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THE SCHOOL CHOIR: SOME GUIDELINES ON ITS FORMATION AND MANAGEMENT

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It is not an exaggeration to say that the most inexpensive and perhaps the most pleasurable form of group music-making is ensemble singing. Yet the school choir is but a poor second, in popularity and numbers, to the school band which costs the school a tidy sum and takes a much longer time to get off the ground as a music-making group. The reasons are not hard to find. While the school band has a trained instructor and its existence is a status symbol for the school, very often the school choir is put in the charge of a music teacher untrained in choral music and in organising one. At best she can draw upon her experience as a choir member during her secondary school days. Some very good choirs do exist and bring honour to their respective schools at the Youth Festival performances and other school functions. In the interest of secondary schools which have plans to start a choir, the following guidelines are offered in the hope that they will make the task of the music teacher easier.

Recruitment of Voices

This is the first and most difficult task for the teacher in charge. It must be done very early in the year before students commit themselves to other extra-curricular activities (ECA s). The teacher will thus avoid the unenviable and undesirable situation of taking in students who are left without an ECA. There should be no limit imposed on the number who wish to join. However, selection is necessary, based on good intonation or the ability to sing in pitch.

How does the teacher go about selecting the voices? She should first make a general announcement in the school assembly inviting students who are interested to fill in an application form which should be submitted within a week. The application form should include the following questions:

- (a) Have you sung in a primary school choir?
- (b) Do you play a musical instrument? If so, name it . . .
- (c) List 3 songs which you can sing.

Applicants will be told that they are not accepted automatically. A final selection will be made after a listening test.

How to Carry Out the Test

As the selection is based on good intonation, not more than 10 students singing as a group should be heard at one time. Divide them into 2 groups first.

- (a) Those who answered “Yes” to questions (a) and (b).
- (b) Those who answered “No” to both.

Choose the most popular song listed in the application forms for each group to sing. It will be helpful if someone else can provide the piano accompaniment so that you can go round to listen to individual students. Space them out so that you can move among them easily. Besides those who cannot sing in pitch, it would be wise, too, not to include voices which are too distinctive — shrill or unpleasant (as distinct from loud). It may be necessary to listen a second time to those whom you have not been able to listen to properly or are not certain of. At the end of the “audition” the students will be told that the names of those you have selected will be put up on the notice board. Be on the generous side when making the final selection as there is always the “dropout” factor in any organisation to make allowance for.

From What Levels Should Choir Members Be Drawn?

In an all-girls school, students from all levels should be encouraged to join the choir. If the number is large enough, students from secondary one and two can exist separately as a junior choir or a “feeder” choir to the main choir consisting of secondary three, secondary four and pre-university one students. The music teacher will thus have two choirs to cope with. However, if she has a keen interest in this activity, she will find that this will not only be challenging, but work to her advantage when planning her programme of activities over a long term. The teacher will see to it that the two choirs will have occasion to sing together and be made to feel that they are complementary to each other. The junior choir will graduate into the senior choir and thus perpetuate the existence of the school choir, which will

consist of members who will have two to three years of choir experience.

In a mixed school, the music teacher has the option to confine the choir to girls only. The teacher will find that few boys especially those in secondary one and two will show an interest in joining the choir for two reasons: (a) As a rule, boys through ignorance have the false notion that singing in the choir is a “feminine” activity. By nature they will go for sports and games; (b) At this age, 12 — 14 years, boys experience the awkwardness of the changing voice which is more pronounced in adolescent males than in females.

In well-established secondary schools with pre-university classes and in junior colleges, a mixed choir is feasible and most desirable. It is adequate for male voices recruited to sing one part only — classified as the baritone voice — as male voices have a capacity for greater volume than female voices; 15 baritones will make a good balance for a choir of 60 mixed voices with 25 sopranos and 20 altos. Needless to say, male voices from secondary three and four classes should not be excluded if they are willing to participate and are found to be suitable.

Unison Singing

While the secondary school choir is expected to sing in 2 or 3 parts, this will pose some difficulty for the newly formed choir. The teacher in charge should begin with songs to be sung in unison. Let this phase of choir singing be an opportunity to let the singers listen to themselves as a group and try to achieve a oneness of voice in volume and texture. Very quiet singing will produce the desired results. It is best to nourish a good soft tone until it grows. The singers will then discover that singing can be a pleasant avocation. Part of the training at this stage is to develop a good resonant tone. Let the choir hum gently on a convenient note (say middle G or A) to the sound of “nn” or “ng”, keeping the lips and teeth slightly apart. Raise the eyebrows a little and open the nostrils as the singers hum, concentrating on the point behind the top of the nose. The tongue must lie flat, the tip touching the lower teeth. Having carefully produced this clear humming note, the next stage is to transform the humming note into a singing note by the addition of “oo” or “oh”. Do not try to make a loud sound; just let the voice come out by itself. The following vocal exercises can then be attempted. They should be

sung in one breath — therefore, it is important that a deep breath is first taken and sustained (in the same way that a good swimmer does it) before singing each exercise:

ng - oo - ng - oo - ng - oo - ng
nn - oh - nn - oh - nn - oh - nn

oo - ng - oo
nn - oh - nn

oh - ng - oh - ng - oh - ng - oh

The above exercises may be repeated 3 or 4 times, each time a semitone higher.

Two-part Singing

Let the choir have the fun and pleasure of hearing themselves singing in two parts by singing rounds and songs in which both the verse and chorus can be sung simultaneously and in harmony, eg. the Philippine folksong “Planting Rice” and “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing”. Straightforward two-part exercises should then be attempted. The ascending and descending scales make good material for this:

Andante

mf



How Does the Teacher Select Voices to Sing the Soprano or the Alto Part?

This can be done by the process of elimination. For this purpose, choose the 3rd vocal exercise given earlier for unison singing practice. Let the whole choir sing it starting in the key of C as in the example given. Repeat the exercise several times, each time raising the key by a semitone but do not go beyond the key of F. Each time, before getting the choir to sing the exercise on the next higher key, advise those who find it uncomfortable or a strain reaching the top note, to drop out. It would be advisable also for the teacher to make a personal check for such voices. Always remind the choir to take a deep breath before singing the exercise. Encourage lightness and prevent forcing by singing the exercise quickly and rhythmically. Choose songs which fall within a comfortable range — not lower than B flat or A (below middle C) for altos, and not higher than E or F for the sopranos.

How Should the Teacher Plan Her Programme of Activities for the Choir?

Plan a long-term programme, putting as its goal, the choir's participation in the Singapore Youth Festival in May or June the following year. This gives the teacher about 18 months during which plans are made for the choir to participate in a few music-making events, which will not only maintain students' interest in the choir but also give the choir the confidence that comes with the experience of music-making. Let the choir be committed to sing as an item for an end-of-term concert for the first term, a programme of unison songs. The school choir is a shop-window for the school's music. Use it as a way in which efficiency and enthusiasm can infect youngsters where music-making is

concerned. If there are signs that the music in his school is beginning to flourish and that the school's reputation is likely to be enhanced by it, no principal will withhold support. And once this support is earned, it will be a tremendous boost to the morale of the choir. The school choir will have come to stay.