

Starting A Choir In Your School

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Introduction

Whether you are teaching in primary, secondary, post-16 or alternative provisions, singing in a choir is a fantastic opportunity to offer young people. This resource introduces key considerations when setting up a school choir.

You may have many questions, such as,

- Where can I get support and training?
- How do I get boys singing too?
- What if we don't have a piano in school?
- Where do I find choral music?
- What singing skills do the children need to learn?

The answers to these and more provide a step-by-step guide, helping you hit the ground running and enjoy making music with your students.

Benefits of singing together in school

The benefits of singing have been widely reported by organisations such as the Singing for Health Network (www.singingforhealthnetwork.co.uk) and the NHS. In recent years there has been a boom in group singing, with hit tv shows such as Gareth Malone's The Choir (BBC) inspiring many of us to reconnect with our voices.

In schools, there has arguably never been a more important time to get young people involved in group singing. With reported declines in childhood and adolescent mental health and wellbeing, singing in a choir can help to alleviate stress and anxiety and create and sustain social bonds. Not only this, but research at the Royal College of Music found that just one hour of singing a week can boost our immune systems, contributing to improved overall health. The Voices Foundation (www.voices.org.uk) have also reported findings that singing in schools can directly impact student outcomes. Singing can improve brain function, leading to greater retention of knowledge and improved cognitive reasoning skills.

From a specifically musical perspective, choirs are a genuinely inclusive aspect of music education. They offer children who are not learning an instrument, or participating in other ensembles, the chance to engage with music-making in a friendly and welcoming environment. They don't need special resources, prior musical knowledge or a particular background. Most children in school have voices they can use and are happy to do so and a choir is often the first step on a lifelong musical journey.

But I'm not a conductor!

You don't need to be an experienced maestro to lead a choir. A love of singing, a sense of pitch and rhythm, and a tonne of enthusiasm is all you need to get started. You can develop these skills further by joining a choir yourself, listening to music and experimenting with how you coordinate your body and voice. This can be as simple as singing in front of a mirror and practising pitch patterning (raising

and lowering your hands to mirror pitch changes). If you would like more advanced conducting training your local music hub, Sing Up!, the Association of British Choral Conductors (www.abcd.org.uk), and Orchestras for All (www.orchestrasforall.org) have an excellent range of introductory courses, many of which are affordable, self-paced and online.

So, now you are reassured that your school needs a choir and that you can lead it, let's get down to exploring the practicalities.

Phase 1: Planning and Preparation

Vision, Aims and Objectives

Having a clear understanding of why you are starting a choir can help you to plan effectively. Sharing the value of singing for the personal, social and educational development of students can help you garner support from senior leadership, staff and parents. Integrating singing with other areas of the curriculum can inspire other staff members to get involved. It is also a great way of reassuring school leaders who may have concerns about budgets, time and resources.

Choirs can, of course, be purely recreational, but often having a specific purpose, target or performance goal can help to encourage students to join and maintain their focus and drive during rehearsals. You may wish to programme your own concerts, perhaps centred around key events in your school calendar or aligning with the seasons. You will also find that your local music hub and music centres will have community singing events for schools to join. I would encourage you to speak with the coordinator for the relevant age and stage of your school and sign up to the mailing list. This is also a wonderful source of CPD activities for staff involved in music, especially those who do not also teach classroom music.

Scheduling

Finding time in schools to do everything is challenging. Often the Arts take a back seat in comparison to other curriculum areas, however music (and singing in choir) is a vital part of a school's educational offering. If you can, running choirs as a timetabled activity during lesson time is often most effective logistically. Although it is often the case that choir has to take place in break and lunchtimes, this means limited rehearsal time and increased numbers of children forgetting to come or turning up late as they have been delayed leaving a previous class or getting their lunch. Additionally, these break times are vitally important for students and staff to refresh themselves between lessons and we should protect these social and restful times in the school day.

If, however, you are unable to schedule the rehearsal as a timetabled session, then an afterschool club would be preferable to using break and lunchtimes. There are some schools who run their choirs before lessons start, however there is a growing body of research suggesting that early morning is not the best time to schedule learning for teenagers, due to the rebalancing of their circadian rhythms, and that for maximum effective learning, activities should be scheduled later in the day.

