



Elementary

So you want to start an elementary school choir...

by Curtis Payne • UMEA Elementary Vice President

Over the years, I have had many teachers ask me how to start an elementary school choir. I have come to the conclusion that there isn't one "right" way. However, there are some things that I feel need to be a part of a successful group. Of course, these are my opinions. But having directed a successful school choir for the last 25 years, I do have a pretty good idea of what works and what doesn't. So here it goes...!

First, you need to decide what kind of choir you want. I put them in four categories:

#1 The "Let's just get together and sing" group that performs only a couple of times a year. This group might practice once a week or so, and anyone who can breathe and walk at the same time can be a part of it.

#2 This choir will basically have a Christmas and Spring show with a couple of others thrown in. They usually practice a couple of times a week. Some of these ensembles might have restrictions on membership, such as age, grade level and commitment.

#3 The school choir/performing group. This group usually has some sort of criteria or audition involved to be a member of the choir. This ensemble will be heavily involved in school and community performance. A 3-day practice week is usually the minimum for this type of choir

#4 The performing/classical/competition group. Members of this type of ensemble are highly committed. The directors are usually very talented with a lot of experience teaching voice, harmonization, etc. The choir may have greater focus on classical music repertoire. These groups, because of the talent of the directors, singers, and the time commitment involved, tend to perform at a high level. They also tend to be more of a community-type ensemble than a school choir.

For the most part, elementary school choirs will consist of numbers 2 and 3. In my opinion, number 1 is a waste of time and will not be fulfilling to the director or the students. Number 4 is a huge commitment and very difficult to pull off in a public school setting. However, we do have some marvelous community and school children's choirs in our state that are of this caliber. But most of us are left with choices 2 and 3.

After you have decided what kind of choir you want, you need the details of how to achieve that type of ensemble.

To audition or not to audition?

For the type 2 choir, an audition is probably not necessary. The goal is usually to give kids an opportunity to sing. Because the

commitment of the singers is usually just a couple of programs, all you would really need is some sort of commitment and a few rules, such as be on time, no goofing off, etc.

If your choir is going to perform, you had better have some standard to start with, or you will quickly find out that students will not trust your judgment, parents will not support you, and no one will invite you to sing. An audition holds students to a higher standard and a higher level of commitment. The audition should be simple. My auditions consist of the student singing "It's a Small World" to an accompaniment track. It has a good range; most kids know it and the lyrics are easy to remember. Since my kids sing 99% of the time to accompaniment tracks, that is what I want them to do in the audition. Acapella is fine, if you need to listen to voice quality, color, timbre and the singer's vibrato. But what I want to know is can my singers can stay in-tune to the music? And this ain't "American Idol."

Size: how many kids do you want; how many do you need and how many can the school afford?

A large group has some inherent problems. First is finding a large enough place to practice; second, crowd control. The other challenge you need to think about is if you plan on performing somewhere other than your own school, you will need transportation. There are times when it is appropriate to have parents haul their kids to the performances, but there will be many times when performances are during the school day, and a bus will be needed. I limit my choir to around 80, because that is how many fit on a bus. Buses cost money. The necessity of ordering two buses gets very expensive very quickly. I also hold the numbers down, because most venues can't accommodate over 80 students.

What age group should be included in my choir?

Again, this depends upon what type of choir you want. Our school choir is a type 3. We perform often. In order for my choir to function from year to year, I include 3rd, 4th and 5th graders in the group. By 5th grade, I have some pretty polished and confident singers. That means I have an easier time getting started every year, because I have students who already know the drill and already know 20-40 songs. They can dig into that repertoire and be ready to perform just a couple of weeks after school starts.

Choreography is another consideration when determining the age of choir students. We do a lot of movement, and I found that most 3rd graders can clap and move to a beat. Any younger than



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that, and you will notice a lot of coordination problems.

Uniforms?

Students need to feel part of something. A uniform, t-shirt or robe gives them a sense of belonging and the feeling that what they are doing is special and worthwhile.

To me, looking good is half the battle, and that battle can be won fairly inexpensively. A nice, colorful T-shirt with a good looking logo will cost around \$7. I have a sponsor that purchases our choir shirts. Your parent organization could probably help here too.

I require the kids to wear long, black pants and dark shoes and socks. Black goes with any color and always looks nice and professional. And in my opinion, unless you are doing some sort of cowboy selection, blue jeans should never be part of the uniform, unless they are all EXACTLY the same. (Good luck with that.)

Your group needs an identity.

“So and so” Elementary Choir is a boring name. Find a name that will set you apart from being just “another choir.”

