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**BEST PRACTICES:  
FOR PLANNING AND LEADING  
EFFECTIVE REHEARSALS**

AUGUST 24, 2023 AT 10AM PT

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**2023**



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# REHEARSAL CONSIDERATIONS

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create an agenda/line-up for every rehearsal (and be ready for it).
2. Communicate the agenda/line-up before and during the rehearsal.
3. Don't skip warm-ups.
4. Pray! Connect to Sunday/celebration/liturgical season.
5. Make sure the room and materials are ready before anyone else arrives.
6. Always begin on time, preferably by singing/warm-up.
7. Know the music yourself.
8. Have a goal/objective for each piece on the agenda/line-up.
9. Don't miss the opportunity for liturgical formation and catechesis.
10. Use and reinforce procedures (seating, attendance, distribution, etc.).
11. Don't skip post-rehearsal evaluation.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.

## RESOURCES

For more ideas and assistance, check out the following resources:

[Liturgy.com planning resource](#)

["Today's Liturgy" music planner](#)

["Sacred Rounds" warm-ups \(Christopher Walker\)](#)

["Learn how to run a more effective choir rehearsal" webinar with Angela Westhoff-Johnson](#)

["The small parish: Developing your volunteer-run church choir" blog article](#)

# The Well-Planned Choir Rehearsal



Angela

Westhoff-Johnson

Angela Westhoff-Johnson is a managing music editor for OCP and music director at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland, Oregon. She holds a bachelor's degree in music from Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa, and a master's degree in conducting from the University of Oregon. She lives in Portland with her husband and two daughters.

Proper planning is the key to success, whether you're leading a meeting, remodeling a home, or throwing a dinner party. The same goes for executing an effective choir rehearsal. A well-planned and properly executed choir rehearsal results in happy choir members who feel challenged, fulfilled, and eager to come back. Poorly planned rehearsals feel like a waste of time and result in choir members not eager to return.

Here are some tips to assist in your rehearsal preparation.

## Create a rehearsal lineup

Create a rehearsal lineup, an agenda for the rehearsal with exact times for each piece. Include the date beside each song for when it will be sung in liturgy. Distribute the agenda to all choir members ahead of time. Email is an excellent tool for efficient communication. Strategically place pieces in an order that will achieve your goals and not tire the singers too much. For example, alternate vocally challenging music with pieces that are less taxing on the voice. Program the more challenging pieces earlier in the rehearsal when the choir is fresh.

In addition to a rehearsal lineup, take the time during the summer break (if you have one) to plan the choir season. My choir sings two anthems/motets each Sunday. I aim to have the entire year planned before the first choir rehearsal. I strive for little repetition throughout the season, but certainly there is repetition from year to year. Consider attending choral reading sessions in your area in order to select the right music for your choir. Planning over the summer choir break allows for a smooth start to the choir season and ultimately reduces planning time.

At the first choir rehearsal of the season, each choir member receives a packet that lists the choral repertoire through the end of the Christmas season. I also include in this packet a calendar of the choir commitments through mid-June. This allows the members to plan their year well in advance and greatly improves choir member attendance.

## Prepare the room

Set chairs up ahead of time and write the rehearsal lineup on a white board. Make sure all new music is handed out. Choir boxes are important to ensure all members receive materials and have a place to store them. Music taken home has a great chance of not returning.

## Create a seating arrangement

Time will be saved if members know where to sit. In addition, certain voices work better together. "Voicing" singers to create the best seating arrangement can be time-consuming but is well worth it. Consider having two seating arrangements: one for when the choir sits in sections (all sopranos together, all altos together, and so on) and one for when the choir sits in mixed formation (ideally, in quartets). Post seating arrangements in the rehearsal space so they are visible to the choir.

## Take attendance

Consider assigning one person from each section to take roll or have a sign-in sheet near the door. Rehearsals are not optional. Several times throughout the year calculate absences and convert to percentages. Speak with those choir members who fall above your established threshold of absences.

## Start on time

If you begin rehearsals late, people will come late. If rehearsal begins at 7:00 pm, choristers should arrive no later than 6:50 pm. Music should be in order and each person should be ready to begin on time. Those who arrive at 7:00 pm are late!

## Start with vocal warm-ups

Warm-up exercises are very important. Like stretching before physical exercise, they are definitely not a waste of time. Warm-ups keep choristers in good vocal health. Begin vocalizing a minute or two before choir actually begins. Walking in when the choir is warming up will encourage people to arrive early.

