

Ten Tips for Choral Conductors

From 'Bumblebee! Rounds & Warm-ups for Choirs' by Michael Griffin.

1. Energy! The conductor must have more energy than the choir. Choirs respond to an energetic and passionate conductor. Particularly with young choirs, a fast-paced rehearsal captures the choristers' attention, reducing boredom and unwelcome behaviour.
2. Model! Conductors should constantly model posture, correct mouth shape, and breath preparation. Choirs learn best from mostly nonverbal rehearsing strategies. Sometimes it is useful to model what you do not like, the choir to copy, followed by the correct way, so they can feel and hear the distinction.

New teachers are susceptible to over-teaching. They fall into the trap of providing excess verbal instruction at the expense of offering a simple model. Sometimes it is better for teachers to keep words to a minimum and allow students to copy. It is important for students to engage in experiential learning; teachers do not always need to intellectualise the lesson. Searching for improved tennis training methods, Tim Gallwey did exactly this. He experimented with nonverbal instruction, asking his pupils to observe and copy him. His experiment was an unqualified success. Gallwey states, "I was beginning to learn what all good pros and students of tennis must learn—that images are better than words, showing better than telling, too much instruction worse than none". -From *Learning Strategies for Musical Success* (p 40)

3. Goals! Always be working towards a goal. Setting goals is a great way to fill the mind with positive thoughts. Goals are motivational; goals inspire! At the very first rehearsal inform the choir of their next performance. Goal setting is essential to progress. Learning choral music requires the conductor to plan and to set short and long-term goals. People sometimes fail to succeed because their goal setting is unrealistic. If we set goals that are much higher than we have previously achieved we set ourselves up for failure. Conversely if we keep our sights too low we never will improve substantially enough to enjoy the fruits of increasing achievement. Lack of purpose results in lack of excellence. Lack of proficiency is a primary reason people give up music, and this is often related to poor goal setting.

Most people do not plan to fail, they fail to plan. - John Beckley

4. Plan! Plan rehearsals thoroughly. Know what the focus of each rehearsal will be. If you have lunchtime rehearsals, arrange to have an earlier lesson available for preparation in order not to be rushed when starting rehearsal. Sing through all choir parts prior to rehearsal so as to anticipate difficulties. Understand every aspect of the work; rhythmic cells, pronunciation and emphasis, breathing, dynamics, tempo and tenuto, range (compass) of each part and the meaning of the text. You should know the whole work before you teach any of it. The interpretation of initial phrases is influenced by their later treatment, and vice-versa.
5. Excellence! Demand a high level of excellence. If you let anything 'go' or write it off as a 'slip' the choir will either think that a) you are incapable, b) you don't think they're capable, or c) you are slack. In any case you and the choir lose. The benefits of excellence are numerous. We feel proudest of the achievements for which we have worked hardest,

and reflecting on past success gives us a perpetual sense of satisfaction and hope. New success allows us to view our self-image in a fresh and more favourable light, and new possibilities emerge as excellence begets excellence. Ron Berger states, “Excellence is transformational. Once the student sees what s/he is capable of, that student is never quite the same. There is a new self-image, a new notion of possibility, a new appetite for excellence.

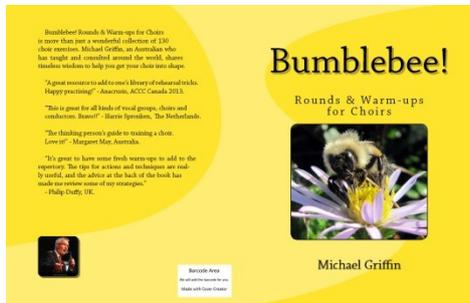
6. Repertoire! When selecting repertoire you must know the vocal range of your choir sections, and preferably each member’s range also. Have this written down and accessible. Repertoire should be challenging and artistically satisfying. Choristers like repertoire that fully absorbs their present skills, resulting in personal musical growth. Hence, it is better to know only a few songs and do them really well, than to sing a large number indifferently. Conductors often underestimate the capability and potential of their choir. If repertoire does not progress in complexity, choirs can lose interest. Making progress is the greatest motivator. Understanding motivation is paramount. For a full discussion on motivation, go to Chapter Three of *Learning Strategies for Musical Success*.

Resist the temptation to pander to the repertoire requests and popular taste of choristers. Songs that are the fashion of the day seldom yield choral reward because their success relies upon non-musical factors such as style, fashion and sex-appeal. These features attempt to compensate for simplistic harmony and mediocre lyrics. Young people in particular will have little idea what works well in a choral context. The strongest protestations against quality art music are most often uttered by the most uncultured. Be strong. Your choir and audience might never appreciate the wonders of serious choral music if you neglect to educate them. Good repertoire includes songs that are word-rich, and vowel-rich, because it's on the long vowels of a song that harmonies really express themselves. Select varied repertoire that expresses a range of emotions between contemplation and exhilaration.

I don't aspire to be in fashion, because what's in fashion goes out of fashion. – Betty Churcher

7. Memorise! As much as possible the choir should learn music to be performed from memory. Performing from memory indicates a deep understanding and internalization of the music. Memorisation allows musicians to develop their expressive ideas more freely and to communicate those ideas more effectively. One study found that an audience with musical training rated memorised performances higher in terms of communicative ability. An audience feels a greater connection when notation and music stands are omitted, and when distractions such as page turning are not an issue. Besides other benefits of memory learning, this will enable choristers to focus on your conducting. Don’t assume that the music is too long or too difficult for memory work. The choir will be capable of memorising more than you think they are. Everyone is capable of improving memory skills. Learning to sing from memory requires an understanding of musical-chunking processes, which is greatly assisted by understanding the score.
8. Get out more! If you need to become familiar with choral excellence, attend school and community concerts and rehearsals. Good examples are often our best teachers. Invite an experienced conductor to take your choir, creating an opportunity for professional development.

9. Enjoy! Have a sense of humour in rehearsal. Show your passion, emotion and personality. Reveal your love of music and pause to appreciate the moments of beauty discovered within each piece.
10. Practice! Learn the fundamentals of learning. A good place to start is with my book 'Learning Strategies for Musical Success'.

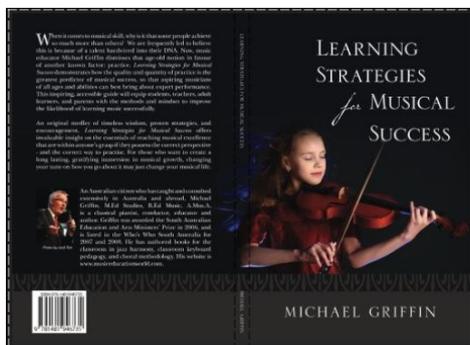


Bumblebee! Rounds & Warm-ups for Choirs

More than just a wonderful collection of 129 choir exercises including more than 45 rounds. Griffin shares timeless wisdom to help you get your choir into shape.

A great resource to add to one's library of rehearsal tricks.
- Anacrusis, ACCC, Canada

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mdgriffin63@gmail.com



Learning Strategies for Musical Success

Terrific...eminently practical...excellent discussion...I came away inspired and excited, and I heartily recommend it.
- I Southcott, The Music Trust, Australia.

A deeply impressive work, the breadth of research is fascinating!
- R Chamberlain, Monash University, for VMFA.

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I would like to wish Deb Hepworth and all the PSMF community a wonderful 2015 Public Schools Music Festival!!

Thank you for supporting South Australian music education products.

-Michael Griffin-
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