

“Crucial survival tips for those who conduct volunteer choirs”

Jeff Ostrowski

201. Close your eyes, and pretend you're walking around the streets of Los Angeles. Observe the people. Banish the notion that most will be interested—as we are—in the difference between a *Salicus* and *Scandicus*, or the way Alfred Cortot approaches a certain coda vs. Josef Hofmann's approach. When you begin working with volunteer/amateur choirs, you will probably get frustrated when so few seem willing to ***sacrifice their free time, family time, and gas money*** to attend musical rehearsals. Don't dismiss them as Philistines, because the problem might our approach—*that's right, we might be the problem!* (Ouch! Yikes!)

202. Now close your eyes a second time, and conjure up those same people on the streets, or in Walmart, or at the beach. I bet some of those people ***do*** love God. And I bet some of them ***do*** attend Church on Sundays. And I bet there are families who ***do*** want to help the priest, if he says Sacred music is important.

203. But they will not be in your choir if you berate them for not reading music at a high level, or for incorrectly spelling a Dominant 7th Chord in the key of Ab Major.

204. Most of us have studied music since we were little, take it very seriously, and have spent hours practicing at the keyboard in a small practice room. It is ***impossible*** for us to fully understand the **state of musical development** for volunteer choir members who have not dedicated their entire lives to classical music, as we have. (*When you get very frustrated, call to mind this reality.*)

205. Last year, I gave an entire talk on dealing with Amateur choirs, with fifty “bullet points” or “suggestions.” You can access this talk online by searching Google for “Jeff Ostrowski’s Symposium talk is now online.” Because you can freely access this, I decided *not to repeat* what I said last year.

206. In this presentation, I will give you advice on how “not to lose your mind” when it comes to dealing with amateur choirs. You are free to accept or not accept what I tell you—because I know everyone’s experiences are different.

207. Let’s talk about “setting yourself up for success.” Liturgical music is actually similar to television shows. If you ever saw a TV news show, they always begin with a (so-called) “serious” topic—often a monologue or list of talking points—while the viewer’s mind is fresh and receptive. Then they will feature their “heavy-hitting” guest, whom they will interview. After a commercial break, they’ll have a lighter story, followed by another guest. After another commercial break, they’ll have some kind of panel discussion, and they’ll close the show with a YouTube Cat Video, or some humorous story.

208. Mass is similar. You wouldn’t want to have your “**heavy and complex**” polyphony at the very end of Mass. It works better at the beginning—not only for the congregation, but also for the singers. Of course, you also don’t want to have something “heavy” at the very beginning, for a variety of reasons I cannot delve into now. If I remember that my singers will need the grey book for singing the *Gloria*, I try to program a Hymn (from the grey book) as the Processional—for the simple reason that it GUARANTEES they will have their grey books near them when the *Gloria* comes. By the way, anyone who’s done the Traditional Latin Mass knows the beginning is the hardest part, and things come **IMMEDIATELY** without any breaks: *Procession, Asperges, Responses, Introit, Kyrie, Gloria*. There’s no time for passing out books, or explaining what page we’re on, etc.

209. Getting back to what I was saying, I believe the Mass should have a mixture: Renaissance polyphony, modern polyphony, accompanied chant, unaccompanied chant, good hymnody, music from the Medieval period, plainsong sung by women only, plainsong sung by men only, parts for soloists, metered music, non-metered music, music from the Baroque, music from 19th-century France, *falsobordone*, parts for the congregation, organ interludes, and so forth.

210. This is very complicated, and sometimes my head feels like it's going to burst when I plan & plan & plan. But this excellence is part of what will keep your volunteers coming back each week. There is nothing wrong with your volunteers *enjoying* what they are doing—indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas talks about this very point in one of his writings.

211. (By the way, you will never get any credit for all the planning you do. *Remember what I am telling you*: you will never get any credit. But planning is essential.)

212. Something very important is consistency and brashness. When I say consistency, I'm talking about doing the same items **without fail** *every single week*, no matter what. For example, let's say you make a decision to have the ladies sing the Communion every week, accompanied by the organ. Stick to it, *no matter what*—even though the first few months will be very difficult, especially for those of us who can't abide hearing music sung badly. [That's where the "brashness" comes in.]

