

Fifteen Steps to Becoming a Skilled Choral Singer

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15 STEPS TO BECOMING A SKILLED CHORAL SINGER

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Choral singing is a fantastic activity that brings much relaxation and joy. It also builds strong community bonds. The more we develop our choral skills, the better we sound as a choir and the deeper our enjoyment and sense of fulfillment of contributing to a beautiful whole.

Imagine watching a beginner choir that sings with lots of spirit. We might enjoy the spirit but the lower level of quality might be distracting. On the other hand, imagine hearing a professional choir that sings beautifully, but with no spirit. While the music would be enjoyable to a certain extent, the lack of spirit would also lessen the experience. On the other hand, imagine a highly skilled choir that also sings with lots of emotion. This would be more moving and would deliver a deeper spiritual experience. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "the Teachings of God... when they are melodiously sung, are most impressive." Therefore, when we sing the divine melodies with emotion as well as with skill, we can touch the audience at a more profound level.

'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasises how choral singing brings rapture to the Concourse on high. He calls those singers 'noble souls':

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is the dawning-place of lights and the gathering place of the righteous. Whenever a company of noble souls assemble in a heavenly gathering there and offer supplications, intone divine verses, and chant prayers with wondrous melodies, the inmates of the Concourse on high hearken and call out, crying, "Happy are we; let all the world rejoice!" for, praise be unto God, souls from among the angels of the Kingdom of Glory have arisen in the nether world to commune with their Lord and intone the verses of Divine Unity in a gathering of holiness. What bounty is there greater

than this?2

‘Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us that we must continually strive to increase our singing skills and forever try to perfect them:

The art of music must be brought to the highest stage of development, for this is one of the most wonderful arts and in this glorious age of the Lord of Unity it is highly essential to gain its mastery. However, one must endeavor to attain the degree of artistic perfection and not be like those who leave matters unfinished.3

But what are the skills involved in choral singing? These are quite different than those for solo singing. Let us take a look at a selection of fifteen of these. The following steps are to reach the highest level of skill. You don't need to master all of them in a short time, but if you focus on a few each year, and persistently progress, you will contribute to the higher quality of your choir. Tips are placed in order of difficulty, beginning with the easy stuff (sort of).

1) Hydration: our vocal folds need water to function at their best. It can take hours before the water we drink reaches our vocal folds – which are low on the pecking order (i.e., the heart, lungs and brain receive the water first). You have to drink more water so that the vital parts have had their fill, and there is some left over for the rest of the body.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Compilation on Music*, p. 77

‘Abdu'l-Bahá, in *The Divine Melody: Song of the Mystic Dove*, p. 121.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Importance of the Arts*.

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2) Punctuality: arriving 5 min early and being in your seat 1 min before the starting time.

3) Regular attendance: choral singing is a team activity. We need each and every one of you at each rehearsal, like on a soccer or volleyball team. Of course, while life happens and some things are unavoidable, sometimes, with a little extra effort, scheduling conflicts can be resolved so that you can still attend your rehearsal. Your commitment will be greatly

appreciated by your fellow choristers.

4) Folder organisation: organising your folder so that you can find the songs very quickly is a way to be courteous and respectful to your fellow singers. You can use sticky tabs or alphabetical dividers. Singers can save a lot of rehearsal time when they all find the next song quickly. Avoid plastic sleeves as they add weight and are too time-consuming.

5) Marking your score: always bring a pencil and mark down your personal notes or comments from the conductor in your score. Remember the saying: "Amateurs hope to rely on their memory while professionals write things down."

6) Watch the conductor: memorise the first and last 4 bars of every song so that you can watch the conductor. Also look up during major entrances and cut-offs or when the music slows down or pauses. Know your part well that you can glance down only when needed.

7) Listening in silence: when the conductor is rehearsing another section, continue to follow along in silence as the concepts will probably apply to you as well. This is also respectful towards your fellow singers. Otherwise, the noise of everyone else talking will make it hard for that section to hear themselves sing or to focus on what the conductor is saying.

8) Listen louder than you sing: if you can't hear your neighbours around you, you may be singing too loudly. The beauty of a very good choir comes from all voices blending into one with no voice standing out. Listen loudly to ensure you hear the singers around you.

