the suchlike. It can be effective to make a big fuss about such matters, such as the vicar presenting a ribbon at the service and notifying the parents in advance. Prizes need not be of any great intrinsic value. What matters is the achievement in winning a prize, not the increase in their personal wealth as a consequence. Expensive awards are usually a waste of money, as the expense adds nothing to the sense of achievement.

Self-actualisation is demonstrated when they enjoy the choir so much that they bring their friends and stay in the choir when their voice breaks. You should be so lucky.

Dealing with the Congregation

Education

An organist should educate the congregation. Brief introductions to anthems should be complemented by articles in the magazine giving more details. Be willing to talk to church groups.

Feedback

In Tune With Heaven recommends that an organist receives feedback on church music. This is fine in theory, but in practice the average worshipper will only tell you what he likes or doesn't like, where the former is simply what he has got used to. Feedback can encourage criticism and lead to consumer religion.

It is best if feedback comes from someone who has good hearing and some musical knowledge. They can tell you if the sound was balanced, the words audible and the introduction appropriate. A former chorister is ideal.

Choir v music group

An organist should not fear music groups. A properly constituted body of competent musicians playing a proper arrangement adds to worship. As with choirs, the standard must always be the best we can offer, and should be at least of a standard that the public would pay to hear.

The problem is that many groups come nowhere near the standard of competence taken for granted among organists. Guitarists and bass guitarists are not usually the problem as these are simple instruments. Players should be at least Associated Board grade 6 or equivalent. One or two people learning their instrument up to grade 5 can be "carried" by other more competent players. The biggest problem is often the drummer who cannot be "carried" and should be of a standard of a semi-professional player.

Another problem with music groups is that they do not play the words. Tunes are banged out without the phrasing and dynamics which organists use to make words come alive.

An innovative though rarely-used option is for the organist to be the music group using a modern programmable synthesiser. Advances since the early 1990s mean that these produce CD-quality sounds and have sophisticated rhythm patterns which provide competent drumming. The pedals can be programmed to put in drum breaks. This requires the organist to learn some new skills, particularly on rhythm. The result is far better than most music groups.

Modern music

Organists should welcome modern music in its various different styles. Traditional hymn books are themselves collections of different music styles over several centuries. There is no reason to stop the canon of church music arbitrarily at 1920.

However, much greater care is needed in selecting modern music as its repertoire has yet to be filtered through time. A look through a 19th-century hymn book will reveal hundreds of banal or sentimental words to instantly

forgettable tunes which died in the generation of their birth. Those 19th-century hymns we sing today are the best few percent. So comparisons between old and new tend to be between the best of the old and everything of the new; there is no like-for-like comparison.

Charles Wesley has 39 hymns in Common Praise and 20,000 not in, yet no-one would argue that he was a poor hymnwriter because of this high attrition. We should show similar recognition to Graham Kendrick when he is remembered for three hymns.

Everything that we now regard as traditional was once modern. A cursory study of the history of church music reveals that the introduction of polyphony, harmony, counterpoint, hymns and organs all aroused as much passion in their day as any innovation in this day. An organist should not be dismissive of all modern music, but should be highly selective and ready to educate.

Outreach music

An organist must be ready to rebut arguments that music groups assist outreach better than choirs and organs.

Choirs and organs can be the music of evangelism and outreach. No-one outside the church is likely to be attracted in by a poor performance of worship songs, but they will be attracted by a proper choir, even an amateur choir singing simple choral music, as carol services routinely demonstrate.

A look in any large record store shows that choral music is by far the most popular form of Christian music. Next popular are country-and-western and black gospel.

There is value in having a form of music specially for worshipping God. This is indeed the whole concept of holiness, being set apart for God. This resonates with those outside the church. They expect to hear circus music at a circus, and military music at a military display. Similarly they expect to hear church music in a church.

The Church of England's General Synod gave a measure of recognition to this in Mission-Shaped Church (Church House Publishing) in 2004. Here are two quotes:

On fresh expressions in worship:

"There is some evidence of an increase in attendance at cathedral and other churches offering traditional styles of worship.... People now as always are looking for mystery, beauty, stability and a sense of God's presence."

On youth services:

"A pattern of innovation in liturgical revision and musical variety has not (on the whole) been sustained. A generation of young people find Graham Kendrick old-fashioned and Common Worship outmoded."

Another relevant observation is made by Philip North in The Vicar's Guide (Church House Publishing, 2005):

"It is notoriously difficult to define what it is that makes for good worship. It is easy to assume that worship that matches our own particular taste or spirituality

is bound to be what works, but this simply isn't the case. I have seen growth in churches that offer spontaneous charismatic worship and also in parishes that offer a very traditional High Mass. One of my friends in the Diocese of Durham saw extraordinary growth in a very down-at-heel church where he served as priest, and by far the most popular service was Prayer Book Evensong.

"There are, however, some factors that can be identified, and the first seems to be that those leading worship have real confidence in what it is that they are offering. We do not need to explain or be embarrassed by the Church's worship. We just need to offer."

A church should always be wary of being trendy. Those who marry the spirit of one generation are widows in the next.

Even by the standards of pop charts, traditional church music fares better. The only "music group" songs which have made the charts (as far as we can find) are Colours of Day/Light Up the Fire (no 31 by Parchment in 1972) and Let the Flame Burn Brighter (no 55 by Graham Kendrick in 1989). In contrast, traditional hymns such as Amazing Grace, Morning Has Broken and even Jerusalem have made the charts, as have anthems such as Panis Angelicus and Ave Maria. In 1994, Gregorian chants sung by Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silas was the 30th best-selling "pop" album in USA, beating Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones and Rod Stewart. It was number 1 in Italy for six weeks. Even an Anglican chant has made the UK top 30 (Highway Code by Master Singers reached 25 in 1966).

It should also be noted that modern popular music is not a single form liked by all young people, but a plethora of different forms each of which is a turn-off for some young people. Also, a glance at Top of the Pops or MTV will show you that current pop music is often as far removed from the music of a youth service as it is from choral evensong.

Adverse comments

For some inexplicable reason, some congregation members feel free to make rude comments about the music which they would not dream of making about the flower arrangements or Sunday School tableau.

An organist should be resistant to such comments until they start to gain currency. A person who seems to know all about church music may be asked on what authority or experience he speaks. Someone who wishes to "share" a derogatory opinion can be invited to share your opinions.

There are the unsubtle who come up after a service to tell you how good another service or concert was. Some will come back fired up by different worship (usually monastic singing or a rave-up) which they wish to transplant to your church. To do so would probably require a different congregation.

And do not be swayed by those who seek to get their own way by saying they have prayed about it, as though God has decreed that their favourite hymns must be sung on that day or no-one will go to heaven. This is simply spiritual blackmail. God works through appointed leaders. For music, that means the organist.