213. Pope Benedict XVI has said:

The greatness of the liturgy depends—and we shall have to repeat this frequently—on its unspontaneity.

The consistency I'm talking about is also quite important for the congregation. It will take them years—YEARS—to begin to understand what the Communion antiphon is all about, especially on feasts like St. John the Evangelist (EF).

—**Have audience repeat:** (“It will take the congregation many years...etc.”)

That is why for the Ordinary Form I'm a huge fan of the *St. Isaac Jogues Illuminated Missal, Lectionary, & Gradual*—because it has all the Propers in Latin & English. That means no matter what you introduce is already “waiting” for the people, although (as we just repeated) it will take years for them to begin to grasp it.

214. Perhaps the most important thing I can say about dealing with Amateur choirs is to: SING SING SING. As hard as it is for us to believe, the volunteers are not showing up to hear us talk about music—*Gasp! Gasp! Gasp!*—no matter how much we know about music, and some of us know a ton. They are there to sing.

—**Have audience repeat:** (“The volunteers are there to sing ... not hear us talk, etc.”)

215. Speaking of SING SING SING, when somebody's getting something wrong, don't *describe* to them what kind of sound you want. Simply say, “Here's how I want it” ... and demonstrate. Last

year, I spoke about my former professor who related everything to food. “Make it mushy meatloaf, make it jello, make it fried sausage.” Don’t be like that professor—just say, “Here’s how I want it.” With a new choir member, you can say, “Let me show you how we do it here.”

216. Those words are very important:

—Have audience repeat: (“Let me show you how I want it...”)

Did you notice I didn’t say, “Let me show you **how your voice teacher** wants it...” ?

Did you notice I didn’t say, “Let me show you **how your high school choir teacher** wants it...” ?

Did you notice I didn’t say, “Let me show you **how you heard it once** on a recording...” ?

217. This is very important—because something you must always fight against has to do with inappropriate comments made by choir members. In every single choir, there will always be ONE PERSON who, when you say Wednesday, asks: “Why not Tuesday?” There will always be ONE PERSON in every choir who, when you say Men begin, will ask: “Can’t the ladies begin?” You tell the choir to walk out on the **right**, and that person will ask why we can’t walk out on the **left**. You choose a piece by Duruflé, and that person says: “Why not Vierne?” You choose a piece by Marenzio, and that person says: “Why not Mozart?” You choose Hymn Number 919 and that person asks: “Can we do number 909?” And so forth.

218. It is very important that you NEVER FIGHT WITH THAT PERSON.

—**Have audience repeat:** (“Do not fight with that person...”)

—**Have audience repeat:** (“Do not explain why you made your decision...”)

—**Have audience repeat:** (“Because that takes too much time...”)

—**Have audience repeat:** (“It is not your job to waste time during Rehearsal explaining why you made the choices you did...”)

219. If that person keeps making suggestions and asking questions, simply say: “It is my expectation that everyone in this choir turns to page Such-And-Such and sings the music there.” If they are unwilling to follow instructions, they can take their complaints to the priest. And they can say to the priest, “He told me to sing—but I wanted to ask him questions about why he made certain decisions.” Whom do you think the priest will side with?

220. The choir members have NO IDEA how difficult it is to run a choir. They have NO IDEA how much work it is to plan everything properly. Otherwise they would have a choir of their own. When I’m preparing music for Mass, if it’s only myself singing & playing, I can prepare in 5 minutes. If I’m preparing for an amateur choir, it can easily take a week. But they don’t realize this.

221. For the record, I was “that person when I was in college.” I used to pester the living daylights out of Simon Carrington in the hallways, and I’m amazed he didn’t slap me! I did everything horrible I just described—and I’m ashamed of how I acted in college.

222. By the way, **NEVER** fight with choir members about your expertise, pedigree, training, or accomplishments. *Just say no. It never ends well.*

223. If choir members insist on wasting time during rehearsal, consider the following phrases:

“That decision has been made.” “I don’t want to change what was planned & announced.”