## Incorporate sight-singing into each rehearsal

Sight-singing is particularly important when building a choir. You'll find that the more they do, the quicker they improve at this skill.

## Use time wisely

We live in a busy world and no one has time to waste. Make adjustments as necessary during the rehearsal to make the most out of the time.

Pay attention to your choir members. They may need a break if they are getting fatigued.

Don't let the chatter get out of hand. A little time to chitchat is important; it builds community. Members need to establish friendships, feel comfortable in their surroundings, and connect on a personal level in order to fully share their gifts. However, be sure to bring people back to focus when things start to drift and the chatter becomes unproductive.

## Balance standing and sitting

After a long day, people are often tired and need to move a bit during the rehearsal. Sitting for an entire rehearsal will result in lack of breath support and energy. On the other hand, standing for the entire rehearsal may cause additional fatigue and be counterproductive. Mixing things up a bit, such as standing when singing through a piece they know very well and sitting as you introduce a new piece of music, can offer the perfect balance.

## Know your music

Adequate score study is a must for running a productive rehearsal. You can't be learning or reading the music at the same time the choir is. Determine places in the music that may need more attention and allow adequate time. Make sure you have combed the score for possible errors or unique notation that needs attention. Admit when you've made a mistake: "I wasn't very clear there. Can you do that again for me?" The more musically prepared you are, the smoother your rehearsal will be.

## Be positive and upbeat

Provide constructive feedback in a positive, supportive tone. Constructive comments do not have to be demeaning or degrading. Point out when something needs to change and point out when things go well. Early in my career I made a conscious effort to compliment each section at some point during every rehearsal. In the beginning there were rehearsals that made this a challenge. I didn't want to give false praise since that could be misleading. However, pointing out areas for improvement is easy to do and when the choir has worked through trouble spots it gives them a feeling of success.

## Set high standards

Be demanding in a professional, caring way. People want to be part of something that sounds wonderful. Be realistic about the choir's ability. Don't choose music that is too difficult. They will feel defeated. Aim to create a beautiful tone; singing in unison will aid in achieving this goal. Create a balanced repertoire. If all the music is too difficult, they will feel overwhelmed and won't come back. If the music is consistently too easy, they won't be challenged and won't come back. Set high musical standards that are in line with your choir's ability.

## End rehearsals on time

This shows respect for everyone. Again, time is precious. Just as you

expect the choristers to arrive early so the rehearsal can start on time—thus fulfilling their part of the mutual commitment—ending on time is your way of fulfilling your part: this is the time we agreed to and you can be sure we'll always stop then. That kind of consistency and structure builds trust.

## Debrief afterward

What went well? What could go better? Make your next choir rehearsal even better than the one you just finished. Quite often I send an email out the day after a rehearsal thanking them for their hard work and commitment. Showing appreciation goes a long way.

Being part of a choir can be a thrilling experience. It is rewarding to make music with a group of people who share a common love. However, it is a big commitment to be a member of a liturgical choir. Members devote between four and eight hours each week to this ministry. As a director, it is imperative that you plan and execute rehearsals well so as to make the best use of everyone's time. Effective rehearsals result in choristers leaving feeling energized and with a sense of accomplishment. It is my hope that this article has provided some ideas to assist you in planning and preparing for your next choir rehearsal.

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# Leadership and Laban Strategies for the Choral Rehearsal

Lisa Billingham



Lisa Billingham is an associate professor of choral music education at George Mason University where she conducts the university chorale and teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in choral music education. She is the past-president for the Virginia chapter of the American Choral Directors Association and is a planning committee member for the Annual Voices United Conference. She earned her doctorate of musical arts from the University of Arizona.

We as church musicians are constantly looking for new ways to enhance our weekly routines. In the past few years I have realized that my training as a Laban Movement Analyst has helped me to become a more open and effective conductor and person. This article will give you some suggestions for strategies to keep your choir rehearsals focused and creative.

## Rudolf Laban

Rudolf Laban was a teacher and movement specialist who created a movement theory to define and enhance dynamic and productive patterns of our daily lives. From an early age he observed human movement patterns and created a theory of how to maximize our movement patterns through relating the psychological intent of movement to the actual movement itself. Through certification in Laban Movement Theory, I have grown more expressive as a conductor and am connecting to my choirs in new and creative ways by pairing the idea of intent to action.