Allowing an hour for your rehearsal is ideal. There is a lot to do in each session and this amount of time will allow students to arrive, notices to be given, warm up and cool down to take place, musicianship games to be played and songs to be learnt. If you find that you are restricted to running

sessions during break and lunchtimes, then this might not be possible and you will have to be very selective about the content of each session.

Rooms and Resources

Getting the right space for your rehearsals will make your life much easier. You will want a big enough space that you can encourage an active session, with movement as part of warm up and performance being vital for ensuring the best and healthiest singing. However, you will want to avoid singing in too large a space, as this can make behaviour management a challenge and may also encourage you and your singers to over-sing or use their voices with too much force and volume. Although projection is important in vocal performance, the temptation of rehearsing in a large hall is for students to try and fill the space. This can lead to vocal strain and also reduces the amount of time they spend listening to each other and building their pitch and harmony skills.

An ideal space would be a light and airy room, where you are able to move around and try out different configurations for different songs. Room acoustics are less essential for school rehearsals, but avoiding a boomy space can be helpful in terms of building musical and healthy vocal skills. Room ventilation for singing is still a hot topic in this post-covid era, and whilst the sensationalised 'dangers' of singing have been debunked, the coughs and colds that are ever present in schools mean that rehearsing in a well-ventilated space can be useful for keeping well. It also makes the experience much nicer! It is worth noting though, that if you are working with teenagers, a room with windows overlooking social spaces may cause the students to feel self-conscious about their singing. It is worth considering this if you are restricted to break and lunchtime sessions.

Accompaniment

A piano is ideal, but make sure it is in tune! Being able to pitch match against a piano that is in tune will make it so much easier to train your choir's ear and begin to introduce them to harmony singing. If you don't have access to a tuned piano, use an electronic keyboard or backing tracks. Backing track resources are provided by music publishers with many available on Youtube and other streaming platforms. Do always check these sources, as you want to be sure composers and arrangers are getting paid for their work. If you are uncertain about this, the PRS foundation have guidance (www.prs.org).

Recruiting Singers

Singing is a wonderfully inclusive hobby and school choirs should aim to be as open and welcoming as possible. Consider what kind of choir you want to set up and how many singers to recruit. You may have particular music that you want to perform, or perhaps your mission is to foster a sense of community within your school. If you are aiming to sing unison and simple part songs/rounds, then your main concern will likely be how many singers is manageable in the space and with the staffing that you have. What you decide will be largely driven by behaviour management concerns and how equipped you feel for dealing with larger groups. Ideally, you want at least 12 singers minimum for a small chamber choir. Larger groups of 30 plus will require more confidence in leadership but can provide a rewarding musical experience.

You may decide to have separate choirs for boys and girls. In order to be as inclusive as possible it can be helpful to have upper and lower voice choirs. This allows students who identify with a gender other than that assigned at birth to find a welcoming place in the choir that is respectful and accommodating of their physical and mental health, as well as vocal wellbeing.

Multiple choirs or rehearsing in upper and lower voice sections can be useful for encouraging boys to sing. Research suggests this can enhance the learning of vocal skills by allowing choir leaders to focus on the particular needs of changing voices. However, some interesting new research has recently been published that suggests boys perform better when they are with girls as it brings out their desire to impress!

For SATB singing with older secondary and post-16 students you will want to try and get a balance of voices for each part. It is worth being mindful that at this age there are very few true altos or true basses. Most teenage voices fall in the middle range of upper and lower registers. Often, it is the good sight-readers and those with more advanced singing techniques who are allocated to these harmony parts at the extreme ends of their registers. Whilst this is not always problematic and can enable performance of a wider range of repertoire, from a vocal health perspective one must consider that this may not always be the most helpful or safe option. It is worth regularly checking in with singers to check that they are comfortable singing in that range. Don't be afraid to move people around. Boys' voices will change most dramatically, but girls' voices also go through a period of change, which ebbs and flows along with hormonal cycles. You don't need to know exactly what is going on for individual students, but you do need to build good relationships with them and be open to listening to more than their singing voices – reading their body language, energy and moods can tell you a great deal about how to allocate parts and set the tone and pace for each rehearsal.