When they ask about something *you already said* will be revealed later: **“In process”**

“I can look into getting you a copy of the decision criteria.”

“I cannot add anything to what’s already been said.”

Rehearsal time is precious. The choir members have no idea how **precious** it is, but the choirmaster knows. Don’t ever let them convince you otherwise. By the way, mothers understand this concept, because when they plan for something, they must take into consideration ***the time it takes to have the children use the bathroom, find their shoes and socks, buckle into seatbelts, etc.***

224. Working with amateur choirs, you will frequently have people show up late to rehearsal. Depending on your circumstances, you **may** be able to fix that problem; but I suspect many experience difficulty in this area. Let me now talk about what you should do in those cases.

225. Suppose your really strong singers—the ones who read music—are tardy. However, the singers who arrive on time are not as strong, and you also have a new singer (who will decide whether to join based on what is experienced at this first rehearsal). You had planned the entire rehearsal, but you suddenly realize that if you follow the plan, it will sound horrible and everyone will be discouraged—and you'll never recover. Your heart sinks. You begin to perspire. You begin to despair. What do you do?

226. This is where Solfège will save your life.

227. First of all, one can never practice Solfège too much (and I don't care how stupendous you are) because Solfège secretly teaches important concepts—such as pitch relationships—very helpful to composers, theorists, and singers. So you cannot spend your time better! Indeed, you can actually just do Solfège for 10-11 notes—yet during that practice session you're secretly working on vowels, blending, phrasing, rhythm and much else!!!

228. Even with very weak singers, you can explore concepts. For example, you can teach them to find «DO» or other “entrance pitches” from the other voices' Solfège. (Treble «DO» = Men «DO»)

229. Don't sit there, nervous & disheartened with a broken soul—even if only Tenors and Altos are present you can teach them “bridges,” using Solfège, such as *ISTE SANCTUS Agnus Dei* mm. 18-19 when tenor “tosses” to the Alto B. {visit <http://www.ccwatershed.org/polyphony> for score} Always start with the hardest places, and *seldom work on the beginning of a piece*. The beginning is normally the last section that needs hard work. Similarly, everyone knows the beginning of the *Gettysburg Address*: there's no need to practice that. But what about the rest of it? **EVEN A SHORT PIECE HAS HUNDREDS OF POSSIBLE BRIDGES:** Tenor Bass, Alto Soprano, Soprano Bass, etc.

230. Even though I hated it in college, *speaking* rhythms with “Ta Ta Ta” will sometimes save your life. When a piece seems impossible to make any progress on (perhaps because several strong singers are absent) have the Tenors “Ta Ta Ta” until the Sopranos enter. Or Bass-Alto, and so on. You can also get them to strive to see how perfectly accurate they can be rhythmically, and you’ll be ASTOUNDED how sloppy most singers are about rhythm. By the way, never explain the purpose of Solfège or “Ta Ta Ta”—it wastes time. Just say, “Please repeat after me.” If they really want to know, they can go to the conservatory and find out.

231. There is no question that starting a choir is incredibly difficult. Good singers like to sing with other good singers—but at the beginning, there’s just you. The first step is to “get in people’s faces” in terms of recruitment. Don’t place an ad in the bulletin and expect people to show up for choir practice. (I promise you there will be a maximum of 2-3 people who respond.) You’ve got to greet them, saying over and over: “Why not you? Can you sing in tune? Why not you? Don’t you want to learn more about the sacred liturgy? Why not you? Why not you?” Then collect a list of names, and interview them during the week. Don’t interview them on the spot. By the way, you must always audition people—but don’t call it an audition, because that will scare them. Say you just want to “speak to them about the requirements”—but yes it’s secretly an audition. Sing Solfège pitches and have them sing them back to you. By the way, never—and I mean never—allow somebody with excessive vibrato into your choir. I guarantee you’ll regret it until your dying breath.