Should I ask for help?

I am a dictator, so I have no co-director. That way, I have no one to blame but myself if things go south. If you have a colleague or friend that is willing to put in the time with you... great! Some choirs have parent helpers or presidents or some type of support organization. I never felt comfortable with those, because I never wanted to be beholden to a parent to give their child a solo part or special treatment, and it keeps me a little more objective. I do have parents help at times, but only when I feel it is needed. I think the only time I would be comfortable with a lot of organized parent help would be, if I directed a choir that performed out of town or at venues that required lots of

transportation, housing or funding.

Do I need an accompanist or should I use music tracks?

A good accompanist, who is willing to practice 3 days a week and perform 25-30 times a year with us and do it for free, does not exist in my world. If you have one...lucky you.

There will always be the argument of whether or not you should just use a piano or use background tracks. I won't get into that here. I think the argument is a little silly, though. Who wouldn't want to perform with an orchestra or band? And in this day of marvelous technology, almost everything can be put to some sort of orchestration. And I guarantee, your elementary students would rather perform to a great sounding orchestra than just a piano...and so will your audience.

You will also need to ask yourself if all of your performance venues will have an available piano. Most places where we sing have a nice, available sound system but rarely a good piano. And if worse comes to worse, I can always bring my boom box. Another argument is that CDs and boom boxes never get sick. Yeah, yeah, CD players sometimes break. But I can replace a CD player a lot faster and easier than an accompanist!

Do I need any special equipment?

If you will always be performing at venues that already have a sound system or a piano, you really don't need any special equipment. Our group has its own sound system so we can perform at care centers, clubs, restaurants or venues that don't have an amplified sound system. It consists of an 8 input amplifier, a couple of large speakers, CD player and wireless microphones. Purchasing an adequate system of this type costs about \$1500-\$2000. I use my system when we practice, so students are familiar with the microphones and where they need to stand in relationship to the speakers, etc.

What kind of music should I sing and where do I find it?

Let's answer the easy question first. Where do I find music? Almost every music publisher in the United States has a website. Catalogs with 1000's of titles can be found on these websites. And the neat thing about it is most of the catalogs have a preview feature, allowing you to listen to the song and view the score. Many of the companies send out preview CDs of new material and also provide samples online. Get on their mailing list. Some of these companies include: JW Pepper, Hal Leonard, Shawnee Press, Alfred Music and Heritage Press.

If you'd like to know what the song sounds like with a real choir, type the name of a song in the YouTube search box, and you'll probably have several video's pop up of somebody or some group performing the song.

Now the question of "What should we sing?" Since this is a new experience for both you and the kids, you need to be singing things they will enjoy. The songs need to be full of life and energy. Please leave "Kyrie," "Agnus Dei" and "Pie Jesu" for another day. Any selection that has more than about two measures of harmony should also be left on the shelf for a while. Students need to be successful and sound good. Plodding through Latin, other foreign languages, and crazy harmonies with a brand new elementary choir is asking for disaster.

Start with some fun unison songs. You can find these at music websites. Listen to them and see if they fit your choir students and your personality. There are lots of good novelty songs out there that are fun and make for a good performance.

Next, find a couple of good partner songs. These are usually songs that take a classic or well known song and pair it with a new composition. The classic is sung first, then the new song, and then they are combined so that you have half of your choir singing the classic and the other half singing the new song. These songs are usually pretty simple, but when you put them together they sound a whole lot more complicated and are often very impressive.

Pick a couple of songs that are currently popular or come from familiar movies. If students know the words and the melody already, most of the work is done for you. Just remember that even though the song may be popular, it may not be appropriate for 10 year-olds to be singing.

By all means, when you order your music, buy the CD that



goes with it! It will have both the accompaniment and a full performance track, letting your kids hear what the music sounds like. As far as purchasing scores, that is up to you. You probably should order at least one or two. Odds are, the kids can't read music very well, so buying 70 scores is not going to be helpful or a good use of the paltry funds you have to run your music program. Teach the lyrics in any way you feel comfortable.

Another question

I am frequently asked is, "How many songs should I have in my repertoire?" Generally, you should have between 20 and 30 minutes of material ready for any given program. Depending upon the length of the songs, that would be between 7 and 10 selections. Remember that your audience does not have an unlimited attention span. Anything over 30 minutes, and people will start looking at their watches.

