



Foederatio Internationalis
Pueri Cantores

VADE MECUM FOR CHOIR DIRECTORS

A choir is a community. The Choir Director is the leader of the community and responsible for the musical side of their activities, as well as various educational, social and spiritual aspects.

The choir director is musician and educator: he plans and organises the music and many other aspects of the choir. He must also be psychologically aware and be guardians of the choristers' well-being. These qualities and skills are described in more detail below, as they should ideally be found in one person.

However, it is often possible and advisable for these versatile skills to be shared among different people in a team led by the choir conductor.

I – CHOIR DIRECTORS ARE MUSICIANS

Whether a professional or enlightened non-professional, the choral conductor must have a solid musical training: it is through their musical, social and pedagogical qualities that they will make their choir really flourish.

1 – MUSICAL TRAINING

Directors must have a perfect command of musical language: sight-reading musical scores with texts, “inwardly-hearing” a 4-part score without an instrument and having a solid knowledge of harmony and counterpoint which will enable him, for example, to avoid mistakes. They must, of course, have a solid command of rhythm and be at ease with many different musical styles and aesthetics: music by Bach should not be sung in the same way as, say, music by Brahms!

2– VOCAL TRAINING

The choir director must also have good vocal training. A solid vocal technique will enable them both to improve their singers' vocal abilities, and to give them useful, practical illustrations: children (and adults) imitate what they hear, and bad habits are learnt just as easily as good ones. Every choral conductor should make a point of training themselves very well in this respect.

3 – GESTURE

There is no such thing as an “ideal conductor's style”: just watch great conductors at work or read their writings: you will see that their way of doing things, like their advice, can often be contradictory. There is only one absolute rule for making oneself understood: the message sent by the conductor to the choir must be communicated effectively and easily understood. The gesture must also be in harmony with the musical interpretation of the score.

There are two kinds of gesture: rehearsal gesture and concert gesture. The former serves to shape the work, fine-tune details, and so on, while the latter is essentially a reminder of important details made during rehearsals. Thus, in concert gesture can be more concentrated, focusing on essentials, stimulating attention and concentration, and possibly introducing new ideas to give the performance of the piece new impetus. There are, however, several international conventions relative to marking various times, beginnings, and endings, and to indicate agogic nuance and interpretative intentions. It must always be remembered, however, that the best gestures are very often the simplest ones.

4 – TEACHING

Good teaching methods are vital for stimulating singers' attention, imagination, and interest. Successful teachers achieve the maximum musical results possible, while maintaining their choristers' pleasure when singing.

There is also a necessity to teach choristers “how to learn effectively” during rehearsals: avoiding “dead times”, maintaining their attention and the progress of each section effectively, while constantly avoiding boredom.

5 – LITURGICAL MUSIC

As church musicians, choir directors must be at ease with the liturgy and familiar with the dual function of sacred song: praising God and helping the faithful to pray. They must have sound liturgical and spiritual training, which will enabling them to choose appropriate works for the liturgy and to allow their singers to understand the spirit of the works they perform.

(See also part V)

Skills: Not all choir directors have the same musical skills. However, an inexperienced choir director can still achieve positive results through commitment and charisma. Thus no- one should feel unwelcome within the Pueri Cantores movement. It is always much better, however, for any choir director to acquire the necessary training, abilities, and qualifications, through courses run by competent institutions or teachers.

II – CHOIR DIRECTORS ARE EDUCATORS

1 – MUSICAL EDUCATION

Most of the Pueri Cantores arrive in a choir with little (or no) musical knowledge, but simply with a desire to sing and to spend time with their friends. The director's objective should be to help them make progress in all the musical abilities necessary for performing their music well.

2 – HUMANITARIAN EDUCATION

All human success is always based on personal achievement and requires a lot of effort. This effort, which is constantly required of young choristers by their director, must motivate them to achieve their best possible performances. This sense of personal effort can be transposed to all areas of human life. Pueri Cantores are at stage of their lives when their personality and their sense of values are established. Choral singing is above all a school for life itself.

The choir director will have a relationship with their youngsters based on mutual respect and high standards. Their human qualities and willingness to constantly challenge themselves are just as important as their musical abilities. This is why the Pueri Cantores Federation asks its choirmasters to have care and regard towards the youngsters in their charge and to maintain authentic concern for the education of all young people. These requirements are essential for all educators.

