

Youth Choir – Every Church Should Have One

By Lu Lee Hui

After graduating from Singapore Bible College, the first church which I served in requested me to direct their youth choir. As the youth choir conductor, I had to give spiritual guidance and teach on what church music is all about. I simply loved the idea of working with a youth choir. After all, I had been in a youth choir as a teenager, and that had helped me in many ways.

Why have a youth choir? Two reasons: the spiritual development and general well-being of the youths. It is desirable that youths mature in their Christian walk through choir-related activities and experiences, so that they can better relate to church life and ministries. The fact that we are not situated in a region of rich choral art heritage and with the proliferation of worship band, it is no wonder that choir gradually becomes a dying art. Directing a youth choir is simply a demanding enterprise! However, as parents and leaders of the church, we have to recognize that we are ultimately responsible for the musical well-being of our teenagers. Many times we fail to see the obvious: just as godless music can lead teenagers astray, God-centered music possess the healing power to restore the lost. So be prepared to work off our motivation batteries for many months before you see the teens give back.

How do you start a youth choir? The only way to have a successful youth choir is to grow it. A well-designed choir program for younger children is required. It is not realistic to expect a strong youth choir to come about overnight. Good singing calls for discipline of the mind as well as the development of vocal muscles through trainings. Therefore, the beginning of a good youth choir comes from early music training, as early as three or four years old.¹

The secret to a successful choir program lies in conveying choir as a ministry of importance, in order to attract the loyalty and devotion of the youths. When forming a youth choir, the youths must first be challenged to serve the church, thereafter comes the music. When teens are being challenged, they will respond to specific goals and start to serve responsibly and on a regular basis. At the initial stage, a short-range goal, such as performance (of a specific work chosen) with an obvious appeal can be attractive. Added responsibilities such as regular worship leading or singing for orphanages and hospitals, increases the potential for success. Uniform or choir robe strengthens identity, igniting in them group pride and a sense of belonging to a worthwhile organization. Believe in them and they will rise to the expectations put before them.

Spot the “leaders” and recruit them on a personal basis. Young people need to feel important. Start off by working on group dynamics. Approaches on care, concern and nurturing the teenagers need to be intentional. You can get them involved by giving them opportunities to reach out and be responsible for others in the group. Be there when they need you.

Spare time for individual voice lesson. Not only are you strengthening them vocally but spiritually as well. Work towards establishing a good choral sound and give a varied musical diet. Offer them Bach, Schütz, Handel, Mozart, etc. and teach on how these compositions can be sung *and* enjoyed. Many a times, we fear that unless we are “in” (trend), they will not like us or the choir. The fact is that we are often afraid to give expectations and thus settle for less, when they may actually be ready to offer more.

You also need to be aware that the same youth who sings in the choir also attends Sunday school and the youth fellowship. Therefore it is essential to coordinate and work with the youth director or Christian education director. A unified approach in planning brings about a wholesome youth program which enables them to participate in many activities meaningfully.

How to care for youth voices? Youth choir directors need to understand the adolescent’s voice, especially the changing voice². Due to the confines of this article, we will not dwell on the topic of changing voice. In many churches, boys who are experiencing voice change are often asked to serve as acolytes or play the hand bells. No doubt that playing instrument is greatly encouraged, but that should not replace singing. Some boys may experience a sudden and rapid growth in their vocal cords. It is crucial that they keep singing through the changing phase, so that they do not lose muscular control over the voice.

Children's choir directors should prepare the boys mentally and encourage them to keep on singing through this phase of change³. Emphasis should be placed on developing the head voice. Forcing the voice down to make it sound more masculine should be discouraged. As their vocal range gradually become limited, they lose the ability to pitch high but they can build pitching low. In general, the voice moves from the treble range down through alto and tenor range and into that of an adolescent baritone. At later stage, they may explore by adding more notes on top of their range to become a mature tenor, or extend further downward to become a bass.

It is also true that girls experience voice change. Though not as radical and obvious as the boys, girls may find it more difficult to sing the high pitch and may sound breathy and heavier in quality. Girls going through this phase should not sing in loud and extreme ranges.

During rehearsals, tension relieving exercises can be of great help to singers going through voice change - frequent head and shoulders rotation, flex and release neck muscles, breathe deeply and relax with a long sigh. Offer encouragement and never tell the youth not to sing during this time. After all, every growing boy and girl experience change and voice change is part of growth.

How to rehearse? Good choirs do not just happen. They are slowly built up through well-planned rehearsals with intentional approaches. Youth choirs learn at a fast pace and require flexible approaches to music. As such, try not to attempt to cover too much material in one rehearsal or dwell too long on one problem. Allow time for relaxation by injecting humor, praise, and blame. Don't sing with the choir, listen to it. Use your voice to illustrate what you want. Strive to work on intonation and pitch⁴, phrasing⁵, tone colour⁶ and blending of voices⁷.

Every rehearsal should begin and end on time. Waiting for latecomers to arrive accentuates their tardiness. Ending a rehearsal late is inconsiderate to the choir members, as it upsets their plans and responsibilities following the rehearsal. Apparently, no one rehearsal formula works for every youth choir or director. The unique requirements of each choir, coupled with the director's personality and ability, should determine what happens in rehearsals.

Finally, we cannot expect future church music leaders, or even well-trained congregations to abound, if we do not begin now with the children and youths. Children and youth choir should be promoted and developed in all churches. The younger generation that is generally enthusiastic about singing may eventually grow into an adult choir. The church should seriously consider a holistic church music program to educate the young. As in the words of St. Augustine, "He who sings, prays twice", so sing, sing, sing!

1 Preschoolers (3-4 years old) enjoy responding physically to melody, rhythm, and timing and should learn rhythms, tone matching and simple melodies. The emphasis is not so much on producing a good tone, but to experience simple elements of music. By kindergarten, they should be able to discipline himself in a group setting, so choir singing is possible. They should be taught the meaning and methods of worship, and how a choir leads in worship. Avoid having children choir parading to the front of the church for a "special" anthem, and then head back to Sunday school. It would be difficult to educate the children on the true function of a choir – to lead worship. Such improper patterns will discourage meaningful youth choir participation.

2 Also known as *cambiata* voice.

3 The more obvious phase seems to take place almost overnight for some boys, while for some others, it may take months. The change brings about approximately an octave drop in the speaking and singing voice of the boys. The larynx and vocal chords are believed to double in size, resulting in lowering of the voice range.

4 Intonation and pitch problems may be related to insecure sight reading, poor training in intervals, mental laziness, weariness and uncomfortable rehearsal room. "Think low as you go high, and vice versa." Upward intervals demand energy in their preparation. To maintain good intonation for downward intervals, increase the lift of soft palate to the lower pitch.

5 Phrasing is a difficult skill to teach. It calls for good singing technique to "shape" the melodies. Decide on where to breath, nuance, phrase direction/movement.

6 A choir should not sing "For the Beauty of the Earth" with the same kind of sound as "Old Hundredth." Directors should guide the youth to create choral tone which reflects their awareness of the meaning of the text and melody.

7 Blending takes time and listening skills. It does not mean making the individual voice colourless, pale, or impersonal. Unified vowel, clarity of harmony, intonation, should come together to achieve a perfect blend of sound.

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 Ferenc 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 (ICCCS).