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Thoughts for your community chorus

by Paul Schultz, R&S Chair for Community Choirs



Those of us who lead a community chorus are faced with a plethora of organizational tasks that take valuable time from our artistic planning and rehearsal time. The following thoughts might help streamline these tasks so that more time can be spent on the precious art of making music.

Auditions

There are numerous philosophies on this subject. For some, once you are in it is forever. Others screen their singers periodically. Many choruses hold annual auditions for new singers while some require everyone re-audition annually (or biennially). Whatever the philosophy, auditions can be a very time-consuming activity. Singers auditioning often arrive only a few minutes before their audition time and find they must still complete paperwork. This can delay the audition, throw the schedule behind, and make the singer feel rushed and more anxious. If you have a website, set it up so those auditioning can complete an audition form online. Singers can select an audition date, time, and offer brief comments online. The director (or audition team) can then download the forms and have them ready at the audition time. If you would like more information on setting this up, contact my website at www.nwrs.org.

Choir Rosters

Once the choir is selected, we usually create a roster including addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, fax numbers, etc. This is information obtained from the audition forms and is very valuable for both directors and section leaders when trying to contact an individual choir member. Once this list is assembled it can result in a six or seven page document, depending on the size of your chorus. This can be expensive to duplicate for each choir member and many members do not want their contact information available in printed form. We have found our website is again a wonderful tool to solve this problem. Our roster is available to choir members only on our website. Members will set up an account with a user name and password. Then each member can access a PDF file of choir members and contact information. This saves paper, duplicating costs, and that common phone call to the director asking, "Do you have an email address and phone numbers for Jane Alto?"

Ordering Music

Directors are finding the need to order music much earlier to have it in time for

that first rehearsal. Check with your music supplier to optimize this process. I have always favored supporting the local supplier but have also found that many publishers will ship scores directly to you more quickly and not charge you for shipping. Many of us opt to pick up our scores at the local supplier in order to avoid shipping charges. Check to see if the music can be shipped directly to you without shipping added to the bill. This alone can save up to a week in arrival time. I have found most suppliers will do this. If this fails...shop around!

Distribution of Music and Information

How much rehearsal time is wasted passing out music, distributing rehearsal schedules, rehearsal CD's, and making announcements? Most of us have no idea how this time adds up over the course of a season. Following are some ideas that probably seem obvious but will share them anyway. I like to start the year with a "retreat" (really should be called "advance") dedicated to both team building activities and most of the administrative things that take time away from rehearsals. This retreat can be held at an alternate location or at your usual rehearsal space. It can be an overnight event but I have found that three hours on a Saturday morning works just as efficiently.

Your librarian should have all the music in packets (or folders). These packets should also include season schedules, weekly rehearsal schedules, rehearsal CD's, handbooks, and organizational information including board of directors, officers, section leaders, committees, etc. If your singers are required to pay dues, the treasurer should be set up to collect funds.

One of the most important tasks at the retreat should be reading through the music in your folders. This is why we are here! This allows the singers to become acquainted with the repertoire, get excited about it, and start working on the music schedule for the first rehearsal. Singers respond very favorably to a rehearsal schedule listing the specific pieces (or sections of pieces) you will rehearse each week leading up to the concert. For example:

Repertoire

1. Ave Maria
2. Mozart Requiem

Rehearsal Date	Repertoire to be rehearsed
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April 6	1, 2 (Lacrymosa; Agnus Dei)
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The idea is that with this information, the choir will come to rehearsal on January 23rd having worked on Ave Maria and the selected movements of the Mozart Requiem.

How many of us take time for announcements during rehearsal time? Is this really necessary? The answers to both questions are quite obvious but there are ways to limit the time spent. In our Internet world, most information can be distributed in advance via email. Also encourage email communication from choir members to section leaders for things like absences, late arrival, score markings, text pronunciation, etc. This can save the director from having to deal with routine tasks not related to the preparation of music. Every rehearsal minute saved should (over time) make noticeable improvement in the artistic qualities of your ensemble. Announcements in rehearsal should be limited only to last minute, essential information by the choir president.

Rehearsal Setup/Tear Down

The old philosophy of punctuality is (and should be): “On time is late; early is on time.” Many rehearsals start late because the room is not set up, not because people arrive late. Most community choruses rehearse in churches, schools, or some venue used by other people during the day. This necessitates both setup before rehearsal and returning the space to the desires of those using the facility the next day. The most efficient way to deal with setup is a crew of volunteers arriving early and having it ready to go for each rehearsal. Often this simply involves rearranging chairs to fit your choir’s needs. I like to have my choir on risers three rehearsals before a concert. This may involve borrowing and transporting risers from another place and finding a place to store them for the concert. The crew might be the same people each week or it may rotate so that all are responsible at some time.

If only chairs are involved, each choir member can be responsible to move their chair to the desired place after rehearsal. A larger crew might be needed if striking and storing risers.

When using a church sanctuary, it is often necessary to move lecterns, altars, benches, etc. These pieces are usually in position for the worship service. It is vital that a representative from the choir be assigned to communicate with the church office regarding moving these items and devise a plan to insure they are returned to their original location after a rehearsal or concert.

I hope some of these ideas will be helpful to you in the future. I strongly feel all artistic directors of every chorus should do everything possible to delegate non-musical tasks to the leadership of the choir, and concentrate on score study, rehearsal preparation, and bringing the music to life so that it may touch the hearts and souls of your singers and audiences.