

Ten commandments for the children's choir director

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The following material was developed to convey in a condensed form, some of the important elements of being a children's choir director. By seeing these ideas as "ten commandments" one should not construe that this writer has seen the burning bush. As we all know, teaching and conducting is a continuous process of learning and growth. Children make that process an exceptionally joyful one, for they have a tremendous intelligence and artistry within them waiting to be nurtured. If a choral director takes the time to understand the child's voice, its subtleties and capabilities, the results can be completely rewarding artistically and personally.

1. **Create good mental focus.** Rapid learning only occurs when the mind is focused. Excellent musicianship becomes apparent only when the mind is acutely sensitive to its physical and aural environment. With this level of mental intensity, the text will take on life and begin to link the singer aesthetically with the audience.
2. **Teach breathing/posture techniques.** The breath is the basis of all successful singing. To shortcut this technique is to shortcut your whole choral sound. Insist on good posture while singing. Through positive exercises promoting a relaxed but erect posture, children will soon learn that it indeed is the most comfortable way to sit or stand. In a healthy choral rehearsal environment, children will very quickly acquire a habit of sitting in "singer's posture" automatically without being reminded.
3. **Use correct vocal range.** Introduce vocalises and exercises in descending patterns always starting with the head voice. Promote singing in the upper part of the treble staff. Children can remember a specific pitch if it is done consistently at the beginning of every rehearsal. A good choice is c' (an octave above middle c). By starting on this pitch the children automatically begin singing in head voice and are given a tonal anchor which is immensely helpful to them as musicians. By developing the voice from the head voice, down, the singer is given a wide tessitura with beauty and vocal consistency on both sides of the break.

4. **Teach correct use of the resonating chambers.** Building consistent vowel shapes through accurate placement of tongue, jaw and soft palate is essential to good singing. One needs to listen to only a few children's choirs to know there is tremendous variety in the color and texture of the sound. As a director, you must decide what sound is most pleasing to your ear. The timbre of a children's chorus will almost always be a direct reflection of the vowel shapes being taught by the director. Model each vowel consistently and accurately. The children will very quickly assume those shapes in their singing with regularity.

5. **Insist on intonation accuracy.** The director must know when certain pitches are out of tune and be able to strive for accurate intonation through good teaching techniques. Often directors accept poor intonation. Children can sing in tune with amazing accuracy. Out of tune singing often results from improper breath support, incorrect vowel shape, insufficient solfege training, undeveloped audiation skills or just plain lack of attention. If you stress good intonation, they will soon be keenly sensitive to vocal accuracy.

6. **Promote a buoyancy of sound.** When students learn correct vocal breathing and support, they often will begin to force. Keep the tone spinning and buoyant and relaxed.

7. **Teach reading skills.** Using a system of solfege (preferable movable do) develops music literacy with some music in every rehearsal. Avoid teaching songs by rote. The goal for a children's choir director should not be to only teach songs but to develop musicianship.

8. **Teach an understanding of the music.** To perform music well, it must be internalized comprehensively. Give your students the advantage of understanding the music harmonically and structurally. It is imperative that the director take the time to analyze the music formally and harmonically in order to share that insight. Help the singers understand the context of their part in relationship to the rest of the music.

9. **Communicate the text.** Understand the subtleties of the language. Activate the articulators, so consonants are heard and the text is musically communicated. Take the time to learn the subtlety of the poetry. Artistic expression can only result from a deepened understanding of the text.

10. **Choose high quality literature.** Children deserve the best. Find the highest quality literature available. Teach the music stylistically so the student has a full sense of the greatness. The language should be appropriate for children. The melodic material should be well suited for their voices. But more important than anything the music should have aesthetic and artistic value.