

OFFICIAL SAMPLE EXCERPT

The Song of the
Righteous

A Choir
Director's
Handbook

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INTRODUCTION + CHAPTER ONE

A Choir Director's Handbook • Michael D. Young

INTRODUCTION

Congratulations! You've been called to serve as a ward or a stake choir director, or you've decided to join the choir in your ward or branch. Depending on your musical background, it is a calling that might stretch your abilities, but it is also a calling with the potential for great rewards. All sorts of people with varying abilities—all the way from the casual music enthusiast to the trained professional musician—are called to serve as choir directors.

As with any calling, you are there because the Lord wants you there, and He will strengthen your current abilities and grant you new ones as you serve in this capacity. Before my mission, I had taken years of piano lessons but had never touched an organ. On my mission, I was suddenly expected to play the organ for sacrament meetings. When I protested that I didn't play the organ, the first counselor in the bishopric turned to me with a smile on his face and said, "You'll learn."

And learn I did. I jumped in and did my best. I played regularly throughout the rest of my mission; since then, I have been called as a ward organist in three different units. It was terrifying and difficult at first, but as I used my musical talents to serve, the Lord magnified my natural abilities. He will do the same for you.

The Lord delights "in the song of the heart" and "the song of the righteous is a prayer unto [Him]" (D&C 25:12). It will be your calling to invite others in your branch, ward, or stake to share the songs of their hearts and offer their musical prayers to the Lord. As you do this, the Lord will bless your congregations with "a blessing upon their heads" (Ibid). The sermons you share through song will be heard by those with ears to hear, and "he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together" (Doctrine and Covenants 50:22).

In the following chapters, I will draw on my own experience and that of other experienced ward, branch, and stake choir directors to help you gain ideas of how to best run or participate in your own choir. We will touch on the spiritual aspects of singing in the Church, as well as some of the technical aspects of singing that can be used to help you improve your choir's sound. We will also touch on some of the logistics of running a choir, such as how to find and select music, how to encourage people to participate, and how to organize your music.

Remember, these are only suggestions: the final deciding factor should be what you are prompted to do by the Spirit. You are entitled to specific revelation about your choir.

What follows is intended to supplement the materials for choir directors already provided by the Church. Basic skills are taught in the back of every LDS hymnbook under the section titled "Using the Hymnbook." You can also read the official Church Handbook online at the Church website, including another handbook for LDS choir directors.

Note: All of the notes included in this book are from people who have actually served as choir directors in Latter-day Saint wards and branches. The quotes are the opinions of the individual conductors and may provide advice that is different from other directors.

I encourage you to read everything you can to have the most well-rounded vision of how to best fulfill your calling.

May the Lord bless you in this noble endeavor.

How to Use This Book

This book is intended to help all those who participate in Church choirs. This includes the choir director, the accompanists, and the singers. Each of these people has a different part to play in the choir organization, and certain sections of the book address certain groups. Some sections are specifically for choir directors; some are for choir members; and some apply to everyone. Some of the information overlaps, but you might gain a stronger understanding of a choir as a whole if you read all the sections.

When considering the ideas found in this book, please keep in mind that these are not the only solutions available. Every method may not work best for every choir, and it is a good idea to try several things until you find something that works well for you. You can obtain other solutions through the personal revelation that is the right of anyone who enters into the Lord's service. Do not feel bound down by the suggestions in this book; instead, use

them as starting points to help you figure out how the Lord would like you to serve in your church choir.

In the Doctrine and Covenants 109:14, we are told to “seek learning even by study, and also by faith.” Learning to participate in choir, as well as any other calling, should involve both kinds of learning: studying available resources and listening to the still, small voice of the Holy Ghost. Though you can learn much from books, that learning will never be complete without including such activities as prayer, fasting, service, and temple attendance.

It is my hope that you will make this kind of learning a lifelong pursuit as you strive to learn how to serve the Lord better, especially through song.

CHAPTER 1—MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

Improving Our Prayers

The well-known scripture from Doctrine and Covenants 25:12 tells us that “the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me.” The scriptures are replete with references about how to pray, teaching us everything from the kinds of things we should pray for, to the attitude we should assume when praying.

Because singing to God is a form of prayer, we can apply these same lessons to improving how we sing. The following are some examples of lessons from the scriptures that we can apply to singing.

Spirit and Understanding

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians also draws a direct connection between praying and singing as well as the need to sing and pray in the same way: “What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1 Corinthians 14:15).

