

**Appleton's Alphabet:  
A Guide for Choir Directors  
and their Singers**  
*by Gordon Appleton*

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**ATTENTION** is what singers must give their choir director who must have **AUTHORITY**. Choirs are not democracies; directors should be fair and kind yet gently **ASSERTIVE**.

**BREATHING** – you need to know the technique so take some lessons. Poor breathing technique often results in flat singing. **BEATS** and **BARS**: We all know that the first beat in a bar has a slight accent, yet many singers accent unstressed beats. Listen carefully for this in your choir. **BATONS** get in the way of expressive choral conducting. Hands and faces are much better!

**COUNTING** is what singers need to do all the time yet so often they rely on others. You must take your own responsibility for counting. **CONDUCTING** should help rather than hinder singers. Be clear and give them confidence. **COURSES**: Take full advantage of church music courses organised by Church Music Future, the Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) and other organisations. You learn so much by sharing experiences with others in similar situations.

One **DEFINITION** of *choir* in the Oxford English Dictionary is *a company of angels*. An angel in the Bible is a messenger of God's word. A church choir needs to convey that message to all who hear it. Think about the meaning of what you are singing about and ensure **DICTION** is clear. The best kind of **DISCIPLINE** is self-imposed and the first requirement is regular attendance. A choir is voluntary until you join; then it is compulsory.

The director's **ENTHUSIASM** will inspire singers and all should strive for **EXCELLENCE**.

**FUN, FELLOWSHIP** and **FRIENDSHIP** are great features of the liveliest choirs. Get a good balance between hard work in rehearsals and a shared enjoyable social life.

**GOALS**: Plan both long term and short term goals. If you need to recruit, often an all-out effort for six weeks before a special service will bring in extra singers who might commit for a short time. They may be happy to stay if the first six weeks are worthwhile.

**HYMNS** appropriately chosen and well sung by the choir are a most powerful way of binding the congregation together and increasing spiritual awareness. They must be treated seriously. **HEADS** too often face downwards. Heads up, books up, sing out!

**INTONATION**: Always listen for good tuning. A choir may be expert in diction and phrasing and understanding, but if it sings out of tune, it does not make music. Often semitones (half steps) are too wide - especially descending – so one incorrect interval can ruin a whole phrase. Choir directors must always listen for this (and hear what is actually being sung rather than what they would like to hear).

**IMITATION**: Don't be afraid of imitating choral training techniques of those you admire. Similarly, inexperienced singers should imitate the best singers. Choral singing is caught as well as taught.

**JAWS** too often stick out when choristers sing. This results in tight throats, straining and ugly sounds. Watch singers carefully and remind them not to let their jaws protrude. **JOB**: You are unlikely to be a choir director for the pay! If you are not a professional musician, you should be proud to be an amateur (from the Latin *amare*, to love). Being a church musician is a real vocation.

**KNOWLEDGE**: As your own knowledge of choir training increases, your choir will improve. The RSCM and other organisations produce excellent publications to help you. Read more and attend courses!

**LISTENING**. Ears are just as important as mouths when singing. Use the trick of covering one ear while you sing so you can hear how your own sound blends with the choir. Good choral blend depends on careful listening to the choir.

**LOOKING.** Singers must look at the conductor – and conductors must look at singers. In this way, stances can be corrected, even before a note is sung.

**MUSICIANSHIP.** There is much more to making beautiful music than singing the right notes at the right time. Plan beforehand how you can bring the music alive. You cannot wait until the practice or performance for inspiration!

**NOTES.** Help your singers to read the musical notes as easily as they read a newspaper.

**ORGAN.** If the choir is accompanied by organ, ask someone to check the balance. Some organists like playing too loudly! **OPEN:** Insist on open books, open throats, open mouths and open minds.

**PHRASING** is often ignored as choirs **PLOD** through one note after another with equal stress. Work on super-smooth legato. **PENCILS** are essential for directors to mark the score in advance and singers to mark their music. Writing something down helps you remember it (so use a numbering system so that the same singer gets the same music every time). Good choristers carry three pencils: one each for those either side of them who have forgotten theirs.

**PUNCTUALITY** is essential at the start of rehearsal – and it is equally important that the rehearsal finishes on time. That way good **PROGRESS** can be made which should be apparent at every rehearsal. Without progress, the singer will not want to return.

**QUIRE.** In a traditional cathedral layout, this is where the choir sits on two sides facing each other (*decani* and *cantoris*) and it does help the blend, but it may not be the ideal position for the choir in your church. If your choir is in the chancel, turning 45 degrees towards the congregation can often make a difference to the projection of the sound.

**RHYTHM** is the life blood of music and as essential in church music as all other types. Regular **RECRUITMENT** is essential especially in children's choirs. **RETIREMENT** is hard to deal with, but needs to be considered carefully by choir directors and older singers whose voices become less reliable.

**SIGHT READING.** Every choral director should give this high priority. It is a key to musical literacy. Learning by rote does not produce useful choral singers. **STANDING:** It is much easier to sing in this position than sitting – and the results are better too!

**TEMPO.** One of the most difficult things for singers to do is keep a steady tempo. Imagine you have a built-in metronome.

**UNDERSTANDING.** The motto of the RSCM is “I will sing with spirit and understanding also”. Unless you understand what you are singing about, you cannot convey the meaning to anyone else.

**VOICE FOR LIFE.** This is the essential RSCM scheme for training singers in choirs through a graded programme supported by helpful publications for choir directors and singers. There are full details at <http://www.rscm.com/education/vfl/vfl.php>

**VARIETY.** There are many different styles of church music. Challenge singers to learn new repertoire which broadens horizons and keeps everyone interested.

**WORDS** always need to be enunciated clearly. *In the beginning was the word!* **WORSHIP** is the main reason why church choirs exist. Choirs worship for themselves and also help others to do so – as St Augustine of Hippo said: *They who sing, pray twice.* **WATCHING** the conductor is a constant plea and it makes all the difference to the choir sound – but only if the conductor is clear and helpful and the conductor watches the singers. **WATER** is the best drink to have before singing.

**XEROX.** Please do not be tempted to photocopy music which is in copyright. You are depriving the author, arranger and composer of their rightful income. There is much music now freely available from the web but that will not cover all your needs. Perhaps you need to raise more money for the choir music budget.

**YOUNGSTERS** are essential for the future of choirs and the future of the church. They need constant encouragement and challenge. They often learn quicker than adults too!

You may not be awarded a red **ZUCCHETTO** for your choir training, but choir trainers and singers alike will benefit from this most fulfilling vocation if they apply themselves with **ZEAL**.

*Gordon Appleton  
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