There is a connection between intention and every movement we make. Modeling good posture when we rehearse builds a connection to our singers that is subtle yet important. The relationships we build with our ensemble members are formed from simple gestures of welcoming to the intended gesture of conducting and feedback in the rehearsal and liturgy.

Below is a series of routines and gestures that we can actively create to assist in keeping our ensembles focused and create a welcoming environment for singers to share in the connection between intent and action/performance. Below are some suggested strategies to re-energize your own work and connect to your choir.

### Ten rehearsal strategies to keep your choir engaged:

1. **Greet your singers at the door and individually say hello.** The personal connection we make from shaking hands and being greeted with eye contact confirms for choir members that they are individually important to the choir. Keeping your posture positive and open will create the physical and emotional space for them to engage in conversation or simply be aware of the space they hold in rehearsal.
2. **Focus on changing your warm-up patterns.** I have a set pattern in warm-ups that starts with something physical such as stretching or playing a mirror game. I encourage my groups to follow me as I move—raising an arm (if I raise my left they raise their right as if they are looking in a mirror), scrunching my face, massaging my jaw. To add a bit of Laban Movement Theory to the mirror exercise, I have the ensemble isolate one side of the body while they move the other side and then switch sides. This exercise allows you to see which side is dominant and how free your singers are to experiment with movement in rehearsal. Simply inserting breathing back into your warm-ups is a good place to start. Activate the voice with a unison hum prior to vocal warm-ups.

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*I have found it humbling to realize just how much we rely on our words rather than our gesture to convey musical intent.*

- 3. Modify the configuration of your rehearsal space or simply change the chair set up.** Rehearsals need a familiarity in the way you start your rehearsal but consider a new way for your ensemble to hear. Changing the design of your rehearsal set up can create an opportunity for singers to hear in a new way. Volunteers are often hesitant to change seats but by trying this from time to time you may find that they ask for one of your new seating arrangements. When you are working in pews or seats that cannot be moved, move the singers. Have you tried a standing position that is mixed by voice part or conducting rehearsal in a circle? Part of building trust in your ensemble is to move them around and ask them to sing mixed. This is another strategy to build confidence for the individual singer.
  - 4. Start a new piece with the goal of singing it in the future, perhaps a month away.** My rehearsal pattern is to begin with the songs for services that week, followed by music for at least the next three weeks if possible. My church choir looks forward to feeling confident when we sing each week. When you work ahead, you have the opportunity to set the parameters for how difficult the rehearsals may get during a special or demanding time in the liturgical year.
  - 5. Find a way to do something social prior to or following rehearsal, such as a once-a-month birthday club.** This gives the group an excuse to be social with one another outside the church and creates a place for members that might not connect in other ways. Attend concerts together or plan other group activities to find what your singers have in common.
  - 6. Try a rehearsal where you use very little or no talking.** This is an excellent tool for training your singers to watch your gestures. We can define the length of phrases and demonstrate the style of a piece with our hands. Demonstrate the shape of an arc in front of you and then ask your singers to model this shape back to you with their hands. This can bring a new level of musicality to your rehearsal without a great deal of explanation. If you incorporate the mirror exercise mentioned earlier you may find that your choir will be able to apply the same sound you create in warm up to your pieces. I have found it humbling to realize just how much we rely on our words rather than our gesture to convey musical intent.
  - 7. Ask your members for a list of their favorite songs from which to choose as you plan your music for the year.** Choirs can build a sense of identity by singing a familiar piece. This also allows for ownership of the piece from within your ensemble. This can be gathered through a survey via email at the beginning of the year or by signing up in rehearsal. This is another example of the inner connection of the music to the outward connection to one another. Of course you will always have veto power!
  - 8. Learn a song together that can be used as a closing prayer for rehearsal.** Several conductors I know use a closing song such as “The Lord Bless You and Keep You.” There are times when a closing prayer after sharing time may be too difficult for the choir to create. By singing together before they depart they have the opportunity to share something in common that signals that rehearsal is about to end.
  - 9. Give your rehearsal one focus for the evening such as tone, rhythm, or singing line.** Our society has become a place where holding multiple conversations, perhaps online and in person in tandem is commonplace. Setting a single goal for your rehearsal helps you to unify your focus as a conductor. This shows the choir how important the topic is for music making. If we foster a solid sense of rhythmic vitality with one song it will most likely carry to the next in your rehearsal. Awareness of simple concepts shared between pieces decreases the need to repeat the same directive with your next rehearsal piece.
  - 10. Choose a rehearsal in which you set the goal for yourself of making eye contact with each member of your choir. This may be a habit for many of you.** It can be rewarding to see the members of your ensemble respond to you and instill a sense of connection when breathing and releasing together. The tutti breath that is shared lifts and opens the rib cage, which in turn produces healthy tone.
- It is my hope that this article has given you a reason to engage in routine and the freedom or permission to make it different. Refreshing these strategies is important in confirming a sense of ensemble for your singers. Our singers are creatures of habit and will flourish with encouragement and the opportunity to connect with one another.

