



BOYS IN CHOIR

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How do you get and keep boys in choir? There is never a simple answer or just one right answer to fit every situation. However, we do find helpful approaches and key ingredients for success. From my experiences, I share with you the elements I have found to entice, engage and delight boys on their pathway to become singers in performing groups.

Give them a “taste” of choir or a trial run

In the first year at my school only a handful of fourth and fifth grade boys joined choir. While the boys seemed to enjoy the interactive song games in music class, they didn't join choir. I found that many boys didn't consider themselves to be “singers.” To encourage those who seemed slightly interested, I created a special written invitation for individuals to attend up to three rehearsals to “try” choir before joining it. I realized that most boys didn't know what to expect at a rehearsal and that their parents didn't want to risk making a painful commitment. This “special invitation” gave students a way to join or to bow out in a mannerly way. They were told they could say, “Thank you, I'd like to join choir.” or “Thank you for the invitation, but I won't become a choir member at this time.” If they attended even one rehearsal, they had a chance to make a personal connection with the choir before the first concert. They saw the organized setup, held music scores, heard the concert literature, experienced the purposeful flow of the rehearsal, and they were in the midst of the choral sound. Most boys accepted the invitation and several stayed. After the first concert, many more students, girls and boys, became interested in joining choir.

Vocal skills

No amount of hype can rival the sense of genuine satisfaction that comes from being able to sing with skill. Children, especially boys, respond quickly to vocal instruction. They understand the benefits of the body, voice, and mind warm-ups. They enjoy movement exercises to prepare for singing. Consistent exploration in accessing the upper register sounds builds muscular coordination needed for singing. The vocal sound of fifth grade boys often shows the fullness and strength of their maturing bodies, yet unchanged voice. The sound produced in

children's upper register is one that truly touches the listener. When good literature calls forth the use of these vocal skills, children know what it means to sing in a choir.

Literature: excellence and humor

I have avoided theme-based choir concerts so I have the freedom to select a variety of literature that can expand student and audience appreciation of choral repertoire. Each concert can include a song with a beautiful melody, lovely harmony, a heartfelt message, a whimsical folksong, a choral classic, and a silly or humorous song. While boys certainly accept and enjoy all types of pieces, they are especially happy with humor. (Remember that one funny song has greater impact than a full diet of such songs.) Here are a few of the humorous songs that have delighted singers (one featured at each concert):

- Pizza! (Funiculli Funiculla) L. Denza; arr. Kirby Shaw
- The Kazoo Concerto (classic tunes) arr. Strid & Donnelly
- The Old Barn Dance J. Reese
- The Cat Came Back H. S. Miller; arr. A. G. Lewis

Vocal identity

Since boys identify with their fathers and older males, they often have an issue with "sounding like girls." Students seem most receptive to an approach that focuses on the science of sound and how sound is produced by the human voice. In music class we clarify the fact that the boys are singing the same pitch, same words, same rhythms that the girls are singing, which means we have skillful singers in class. Experimentation reveals that we can identify individual voices, as well as discriminate between boys and girls. Beyond these activities and discussions, boys (and girls) need to be identified and recognized as a group that sings.

In my first choir, the few (three or four) fifth grade boys who were there sang quite well. As we discussed the historical setting of one piece, I realized that we could showcase the boys' sound without focusing on them personally. We decided to demonstrate to the audience how the Praetorius canon, "Jubilate Deo" would have sounded in cathedrals hundreds of years ago by the treble voices of the Cathedral Boy Choirs. Our boys sang with purity and clarity that impressed younger students, surprised and thrilled the audience. They sang the song through then sang again as the choir entered after them in three more parts creating beautiful harmony.

Humor and action

The fifth grade ensembles began the following year. The boys' ensemble consisted of choir members who wanted to perform a special number with choreography and/or costumes and who would rehearse during one noon recess a week. Given a choice of two or three pieces, the boys have always selected pieces with humor and dramatic appeal. When the boys add their brand of humor, the piece comes alive. Often a simple costume (hat) or prop (rubber chicken) or an unexpected action (plastic insects thrown from their pockets) will guarantee a huge audience reaction. One year much needed confidence burst forth from the boys when they, transformed in their Flintstones' costumes, padded barefoot on stage.

The following titles have been the biggest hits throughout the years:

- Don Gato (Mexican folksong) arr. Ray Doughty
- That's How It Goes! (Three Limericks) by Cynthia Gray
- Santa Claus, Santa Claus (You are Much Too Fat) arr. Steve Kupferschmid
- Down, Down the Chimney by Irv Rothenberg
- Meet the Flintstones arr. Roger Emerson
- Pockets by Lynn Wendelbo & Mary Sallee
- Plain Cheeseburger by Phyllis Wolfe-White
- Parade of the Wooden Soldiers arr. John Leavitt
- Pop Bottle Hoedown by Linda Spevacek
(pop bottle band)
- Polly Walks a Poodle Every Day by George Strid
- The 12 Dogs of Christmas by Steven Lawrence
- Snap Crackle Rap by Kirby Shaw
- The Sailor's Life for Me by Donnelly & Strid

Responsibility and respect

Every choir needs a crew to set up chairs, risers, and care for the scores. It has been surprising to discover how meaningful these jobs are for the students. Students volunteer for the jobs or help when they can. I carefully document who takes on specific jobs, and who works on the major setups. It's amazing to observe their teamwork and efficiency (i.e., 93 chairs and folders set out in 13 minutes.) The students are publicly acknowledged for their help. They are so pleased to see their names in the program and to receive recognition and applause at the end of the concert. They also receive a Service Award at the close of the year.

Keep them singing

Success needs to keep going and growing. Work with new pieces at ever higher levels of musicianship can be motivating, but it can be just the right challenge to create a new twist or spin on what has been done before. Each year the group of singers has a unique personality, skills, and needs. My goal has been to stay open to possibilities and to be alert and responsive to ideas and flickers of interest among the students.