Here, Paul tells us that not only do we need to pray and sing with the Spirit, but we must also do so with understanding in our minds. Both activities require the head *and* the heart to be most successful. It is vitally important to sing with the Spirit, but it is even better to sing with an understanding of music as well. Perhaps this is one reason we are asked to “serve [God] with all of [our] heart, might, mind and strength” (Doctrine and Covenants 4:2) and to “seek . . . out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118). This verse mentions both faith—which increases your ability to have the Spirit with you—and study—which increases your understanding.

Praying with humility

There are several examples in the scriptures of people who go about praying in the wrong way. In the Book of Alma, we read about the Zoramites, a group of people who separated themselves from the Nephites and came together to pray once a week. They stood on a high platform known as the Rameumptom, or “holy stand,” and offered their prayers aloud before an audience (Alma 31:21). “Do not pray as the Zoramites do,” Alma warned, “for ye have seen that they pray to be heard of men, and to be praised for their wisdom” (Alma 38:13).

From this verse, we can imagine that the Zoramites gave too much emphasis to how their prayers sounded and not enough emphasis to the sincere desires of their hearts. In fact, Alma records that all the Zoramites offered the same prayer every week: thanking God that they were chosen while all other people would perish. With all the words being the same, each person likely worked hard to find ways to make his prayer unique.

A similar circumstance is recorded in the gospel of Matthew, in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. At that time, many in Jerusalem, including the religious group known as the Pharisees, wanted to exhibit their righteousness by offering dramatic public prayers. Jesus clearly condemned such prayers and offered an alternative:

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly (Matthew 6:5–6).

Like praying, singing in church should not be done with the attitude of wanting to be seen. Both in prayer and in song, our thoughts should be directed away from ourselves and toward heaven. When a group of people sings together without individuals trying to stand out, it creates the illusion of one voice. In this way, your singing can be like a secret prayer that is known only by you and your Heavenly Father. People who sing or pray to be seen receive their own temporal and immediate rewards of being noticed and perhaps admired. The person who sings or prays in secret, however, has a far more lasting, eternal reward from our Father in Heaven.

Vain Repetitions

Jesus continued talking about prayer in His Sermon on the Mount, warning against a practice that is easy to slip into: “But when ye pray, use not

vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matthew 6:7).

In Jesus’s time, people would repeat the same words over and over, hoping that repeating the prayer would increase its chance of being heard and answered. However, mindlessly repeating words or phrases without relying on the Spirit is not really prayer at all. Sometimes we fall into the trap of using the same words and phrases for certain kinds of prayers without really thinking about what we are saying.

This is an easy rut to fall into when singing as well. Rehearsals center around the goal of having everyone singing the same words and notes at the same time. We repeat the same words over and over, and it is easy after a while to forget the lessons behind what we are saying. It is not necessarily the repetition that is inappropriate; rather it is the danger of becoming disconnected from what we are singing.

Even if you are presenting a song you have performed many times, chances are it will be the first time someone who is listening will hear this song and its message. If you do not sing with the Spirit and mean what you sing, the message cannot get through to those who hear it. This is why I encourage choir members to try to make each presentation fresh by concentrating on what they are doing, making sure their faces reflect what they are singing, and thinking about the words and their testimonies while they sing.

Praying with Your Family

When Jesus Christ visited the Nephites, he counseled them to “Pray in your families unto the Father, always in my name, that your wives and your children may be blessed” (3 Nephi 18:21). Music is a form of prayer and can bring these promised blessings to every member of the family.

Spiritual music is not something that is only meant for sacrament meeting. It can be brought home and made a part of family life. Uplifting music can invite the Spirit into a home, calming tensions, unifying family members, and helping ward off temptation. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord tells us of the benefits of constant prayer. “Pray always, that you may come off conqueror; yea, that you may conquer Satan, and that you may escape the hands of the servants of Satan that do uphold his work” (Doctrine and Covenants 10:5).

When sinful thoughts or temptations enter people’s minds, they can replace them with a worthy song, perhaps even one they have heard in church. When possible, you should invite your entire family to participate in Church

music. If you are directing a choir, you should invite the choir members to invite their families to participate as well so all of them can be blessed together.

Both spiritual music and prayer are meant to be used both in public and in private, to bless groups as well as individuals: “And again, I command thee that thou shalt pray vocally as well as in thy heart; yea, before the world as well as in secret, in public as well as in private” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:28).