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# Choir rehearsal best-practices articles

## *reflection questions*

Read the articles “The Well-Planned Choir Rehearsal” by Angela Westhoff-Johnson and “Leadership and Laban Strategies for the Choir Rehearsal” by Lisa Billingham. Then, consider the questions below. Use them for individual self-reflection, or use them to guide group reflection with members of your choir, music ministry, liturgy committee, etc.

- 1. Re-read the best-practices Angela and Lisa identify. What are you already doing well? How can you build upon what you’re currently doing to do even better?**
- 2. Which best practice do you need to prioritize, address, or improve in your rehearsals? Why did you identify this as an area needing improvement?**
- 3. Imagine you can make the changes you identified above. What will the consequences be for your music ministry in 6 months? 1 year? 5 years?**
- 4. When and how will you make these changes? Who needs to be involved? What support, materials, or assistance will be needed?**

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# Rehearsal culture checklist

The checklist below is meant to help identify areas for improvement. After answering “yes” or “no” for each question, identify realistic action steps that could be taken to improve the effectiveness of your rehearsals. For best effect, provide this checklist several members of the choir or music ministry. Then, hold a conversation to align responses and action steps.

## FOR THE YEAR/SEASON

	yes	no	action items
1. A consistent rehearsal day, time, and place has been established and communicated.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2. Members know their schedule of liturgies for the next six months.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Members have reviewed “choir member expectations” in the past six months.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Members have reviewed rehearsal procedures in the past year.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5. Contact information for all members has been updated in the past year.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. Seating plans were updated and communicated in the last four months.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. A process exists for distributing, collecting, and filing/managing scores, hymnals, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8. New/prospective members are regularly invited to attend rehearsals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

## FOR EACH REHEARSAL

	yes	no	to-do list
9. All singer/instrumentalist folders are prepared ahead of time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. All musicians receive the rehearsal agenda/line-up ahead of time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
11. Basic rehearsal necessities are available (i.e. pencils, water, post-it notes, etc.).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
12. The agenda/line-up is posted for all to see during the rehearsal.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
13. Rehearsals begin exactly on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

14. Every rehearsal includes warm-up exercises.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
15. Every rehearsal includes prayer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
16. Rehearsals regularly include some sort of liturgical or ministerial formation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
17. Choir members understand the target(s) or goal(s) for each rehearsal.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
18. Rehearsals are generally upbeat, positive, and constructive.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
19. Rehearsals end exactly on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

FOR EACH LITURGY

	yes	no	action items
20. Rehearsals are evaluated.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
21. The music space is set-up before musicians arrive for liturgy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
22. Pre-liturgy rehearsal is not a distraction to the assembly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
23. Pre-liturgy rehearsal includes warm-up and prayer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
24. Pre-liturgy rehearsals begin exactly on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
25. Time for silence and prayer is given between rehearsal and the liturgy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

**In addition, what other questions, observations, or concerns need to be addressed?**

**How will the action steps identified above be implemented? When? By whom?**

**When will this checklist be revisited for re-evaluation?**

# Choir member expectations

Setting clear, consistent expectations is critical to the success of any group, especially a music ensemble or choir. They need to be set and reinforced intentionally. After all, expectations set themselves and, if we're not careful, can enshrine unhelpful or counterproductive habits and behaviors.

The following is an excerpt taken from *A Primer for the Catholic Choir Member*, by Lawrence J. Johnson (Portland: Pastoral Press, 1996). Use the list as a way to identify and create your own expectations. Communicate them verbally, in writing, post them in your rehearsal room, and – most importantly – reinforce them through your own behavior and actions.