3 – SPIRITUAL EDUCATION

The Pueri Cantores Federation is a Church movement and is recognized as such by the Holy See and all choir members must be able to experience conditions that allow them to flourish spiritually.

All Pueri Cantores choirs will participate regularly in the liturgy. Liturgies are not merely another kind of musical performance, but should be a "spiritual celebration", where the glory of God is proclaimed actively and where the faithful are constantly helped to understand more deeply the mysteries that are celebrated.

In rehearsal, the motet – if possible, judiciously chosen according to the liturgical time – should reveal its meaning to the choir through their conductor, and thus nourish the faith of the young people singing. It is essential that choir directors constantly bear witness to their own faith, so as become a positive example for their choristers.

Within the activities of a choir, occasions for spiritual development of its members should be planned regularly – maybe led by a priest or a well instructed member of the laity, because the choir leader cannot do everything by themselves.

III CHOIR DIRECTORS ARE ORGANIZERS

In the music to be performed:

- choice of repertoire;
- organisation of the year and their management of rehearsals, the calendar and programming necessary for the liturgy;
- organisation of concerts;
- organisation of training courses;
- participation in training courses or events organised by the Federation.

In their communities:

- recruitment;
- schedule of regular and special rehearsals;
- sharing in any happy or unhappy family events;
- sharing responsibilities, especially with the more mature choristers;
- psychological, human, spiritual and educational commitment to all members of the choir

For Pueri Cantores Federation events:

- participation in regional, national, and international gatherings, particularly those organised by their national Federation, other national Federations, and the international Federation.
- hosting visiting choirs and choristers, particularly those from Pueri Cantores Federations.

In the social life of the choir:

- links with families;
- links with their parish and/or their school(s);
- integration of the group into the musical life of the community.

A director *will never be able to do everything on their own*, but must always be alert to what is happening both inside and around their choirs.

IV – CHOIR DIRECTORS MUST BE BOTH PSYCHOLOGISTS AND A VIGILANT WATCHDOGS

1 – PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

A child or adolescent is a person in the process of growing up and must be supported throughout their development. Their emotions must be both understood and handled quietly with the necessary discretion and discernment. It is essential that adults working with them both know and understand the specific necessities of the age groups of children and adolescents in their charge.

Each person is individual, but there are some age-related constants:

- between the ages of 6 and 8: a child loses their natural ability to experiment by themselves and will more frequently refer to an adult, and may not always understand a joke or ask necessary questions.

- between 8/12 years: they need more autonomy and a sense of justice that is clear. This is the age of friendship, but also of a desire for competition, too, and the beginning of the separation between boys and girls. There is a need to discover how the world is expressed.

- between 12 and 14: this is the trickiest age group for supervisors. Behaviour oscillates between agitation, impulsiveness, and apathy; inhibition, modesty, and exhibitionism. Refuge is often taken in daydreams. The search for a confidant and the need to belong to a group are also very important.

Boys and girls may have very different rhythms and very different needs. These differences must be managed by organising separate activities and reserved areas (changing rooms, toilets, play areas, bedrooms, etc.). This is especially important in early adolescence, when the maturity gap can be very wide and apparent.

As the needs of girls and boys are not at all the same, their individual needs must be constantly monitored and considered, and tailored precisely to the circumstances.

2 – THE ROLE OF A SUPERVISOR

Mutually respectful behaviour is an essential objective and defines the framework for all educational activity. A supervisor must be a well-balanced adult and open to analysing their actions and attitudes. They must regularly challenge themselves through regular training and criticism of their work.

Supervisors must set themselves well-defined educational objectives. They must ensure respect towards others with whom they work and set out clear rules for themselves and for others.

An educator has a permanent duty to encourage, respect and protect everyone, especially the younger and more vulnerable people in their care. They must strive to create a climate of trust and cordiality, and never betray the trust accorded to them. A few simple guidelines:

- A young person must never be humiliated in front of others. If a problem arises, ask the young person to explain themselves, for example after a rehearsal, but not in front of the group.
- Avoid staying alone with a child and, whenever possible, always use spaces that are open.
- Pay particular attention to young people who may be psychologically fragile, or who may become easy targets, thus avoiding any possibility of moral or psychological harassment.
- Outings and concert tours can often be very important for choirs, as they help to build tangible cohesion and trust, but common sense must always be kept in mind: unacceptable familiarity, ambiguity or behaviour must always be avoided.