Those who present the music and those who hear it can take the lessons they hear and remember them later in a private moment. These lessons taught by the Spirit can strengthen and comfort in difficult moments and provide clarity in moments of hardship or temptation.

Tips from Choir Directors about the Purpose of a Church Choir:

The purpose of a church choir isn’t to perform to an audience. The purpose is to sing praises to God; the fact that someone is watching is secondary. Let your choir know that when they sing in a Church function, they aren’t singing to the people in front of them, but to God, and that this ultimately makes the piece a prayer.

—Ryan Larsen

I have a philosophy that there are two main purposes of a choir. The first is to invite the Spirit into our sacrament meetings. The second is to enrich the lives of the choir members. Everything I do as a choir leader has those two goals in mind.

Music does not need to be grand or perfect to invite the Spirit. A simple hymn can do that. The Tabernacle Choir certainly invites the Spirit, but a ward choir does not have to sound like them to accomplish that goal.

However, the choir experience is more enjoyable and fulfilling if the music is as challenging as is appropriate for the group, and if they have the time to work on the music to the point that they can fine-tune it. Choir members grow frustrated if they are asked to sing music when they feel unprepared.

So, when I select music and teach it to the choir, I am more concerned with the members themselves and how they will enjoy the music and how it will touch their lives and help them grow in the gospel. I would never put musical perfection ahead of any choir member. I also make sure every rehearsal is a pleasant experience. I try to include some lighthearted humor, friendliness, a welcome greeting to each member, and at least one spiritual thought in each rehearsal.

—Suze Reece

First and foremost, choir is for fellowship. It is another opportunity for members to feel and stay connected and interact on a personal level. Second, it is a venue to learn the songs of Zion, worship through music, and feel the Spirit. I have learned so much from choir directors both about the depth and beauty of songs and of doctrine hidden through powerful words. Lastly, I think it allows members to share and improve their talents.

—Christine Thackeray

The purpose is to bring the Spirit of the Lord to the meeting. Music has great power to do that. If your choir isn't feeling the spirit of the song, the congregation won't either. Technique and form and all that are important, but not as important as just singing and feeling the spirit of the music. Singing a testimony is a wonderfully spiritual experience. I always ask the choir to concentrate on the meaning of the words as they sing.

—Nicki Nebeker

The first purpose of choir is to bring the Spirit into the lives of the singer and the listener. Many people feel the Spirit most strongly when listening to music. I am one of them. The second purpose is to teach the simple, sweet doctrines of the gospel. Sometimes we get too wrapped up in musicality. Musicality is great, but it's not what matters most.

—Rebecca Belliston

The purpose of the church choir is to use your talents to bring the Spirit to the congregation. It is also to help the choir members worship. I think the best way to convey this to the choir members is to remind them of it often. I also find that reading the scripture footnotes or finding out some history behind the hymns helps the choir members internalize the meaning of the hymn so that the Spirit is more fully present.

—Mary Beth Russell

The hope is to bring the Spirit to our meetings and, in the process, touch the hearts of both the singers and the listeners. Music can heal people's hearts and answer their questions. And we hope to help all ward members feel the love of God for them very personally.

—Mami Young

From the Author

Church choir is a way for each of us to serve the Lord through music. It teaches humility, unity, and dedication and refines both those who participate and those who listen.

Every rehearsal, not just the presentations, can and should be a worshipful experience. We will be blessed for the time we spend rehearsing. Even the songs we offer in rehearsal are a prayer unto him.

Just like passages of scripture, different sacred songs will have different messages for you at different times of your life. Even if you have previously sung a song, pay close attention to the words and the messages God might want you to learn and apply in your life. As you do this, singing will become such a blessed experience for you that you will hardly want to miss an opportunity to sing.

THE REHEARSAL CONTINUES

Continue the Song

Practical help for directors, accompanists, and singers

Inside the full handbook

- The spiritual purpose of a ward choir
- Working with accompanists and organizing rehearsals
- Choosing music, warm-ups, and conducting technique
- Recruitment, retention, sectionals, and choir logistics
- Posture, breathing, pitch, blend, dynamics, and registers
- Diction, vowels, rhythm, memorization, and musical expression
- Strategies for stake, children's, and other choirs
- Stories, resources, glossary material, and appendices



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“The song of the righteous is a prayer unto me.”

DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 25:12

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