1. Never forget that the goal of your choir's singing is to assist and enhance the communal prayer of the people who gather for worship, namely, the assembly.
2. Perhaps your parish has several choirs, each focusing upon a particular type of repertoire. Rejoice! These groups do not compete against one another but rather share in the same ministry or service to the people.
3. Take an active role in recruiting new members for your choir. Sharing your good choral experiences with a friend and asking him or her to join the group can result in a new recruit (in most choirs this will be a double blessing if the friend is a tenor).
4. Make new members of the choir feel welcome; help them to be acquainted with the veteran members (perhaps each new member should be given a sponsor).
5. If, for one reason or another, you cannot be present for a rehearsal or a liturgical celebration, be sure to let your choir director know beforehand so that he or she can, if necessary, make any adjustments.
6. Remember that everyone benefits when each choir member arrives on time for rehearsals and the liturgy. It's called punctuality.
7. Good posture is essential to good tone production.
8. When standing, be sure your spine is straight (do not hump over); keep your head erect; do not pull back your shoulders; be sure your feet are slightly apart with one foot slightly in front of the other.
9. When sitting, do not slouch; sit up straight; do not lean all the way back in the chair; place both feet on the floor (do not cross your legs).
10. Hold your music at such a height so that you can see both music and conductor at the same time.

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11. We all must breathe to live; and singers must breathe to sing. Don't wait until your lungs are ready to burst; catch quick staggered breaths along the way.
  12. Take a deep breath (preferably through the nose) immediately before you begin to sing; mentally prepare yourself for this attack.
  13. Good musical starts and good endings do not a good choir make, but they sure can help.
  14. As you sing, listen to others around you. You are part of the group.
  15. Cough drops, chewing gum, and M&Ms do not help facilitate good choral tone.
  16. Plan ahead for page-turns during your singing. Slightly anticipate the action; don't wait until the very last minute.
  17. Be patient while the director is rehearsing other sections of the choral group; your turn will eventually come.
  18. If you or your vocal section has trouble with an interval or phrase, don't fake it. Ask your director for assistance.
  19. When not singing during the liturgy, center your attention upon the focal point of the liturgical action, e.g. upon the reader during the reading, upon the homilist during the homily, etc.
  20. All of us need encouragement – including your choral director.
  21. Life requires that we constantly grow; we can do no less as choral singers in our skills, repertory, and general musical/liturgical knowledge.

“At times the choir, within the congregation of the faithful and as part of it, will assume the role of leadership, while at other times it will retain its own distinctive ministry. This means that the choir will lead the people in sung prayer, by alternating or reinforcing the sacred song of the congregation, or by enhancing it with the addition of a musical elaboration. At other times in the course of liturgical celebration the choir alone will sing works whose musical demands enlist and challenge its competence.” – **Bishop’s Committee on the Liturgy, Music in Catholic Worship (1972), no. 36.**



# Rehearsal agenda example

REHEARSAL DATE: Monday, October 9

NEXT LITURGY: 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT (October 15)

CLOCK	TIME	ACTIVITY	GOAL or FOCUS	NOTES
7:00	10	Warm-ups	Focus on breath, articulation, and interval warm-ups.	
7:10	10	Letatio Divina and prayer	Pray with the Gospel reading for the upcoming Sunday. Use prayer cards with choir prayer.	
7:20	8	"Hallelujah Chorus" (Handel)	Sections D and E: Clean-up consonant placement and rhythms	Use on Christmas Eve and Day
7:28	6	"A Christmas Gloria" (Gibson)	Verses only: phrasing and breath placement, dynamics (mark scores!)	Use all Christmas Season
7:34	12	"Lord of All Hopefulness" (Eicker)	First sing-through of entire piece, focus on roadmap, score marking, and verse 4 descant	Use on Sunday, November 5
7:46	5	"As We Gather At Your Table" (NETTLETON)	Review introduction and transitions, soprano descant.	Next Sunday
7:51	4	Psalm 23: I Shall Live in the House of the Lord (Alstott)	Refrain only: teach refrain to choir. If time, run a verse with Steve (cantor).	Next Sunday
7:55	5	Announcements	Review upcoming liturgy and rehearsal schedule, remind about cantor training on Tuesday.	
8:00	0	Dismissal		
<p><b>WHAT WENT WELL:</b> We covered all our goals. This was the most consistent we have been on the "Gloria." The new piece was well-received.</p>		<p><b>FOR NEXT TIME:</b> Review parts for current Mass acclamations. Spend more time on breathing exercises during warm-ups. Spend time on score-marking; some singers are inconsistent.</p>		

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