9) Your body is your instrument: sit in such a way as to achieve your best sound during the entire rehearsal: elongate your spine all the way to the top of your head, with both feet on the floor. This posture will also make room for diaphragmatic breathing so that you can sing longer phrases. Good posture will allow you to offer your best to the whole choir and will prepare you better for the concert. Practice makes permanent, so practice the way

you want your concert sound to be. Extra motivated singers can also take singing lessons.

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10) Diaphragmatic breathing: Learn how to breathe quickly and quietly so that you can sing your next note on time. Also write down the places the conductor asks each part to breathe at the same time, then practice always breathing at the same place every time you sing your song. If you run out of air early:

- a. breathe during a long vowel sound;
- b. breathe without pronouncing the last consonant of the word you are singing.

11) Know your part: practice between rehearsals. Properly begin by singing all the notes on time, like at the end of the word sing. Check that your jaw is dropped to its maximum relaxed opening and that your tongue is touching your bottom front teeth. Once you know the notes well, sing your part only on the vowels of each word, without the consonants. This will prepare you for the best singing technique: longest vowels, shortest consonants.

12) Vowels - Longest vowels, shortest consonants: the beauty of sound is on vowels, so it's very important to match vowel sounds. If two choristers sing different vowel shapes, the harmonics of the two vowels won't align and it will sound like they are singing two different pitches. We don't sing the way we speak: we sing with big wide, open vowels to make the most of the beautiful sounds. With a confident posture, open the back of your throat (pharyngeal muscles) and sing in that open space. Imagine sending sound out with an energy field like the frills of this lizard.

13) Consonants - Longest vowels, shortest consonants:

- a. Sing the shortest consonants possible and pronounce them at the same time as the rest of the choir. Only pronounce the final consonant(s) of one syllable when you begin to sing the next syllable. Ex: "I will sing my very best always", a skilled singer will sing it this way:
"I—wi—llsi—ngmy—ve—ry—be—sta—lwa—ys"
Taking good care not to sing "...besssst—alllllll—wayzzzzz"
- b. Singing consonants: l, m, n, ng, r, the, v, z: when a syllable begins with

one of these

consonants, ensure you are singing it on the same pitch as the ensuing vowel. Otherwise, if you start singing the consonant on the preceding pitch, it will sound

like scooping up or down;

c. S: 'sip' it in instead of pushing it out with lots of air. Even be'er, sing a Z instead;

d. Consonants like b, f, k, p, sh, t, thru: 'sip' in any consonant that pushes air, that way you won't sing breathy on the ensuing vowel.

14) Becoming a confident singer: if singers rely on their neighbour to know when to sing,

many singers will start late. If all singers begin milliseconds apart, the ensemble sounds

muddy. Work towards being a confident singer. Learn your part well and know when your

note starts and when to put the final consonants. Watching the conductor also helps.

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15) Ask the conductor: if you hear your section is struggling in a particular spot, you can mark

the bar number(s) of the area and ask the conductor at an appropriate moment to go over

that passage. The conductor can't always hear every little detail, so you can help your

ensemble by mentioning passages that might require clarification.

The power of choral singing:

- When we notice our voice is heard above the others and we adjust our volume to blend in with others, we develop teamwork
- When we follow the conductor's hands through a series of meter and dynamic changes, we develop accuracy and focus
- When we learn to appreciate, or "grow into" a song, we develop patience
- When we refrain from talking during the rehearsal, we develop respect
- When we listen and concentrate during rehearsals, as well as when we practice faithfully at home, we develop self-discipline
- When we sing in different languages and styles, we learn to appreciate other cultures
- When we don't get the solo and congratulate the person who did, we develop good sportsmanship and graciousness

- When we sing in a nursing home, we develop compassion and service
- When we choose a rehearsal or performance over a special event, we develop commitment and passion
- When we bounce for joy and give a high five because we finally sang the most difficult piece straight through for the first time, we develop perseverance
- When we perform a solo at a concert, we develop courage and self-confidence
- When we notice how we've touched the audience because we worked hard and sang with meaning in concerts, we develop gratitude and thankfulness.

Questions?

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