Choosing Repertoire

Now you have recruited singers and decided on a goal for your choir you are able to begin choosing repertoire. Unless you are specifically focused on a particular genre, for example English Choral music, you will most likely want to introduce students to a range of musical styles and genres.

Decide whether students will have music. For younger students I would recommend learning songs by ear and providing lyric sheets for them to take away, along with some rehearsal tracks. For older and more advanced students, beginning to introduce sight-singing to sessions will require enough copies (and spares!). However, even singers with excellent music reading skills should sing from memory and learn by ear sometimes.

Included in your repertoire choices should be a range of simple songs and rounds to be used during warm-ups. These songs will not only provide a focus for healthy vocal hygiene but will begin to introduce key musical skills such as listening, harmony singing and rhythmic awareness. Many warm-up songs include body percussion and movement, which is an excellent way to introduce singers to the importance of mind/body connection in singing. Sing Up! Is an excellent resource for these shorter songs (www.singup.org) and a new publication of warm-ups published by Banks Music is a great investment.

Alongside warm-up songs, riddles and rhymes, begin exploring classical songs to provide grounding in traditional singing techniques. An excellent resource for songs that build on classical singing skills can be found on the Britten Pears Friday afternoons website (<https://brittenpearsarts.org/friday-afternoons>). The resources on this site also include songs from around the world. It is important to

consider the balance of cultures in your programming and how we can contribute to decolonising music education. Taking a little time to explore compositions by indigenous peoples, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals is well worth the effort and will broaden social and culture horizons as well as musical landscapes for your students.

Lower voices perhaps require slightly more careful thought when it comes to programming. Balancing the needs of lower voices and the unpredictable nature of these changes can be difficult. The charts below from John Cooksey's work provide a useful guide when considering suitable pitch ranges for lower and upper voices. It is also worth visiting the Cambiata Institute website, which provide suggested songs for lower voices at various ages and stages of voice change. (<http://cambiatainstitute.com/resources>).

Phase 2: Singing

Once preparations have been made, singers recruited and the music has arrived it is time to sing. But how do you run a successful rehearsal?

Structuring rehearsals

Warm up

Warming up is vital. Embedding healthy voice use from the beginning can facilitate a lifelong love of singing.

The voice consists of complex interactions of muscles and ligaments. A warm-up should consider the mind/body/voice connection and include activities related to each of these elements. Remember that students will mirror the body language and sound of their choir leaders. So, it is crucial that you also warm-up and pay attention to your technique and vocal health.

Warming up the body

Singers should not feel tense and rigid when they are standing tall. Singing is a whole-body endeavour and students need to be able to respond to the music with movement and flexibility in the body as well as the voice. Below is a simple body warm-up format:

- Stretching
- Shaking hands and feet
- Jogging on spot
- Rolling the body down and then back up, slowly stacking the vertebrae
- Moving between standing slouched and standing tall
- Stand with feet hip width apart, with hands relaxed by their sides and heads looking forwards, rock back and forward on heels and toes

Warming up the breath

Starting with warming up the body will make breathing for singing easier and more efficient. As you move into warming up the breath you will want to consider getting a breath that is deeper than when we are at rest. It is common for young singers to want to show you how well they are

breathing, which can lead them to exaggerate the breath and bring their shoulders and chest up and out. Instead of this, we want to encourage a breath that is lower down in the belly, strong, energised and engages the core muscles.

A helpful and simple image for singers can be imagining their stomach as a balloon which fills on inhalation and empties on exhalation.

Warming up the voice

Below are some simple steps in a vocal warm-up:

- Humming softly up and down the easy middle range of the singers' voices

Remember – singers' easy mid-range might not be the same as yours, depending on their age. You can refer to the range charts for help deciding on which pitches to suggest.

- SOVT exercises Lip trills, rolled r sounds or puffy cheeks sliding and gliding up and down the range

SOVTs are semi-occluded vocal tract exercises (referring to a partially closed mouth) and provide gentle resistance to begin stretching the vocal muscles further.

- Simple scale patterns on vowel sounds a, e, i, o, u
- Tongue circles, stretches and blowing raspberries
- Unvoiced fricatives such as 'ffff', 'shhh', 'thhh' (as in the word **'theatre'**), 'hhhhh', and moving to voiced fricatives 'zzzz', 'vvvv', 'thhhh' (as in the word **'those'**)

Try to keep unvoiced fricatives as breathy as possible, aiming for hissing sound.

