

Getting Started with Children's Choir

By Lu Lee Hui

Nothing proves more joyful than to hear the sound of children's voices singing songs of praise. Children seem talented in sharing songs with the church in their own innocent ways. While they may appear nervous during the performance, it is always a pleasure to hear them sing. Consider starting a children's choir if your church does not have one. It can have simple start with comprehensive planning.

A general perception of the purpose of a children's choir is to perform during worship from time to time. Performance may be the goal, but that is just the frosting on the cake. The core reason for establishing a children's choir in your church is to instil consistent skills development – learning proper vocal techniques and musical development.

Reasons to form a Children's Choir

If you haven't already known, research has shown that children who sing in choruses have greater academic success and more advanced social skills than those who do not. Choir is also a platform to practice discipline, perseverance, teamwork, and dependability. Moreover, children's choir can be a good outreach program to the non-believers. Doctrine and moral values can be taught through the anthems, and songs from various cultures and historical periods can present children with glimpses of different worlds and eras.

So, how do I start?

First and foremost, talk to the church pastor and church deacons. Gaining support and approval from the church is equally important as having the right person to lead and teach the choir.

Put up an advertisement in the church newsletter or bulletin to inform parents on children's choir enrolment. Inform them on the whole idea and purpose of the choir and remember to announce the first rehearsal date. Pick a day or time slot that clash the least with other church activities as there is no point agonising over the best day or time for everyone, since church is always full of activities.

Gather a core group of people who have already been working with your church's children and have them suggest names of people who might be interested. This will help you set up a priority list on children to recruit. Make calls to the parents as a form of personal invitation. You may tell them that they were "recommended." Once you have invited a few, news may start to spread by word of mouth and your choir will soon be up and running.

What should the age limit be?

If met with a huge range in age, you may want to consider dividing the children into two (or more) choirs, provided you have the man-power to assist, support and facilitate. Based on information regarding children's musical development in the previous articles, you can gather children ranging from kindergarten age to eight-year-olds to form a group. Those between nine to twelve years old could form another. Younger children can sing easier songs while the older ones can sing more complex ones.

However, in most cases, we could only afford to train one group. Since that is so, you may have to exclude the very young ones till such a time when they discover their vocal capabilities and range.

Should there be an audition?

An audition is useful in emphasizing on commitment to the choir. More importantly, they need to understand the importance of how individual voices contribute to the entire sound of the group. This doesn't mean only the most talented ones are accepted, but that all children who express interest should be given fair opportunity. An audition allows the conductor to understand the vocal quality and musicianship of each child, thus having a better sense when choosing repertoire and devising training methods.

In an audition, let the child sing a familiar song such as "Twinkle, twinkle little star" in a comfortable middle range key, and then proceed to higher and lower keys. You may want to test pitch accuracy by having the child sing a short melodic patterns, either following after the piano or having it sung by the teacher.

The Vocal Model

Children tend to sing in the manner and style that is first impressed upon them. Therefore, a good vocal model is critical in the whole instructional process. Children should see and hear what is expected of them. They need to understand about good singing posture – a straight and well aligned body that is not stiff. They need to see a singer's facial expression and gesture. Therefore it is pertinent that the teacher who models for the children must be able to sing musically in tune and be rhythmically correct, according to its stylistic nuances.

Male teachers, in order to be effective models, need to use falsetto when working with young children or inexperienced young singers. This falsetto should sound light and soft in an effortless way instead of being forced. Children with more experience in singing, often by the age of ten, will be able to transfer the sound of a male voice to their own register.

Should I get some assistance?

Yes! Even if you can play the piano well, it is advisable to find a good accompanist. You will also need an extra hand to work on the administration and discipline while the conductor is teaching. Once the choir is more established, encourage the older children to assist the younger ones in rehearsals. They can set example in areas of behaviour as well as singing with a more mature sound.

What should we sing?

It is important to take into consideration the children's vocal development when choosing a performance piece. (You may refer to our previous article for some references.) Here are some guidelines for song selection:

- ✦ Try to expose children to a variety of historical and cultural repertoire.
- ✦ Select a song that is age-appropriate.
- ✦ Check the music range, tessitura and text.
- ✦ Review the musical and textual highlights.

Why wait? Start a children's choir in your church today!

About the author

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Upon graduation from the Singapore Bible College School of Church Music, University of Melbourne and from the University of Queensland with Master of Music Studies in Choral Conducting, Lee Hui further studied and obtained Diploma in Choral Conducting from the Zoltan Kodaly Pedagogical Institute of Music, under Ferencc Liszt Academy of Music in Hungary in 2009. Currently, she is the Principal Conductor of the International Christian Festival Singers (ICFS) and the Music Educator of International Christian Choral Conducting Society (ICCS).