3 - THE PROTECTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Children must never be subjected to physical, psychological, or sexual violence by an adult or by any other person.

A child who is a victim of bullying, physical or sexual harassment or cyber-bullying may give warning signals which you need to be aware of (crying spells, various aches and pains, violence, fear of the adult, withdrawal).

This behaviour is also a classic sign of a young person growing up. The context must be understood and suitably assessed.

Whenever a child confides in someone, they should be aware that whatever is revealed cannot necessarily remain confidential. Adults who become aware of wrongdoing or violence are obliged to alert the relevant authorities. Under no circumstances can they resolve the problem alone or take the place of the law. Moreover, adults should never hesitate to seek advice and help from other, especially more competent people.

These recommendations or obligations are often simply common sense. But it is vital to have the help of other competent people, to be well-informed and to get suitable training.

A document 'Charter for the Protection of Minors' was published in 2022 by the International Federation of Pueri Cantores. The reading of this text is compulsory for all the conductors. They must take into account the recommendations presented.

V – CHOIR DIRECTORS AND LITURGY.

A good knowledge of the liturgy is a very necessary part of the skills that a choral conductor in the church must master and constantly develop.

1. The liturgical education of singers

This is an important part of all singers' education: in parallel to their musical education, choristers must also receive a spiritual education, which must include an understanding of the texts and the music they sing, so that they always feel encouraged to seek out the intrinsic nature, value, and beauty of the music they perform.

2. Choir directors must know the structure of the many kinds of liturgy and the texts related to them, and they must always choose high quality choral or solo works that have a vital relationship with the themes, the readings, the prayers, and the many other spiritual aspects of the liturgy. Thus, it should be possible to touch the hearts of the individual singers and the congregation – in this way the music, itself, becomes prayer.

It is important to integrate the participation of the congregation into the liturgical singing (*Participatio actuosa*). The choir is, in fact, part of the congregation and is not performing on its own for mere personal aesthetical satisfaction.

Even if the structure and formal principles of the Christian liturgy are the same throughout the world, local and regional musical traditions often create their own – unique – musical languages, and these should be carefully integrated into the structure of their liturgies and become part of the manner of their celebrations. Worship is an intrinsic part of culture, and regional cultures can, therefore, become an important element in a particular community's own path to celebrating their liturgy.

CONCLUSION

THE THREE PILLARS SUPPORTING A PUERI CANTORES CHOIR

The aim of Pueri Cantores choirs is to provide young people with a rich musical, humanitaian and spiritual experience. For a new chorister to integrate well into the choir, it is necessary to always keep the following three “pillars” in mind.

THE MUSICAL PILLAR

Musical quality and regular attendance at rehearsals are essential to any choir's progress. However, if musical activities are to remain a pleasure for the choristers, it is important to maintain a suitable balance: the choir director must adapt to the level of their choristers.

THE HUMANITARIAN PILLAR

One of the missions of a choir is to teach young people to live together in a climate of harmony, fraternity, mutual support, openness, and mutual respect:

- The best way to integrate a new chorister is to introduce him or her to the life of the group as soon as possible. To facilitate such integration, more expert choristers or section-members can be asked to tutor a new arrival and to look after them during events (rehearsals, liturgy, concerts, etc.) and possibly to become their “sponsor” within the choir. This has the advantage of giving the more mature chorister a greater responsibility.
 - As the choir is the business of all its members, it is essential to involve the more mature members in the life of the group, by asking them to take on responsibility for younger members and involving them in decisions.
- Education in the art of living alongside others must always be given due merit within choirs.

THE SPIRITUAL PILLAR

To be a Puer or Puella Cantores means using one’s voice as an instrument of peace for God and for all of mankind. It means giving those who listen to us the opportunity to experience beauty and to rediscover holiness and the sacred.

A Pueri Cantores choir provides a service to the Church. Each chorister has their own personal convictions and every chorister should be accepted as they are, with their own personal questions, doubts, history, and character. Like everyone, all of us seek to give meaning to our lives, but it is essential that we never forget that being part of Pueri Cantores also means serving other people and the Church through divine praise and sacred music.

Thus, a Pueri Cantores Choir will constantly base their activities on these three pillars:

- The art of singing well;
- The art of living in harmony with others;
- The art of serving others and the Church, while seeking God!