- Consonant sounds 'k', 'p', 'd', 't'
- Tongue twisters and riddles, the sillier the better

A laughing singer is a singer who is relaxing and engaging their body, breath and voice without thinking about it too hard!

- Simple rounds and part songs

Singing Skills

Now that your singers are warmed up, you can build on the rounds and part songs and introduce more vocal technique. This might include returning to breath exercises and practising singing over longer phrases, working on coordinating the breath for singing crescendo and decrescendo, playing with characters and sounds to build resonance, singing to the upper and lower parts of their ranges to train vocal strength and tone in these places. If you are uncertain about how to do this, then you could invite the singing teacher at your school to come to a session or attend CPD at your music hub. You might also take a singing lesson yourself to experience firsthand how certain exercises feel and the difference they make.

Don't forget the importance of the mind/body/voice connection. You can use this time to build musicianship by including rhythmic games such as don't clap this one back, action songs that involve internalising song such as alive, alert, awake, and songs that give the brain a workout by including complicated patterns and changes on each repetition, such as the magic number.

Don't Clap This One Back <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4KN94wUxtA>

Alive Alert Awake <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCYB8gMhvng>

Magic Number <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo8ZsckeVUE>

For young and adolescent choirs, the most important skills will be around singing in a relaxed manner, not 'pushing' to try to sound louder or older. This can be achieved through practising the warm-up skills and encouraging active listening during sessions.

Learning Songs

For younger singers learning by ear through call and response styles is effective. Using your hands to pitch pattern (visually replicated the rise and fall of notes) is crucial and singers can copy these gestures when they repeat phrases. There is excellent neuroscience research, showing a close connection between the regions of the brain connected to voice and those connected to gesture. Additionally, motor learning theory suggests that combining multi-sensory modes of learning can embed deeper learning.

For more advanced and older students, sight-reading is another way of learning. All but the most advanced singers will want to be accompanied during this. At first, with the piano playing their parts, and as they progress reducing this to harmonic support, and finally playing the accompaniment provided or singing acapella.

Just as in any other teaching and learning activities, it is important that learning is chunked into smaller manageable sections. A top tip is that, after an initial sing or listen through, you can start learning a song from the end or middle. All too often we can run out of time and rush these parts of the music, meaning that it is sometimes less accomplished than the beginning of a piece. Psychologically, starting at the end is a useful strategy, as when you return to the start of the piece, students are working towards a section that is already known. Don't underestimate how motivational this can be!

Cool down

As you come towards the end of the rehearsal it is very important to cool the voice down. All too often this is a missing link in the rehearsal process, however it is an essential part of good vocal health. You can use similar SOVT exercises to those in your warm-up and simply reverse the pitch patterns to descending rather than ascending. You can follow this with some gentle breathing and stretching. In its simplest form, a cool down is a reverse of the warm-up process.

Supporting singing at home

Practice tracks

Consider whether you want and need singers to learn music and practice songs at home between rehearsals. This may not be appropriate for the very youngest choirs, however by Key stage 2 and above students should be able to learn words and music using lyric sheets, backing tracks and/or practice videos. There are many resources already available online, however it is worth checking these carefully to ensure that the singers are replicating the style that you want your choir to sing in.

Summary

Choral singing is a wonderful experience that will increase the physical and mental wellbeing of staff and students alike. There are as many different types of group singing as there are singers. Don't be afraid to experiment and be playful. There are no right or wrong ways to run a choir. What works for you and your school is what works. Following the advice in the resource will set you on the right tracks and after that the choral world is your oyster!

Step-by-step guide

1. Be clear about why you want to start a choir; set a clear aim and vision
2. Make contact with your local music hub and other community music organisations
3. Decide when, where and for how long rehearsals will be
4. Organise accompaniment (piano, keyboard or backing tracks) and accompanist
5. Decide on performance opportunities and goals and get these in the school diary
6. Organise accompaniment (piano, keyboard or backing tracks)
7. Recruit singers
8. Choose repertoire – think about vocal health needs, decolonising the curriculum, and expanding horizons
9. Prepare lyric sheets, music handouts and practice materials (e.g. backing tracks)
10. Plan your rehearsal as you would do a lesson