



August 2014



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So what does a choir director actually do? The easy answer to this question is that a choir director leads a vocal

ensemble but, in reality, he or she does so much more than this. For a start, you have to select the pieces that your choir will sing very carefully, ensuring that the standard and style are right and appropriate for each occasion and for your own singers. This sounds such an easy thing to do but you have to pay attention to your choir's strengths and weaknesses. Simpler is always better as over-challenging the choir results in unnecessary stress for everybody involved. The wrong choice of repertoire, especially when dealing with a mixture of trained and untrained voices, is a recipe for disaster. You want to be able to challenge the more able readers whilst not discouraging the rest.

In an ideal musical world your choir would have a large, well-known and loved repertoire which the conductor could select from at will and, with just a few minutes rehearsal, any chosen arrangement would be ready for public performance. If only it were this simple in practice! Learning new material takes hours of rehearsal time - my ladies will confirm this - but it is so easy to forget pieces that were performed to a decent standard last year.

A choir director needs a vast variety of musical skills. You need to be a good accompanist and a reasonable singer with great aural awareness and fine sight - reading ability. It certainly helps if you have a background in teaching, theory, harmony, arranging and vocal production, plus conducting, of course. You must keep an open mind at all times and be ready to pick up useful tips and try out new music. Languages skills are a real bonus although, sadly, I have to admit that this is not one of my strengths. Before stepping out in front of any choir, you have to be totally prepared and must never ask anything of your singers that you can't do yourself. It is up to the conductor to set the tone of rehearsals by being punctual and knowing exactly what they want to have achieved by the end

of the evening.

People join a choir for a host of different reasons. Some may come just for a night out and a chance to gossip with their friends, whilst for others it is a much more serious venture. The ultimate goal for all of your singers, however, is to perform choral music to the best of their ability and to give pleasure to their audiences. It is the job of the choral director to inspire the singers by communicating, both verbally and physically, their wishes to the choir. You need to be a pretty good manager as each singer requires something different from the conductor. Rehearsals should be worthwhile and enjoyable for both choir members and conductor and it is the role of the conductor to nip any problems in the bud in order to preserve harmony within the group. A good director truly cares about each member of the ensemble .

In conclusion, it is a combination of skills and talents, plus a deep love of music and a lot of hard work, that makes a successful choral director. However, any conductor will be sorely tested when trying to put together a programme and not being able to get everyone to rehearsals as a deadline approaches. Unfortunately, this scenario happens time and time again. I recently read an article and I thought that I'd share this short extract from it with you.

"From experience, I think that there is little worse for choral singers than having a panic-stricken conductor hammering away at a tricky section right up to the wire, then declaring that time has run out and finishing the rehearsal with a plea for everyone to do their homework" Does this ring any bells, ladies? I can almost hear myself saying these words!

To all members of the Imperial Choir, I would like to say thank you for your sense of humour, your enthusiasm, your commitment and your fantastic organisational skills in balancing family, work and musical commitments. I apologize for my looks of utter hopelessness at times and my nagging at other moments but, somehow, we seem to gel as a team and rise to the occasion. A very happy festa to you all.