If you plan to perform a lot - more than just Christmas and a Spring show - you should probably have about 15-20 songs under your belt from which you can pick and choose (depending upon the type of venue where you are performing). As your choir progresses from year to year, they will naturally have 20-30 songs in their song bucket from prior years. This can be very helpful, if your group is asked to perform early in the school year. You can quickly recycle some of the "old" numbers, requiring only about 10 new selections to start the year.

When choosing your music, look for selections that will work well for a soloist or small group to sing the verses. Most choirs can pick up the chorus very easy. You can have the soloist or small group learn the verses on their own, and that means it will take less time for the group to learn the song. You can almost learn 4 songs that contain solos, duets, etc., in the same amount of time it takes to learn songs in which every work needs to be learned by the whole group.

Choreography or no choreography?

Oh no! The "C" word! This is probably the most difficult thing to add to a performance. Most directors are not comfortable with it. I know I wasn't. But after going to a couple of John Jacobson workshops and trying it out with my kids, I wouldn't have it any other way. If you want to breathe some life into your choir, add some movement. It doesn't have to be complicated. Some of the simplest things, like 80 students clapping their hands in perfect unison, can have an awe-inspiring effect.

There are some good videos and online helps for creating choreography with your music. John Jacobson has produced a couple of videos about riser choreography with some common dance moves. You need to also be aware that choreography takes a little time. The rule of thumb is that for every minute of song, it will take about an hour to learn the choreography. But actually, it really won't take quite that long, since most songs have 2 or 3 choruses, and choreography can be repeated. But please realize it *will* take some extra time.

There are many songs that lend themselves to great choreography that should be added, if possible. And then there are some songs that need to be sung without choreography. Don't try to move during an unmoving song.

As an elementary choir director, your job is to bring the joy of music to the children you teach. You need to find material that is suitable for them - not overly difficult, but something that sounds good. They need to be able to perform and perform often. They need to be entertaining! When your choir is invited to perform, the audience wants to be entertained. They want to sit back, smile and enjoy the kids. Too many new directors seem to think they need to prove something and get caught up in the "I need to teach some real music" dogma. They end up spending an inordinate amount of time trying to push three-part harmonies in some obscure language to 10 year-olds. I guarantee that those in the audience will be more likely to remember the partner song to "I love the Mountains" than "Requiem." So be brave! Creating and directing an elementary choir can be one of the most rewarding experiences you will ever have!

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Book Review

Partner songs, a great resource for fun music

by Curtis Payne

I am often asked, "Where is the best place to find good music that the kids will enjoy, that sounds good and can be used in a program?" My answer is always, "partner songs." Most partner songs take a well-known tune, such as a folk song or other classic, and pair it with a new composition. Both songs are usually sung in unison, separately, and then combined for the last part of the song.

Two books in my personal library have some great partner songs. The first is, *Choose Your Partner* by John Jacobson and Alan Billingsley. It is a collection of 12 songs that partner a new, fresh, original song with an old favorite. Just add choreography by John Jacobson, and you have got an exciting collection to introduce two-part singing to your elementary students. Learn each tune separately; then put them together for instant harmonic fun!

The all-in-one format comes complete with piano/vocal accompaniment, choreography and reproducible singer pages. A CD is also available with both plus and minus tracks. This is a must purchase to go along with the book. This collection includes the songs, "I've been working on the railroad," "I love the Mountains" and "America." The book is published by Hal Leonard.

The second book, another John Jacobson and Alan Billingsley creation, is titled *Partners around the world*. It takes some

classic songs from different countries and pairs them with a new, original song. Some of the songs include, "Yankee Doodle," "O Canada," "Aloha Oe" and "Alouette." A performance and accompaniment CD is also available. This is a great fit for those music-around-the-world programs. It is also published by Hal Leonard.

Another title written by John Jacobson and Alan Billingsley that you might find useful titled *Choose your Holiday Partner*.



A Look Ahead

Elementary Calendar



Workshops:

Orff

UAOSA Summer Workshops

June 10-14 Intro. to Orff-Schulwerk, daily 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

June 17-28 Level I Orff-Schulwerk, daily 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Place: USU <http://www.orffschulwerkinthemountains.weebly.com>

Contact: Leslie Timmons leslie.timmons@usu.edu or

Ewa Wilczynski ewa.orff@comcast.net (435) 755-0853

June 11, 12, 2013 Arts Express Summer Conference for Elementary Educators (k-6), Lindon, Utah; contact: artspartnership@byu.edu or go to <http://education.byu>.

February 7-8, 2014 UMEA Mid-Winter Conference at the Dixie Center in St. George, Utah

Contact: Sharee Jorgensen, www.manager@umea.us

Please send calendar submissions and corrections to the editor:
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