232. As I mentioned, good singers attract good singers, but at first you won’t have any—so you must begin with extremely simple music. On the Lalemant site, you can still find some of the pieces we began with, which are usually just a few bars long. One piece that worked very well was:

5049 • Vita Sanctorum with Harmonic Refrain

This *tiny little polyphonic piece* was one of the first times our choir started to sound good—but even that took much repetition. I remember we also did a GLORIA that had little 3-voice sections I adapted from Fr. Cristóbal de Morales.

233. These are “stepping stones.” Your choir is a snow ball that needs to get rolling, and sometimes it seems like you never will get “rolling”—but perseverance will bring rewards.

234. One thing I struggle with is keeping my cool. For example, sometimes I spend months planning special music, and 3-4 good singers text message me at the last second saying they will be skipping Mass. ***No matter what happens***, you must never lose your temper—and you must always avoid getting angry at the people who did show up. After all, those people didn’t show up to hear you rant and rave about the people who skipped. Never discuss whether “many people are missing.” When you hear comments like “Where is everyone today?” ignore them. It’s a waste of time—and it’s self-evident. But again: DO NOT GET ANGRY.

235. Later on, after you control your temper and don’t explode, you will realize ***there is always more you could have done***. For example, what prevents you from texting each member of your choir every few days and checking on their progress? We say “we are too busy” to do that—but we lose our temper when the choir members are “too busy” to show up early on Sunday, or they have a flat tire, or they have a family emergency, and so forth. With my choir, I organize and sort their binders every single week, and it takes hours. I setup 90 chairs every Sunday, and move many other heavy items. I bring water for them, pencils for them, and so forth. I do all this so we can spend ***every single moment*** of our Rehearsal learning music. Is it tons of work? Yes. Do I sometimes feel like I’m a donkey instead of a musician? Yes. On the other hand, the results have been beyond anything I could have imagined. Often, a simple “reminder” text message can save the day.

236. It is better not to sing anything for Offertory. Sometimes my choir does, but it's better to have organ music. Otherwise, in the Traditional Latin Mass, you are basically having the choir sing into the ears of the congregation *the entire Mass*, without any breaks. That's why the Offertory should normally be organ interludes (after the Antiphon is sung or Psalm Toned). Besides, the choir appreciates a few minutes to talk to God in the silence of their hearts. Also, there is PLENTY of other stuff to rehearse! My old boss says the congregation gives more money if nothing is sung at the Offertory, and who knows? That might be true. [His point was that if people are singing a Hymn they cannot reach for their wallet.]

237. Speaking of singing, polyphony in the Ordinary Form is much more challenging to “work in” to the program. I would suggest you can do things such as what I've done for the ALLELUIA, CREDO, and KYRIE. cf. #4884 at <http://www.ccwatershed.org/polyphony> {Indeed, the Kyrie can even have *Cantor, Congregation, Polyphony*.} Others will disagree, but I do NOT recommend a full choral *Gloria, Credo, or Sanctus* for the Ordinary Form. (Others will disagree about this.)

238. When you feel angry, or when you have to put up with idiotic or rude comments from choir members, offer it up to God. Imitate the Jesuit martyrs—who suffered in 5 seconds more than we'll ever suffer in our entire life—who (when glancing at a confrère who had his nose cut off by an Indian) repeated the words of St. Paul: *we are made as fools for Christ's sake—we are made a spectacle to the world, and to angels, and to men*. You will feel you have been treated unjustly by choir members: “we are fools for Christ's sake.” You will feel that you try so hard, but the music never goes comes out right: “we are fools for Christ's sake” You will feel betrayed by various people in power at the parish: “we are fools for Christ's sake” You'll feel betrayed by singers: “We are fools for Christ.”

239. I will close by a saying that is often applied to the artistry of Alfred Cortot:

“It is but a small step from sublime to absurd”

Great music making, *really great music*, often borders on the absurd. The artistry of Cortot—and to some extent Hofmann, Gould, Fischer, and Rachmaninoff—is living proof of this. Even great

And remember: *nobody's perfect*. Even great artists like Fritz Reiner and Ignace Tiergerman sometimes made horrific mistakes (which we can hear on recordings).

Even the great Jackie Gleason completely failed, and on 27 January 1961 spent half an hour explaining on national television what an awful job he did the week before!