

How to organize successful choral retreats

Linda Crawford

As choir directors, we all know that weekly rehearsals are limited by time and venue. A “retreat” can offer choir singers a more in-depth and relaxed choral experience. There will be more time to focus on choral technique, to explore repertoire more deeply, and to get to know each other as singing colleagues. Even one day, or an afternoon, can re-energize a group, both musically and socially.

Venue

Choose a different location than your usual rehearsal space. It doesn't have to be far away, or chic. Just choose somewhere different, with a good aesthetic vibe. Choirs often enjoy retreats at rural churches, not far away from home. Churches are usually pretty, have good acoustics, and a “warm” atmosphere. A good idea is to liaise with the congregation, who may provide a simple, hearty lunch, for a very reasonable fee. This provides two good outcomes: (1) the choir enjoys a meal together, seated as a community, without having to prepare it themselves, and (2) the local congregation earns a bit of extra money—always a good thing for struggling churches. Check out the piano/keyboard/organ ahead of time. If those are not adequate, you may want to bring your own keyboard. Consider the access to bathrooms: if there is only one washroom, it can really hold things up. Consider the travel/parking/public transit situation: be prepared to organize car-pools. Consider distance: If your venue is too remote, transportation and time may become an issue. Check for space for non-singing activities: is there a hall with appropriate flooring, for whatever special group activity you are planning? Finally, consider cost: keep the price down. Families are feeling the financial pinch, and so are retirees. That covers a large part of our choir memberships, right?

Planning

1. Book your venue and your personnel at least two months in advance. Get the information to your singers right away, so that they can block off the weekend time on their calendars, make child-care arrangements, arrange work schedules, and line up transportation.
2. Plan at least one non-choral activity. Fun non-choral activities include:
 - a. Seasonal crafts or even colouring activities (yes, adults LOVE to colour.)
 - b. Yoga: focus on posture and breathing.
 - c. Nature walks: but plan an alternate activity, in case of bad weather.
 - d. Sports: especially good for kids, to burn a bit of energy after an intensive rehearsal. Consider a retreat at a horse ranch, with riding as our special activity.
 - e. Dancing: choose a genre appropriate to your group and programme. You can combine a workshop on celtic dance, on a year when you are singing a celtic programme.
 - f. Trivia contests: games that reflect your current repertoire, or which allow your members to get to know each other.
 - g. Ice-breaker/team-building games: Hit ‘motivational’ websites for ideas. Don't forget the classics, like musical chairs.
 - h. Drama games: Devise an activity that fits your concert theme, or which fosters team-building. Invite your local drama teacher in to lead the activity.

And you must have prizes, of course.

3. Make a basic outline of what you wish to achieve with your singers that day. Choose two focus concepts and research ways to implement those ideas.
4. Two weeks ahead, contact the special activity leader: confirm time, place, space, equipment, and fee, if any.
5. One week ahead, plan your music. Doing this any earlier is usually not productive. Balance the work between “note-bashing” and higher-level interpretation work. Too much of either one gets boring and exhausting. Most of your singers will likely be unfamiliar with the concept of rehearsing for such a long period of time.
6. Make sure you always have a “plan B”. Sometimes a day will evolve differently than how you expect. Seize an appropriate “teaching moment” if one appears. Prepare to be flexible.

Repertoire

On a retreat day you will have more time than usual for warm-up/vocal training activities. This is your opportunity to try something different. Explore some of those handouts or books that you have sitting on your shelf. Hit some choral blogs online. Ask your choral colleagues about their favourites. This is an opportunity for you to learn too. Try including a completing off-the-wall selection for the day, just for fun and giggles.

Encouraging leadership

Invite members of your choir to lead a warm-up, or to organize the non-choral activity to engage your singers in the choir, and strengthen bonds. Remember that high-school students who volunteer their help can be “paid” in “community service” hours.

Budget

Some organizations ask the adult singers to pay most of the cost, with the balance paid from the operating budget. For children’s choir half-day retreat, the entire cost can be included in the general operating budget. Some choirs solicit sponsorships/patrons of retreat days: ask community businesses to sponsor or even lead an activity, in exchange for publicity. Remember to budget to pay your professionals: they will be giving up their time, above and beyond their usual contracted rehearsal time. Often they are paying for extra child-care, or their spouse is “on-duty” for the day, to care for children.

Closing

How you end the day is important: you want folks to go home feeling good about their progress. For a children’s retreat, close the day with a fifteen minute “highlights concert” for parents. Demonstrate their favourite warm-up, ask one or two singers to share what they learned, show off their craft items, and then sing a couple of pieces that demonstrate good progress. This wrap-up will empower your young singers, practice their concert etiquette, and demonstrate to parents that the time (and money) was well-spent.

Have a great retreat. Happy singing.

Linda Crawford is Artistic Director of the Goulbourn Jubilee Singers, Ottawa. The organization includes two non-auditioned community choirs: an adult SATB choir, and an SA children’s choir. Linda recently retired after 30 years teaching Music and French for the ODCSB. She also manages the Sarah Burnell (celtic) Band.