

SUZI'S TIPS FOR RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL CHOIR SESSION

1. Structure your session

The structure of a session is important and I would strongly urge you NOT to skip the warm-up no matter how extreme the time pressure. It is a false economy to dive straight into working on material! Your session should begin with a warm up, then you can move on to the meat of your session, and then you should finish with a cool-down, singing something that will send everyone back out into the world with a sense of achievement and feeling good. If a session lasts 90 minutes, I would aim for a 10-15 minute warm up, an hour or so of solid work, and then a 10-15 minute cool-down.

2. Why warm up?

There are lots of reasons to warm up. The obvious one is to get your voice ready for singing, but you also want to focus your group's attention, get rid of some of the inhibitions they may have brought into the room with them, and to really set them up as a team so that they are ready to work together for the rehearsal feeling focused and united.

3. What to do as a warm up

I like sound-based, non-singing exercises to form part of my warm up. These are an easy way to get your voice moving and there is less risk involved for participants, as no one is worried about making a beautiful sound, which can be inhibiting. I would also encourage choir leaders to know exactly why they are doing a particular exercise – there isn't really any point in singing through lots of arpeggios on 'na na na' unless you know that there is something specific you want to get out of it.

4. Make links between the different sections of your rehearsal

When I am planning what to do as a warm-up or cool-down with a group, I think about what the focus of the session will be. For example, at the BoMo session, much of what we worked on was connected with storytelling and how engaging emotionally with your material – whatever the material may be – is a short-cut to good vocal technique. The warm-up (spell-casting) and the cool-down (Ah, poor bird) reflected this. If you know you are going to focus on super-crisp text, then build this into your warm up. If the piece you are working on has difficult intervals to pitch, then this should be your focus.

5. Really listen to what is happening in the room

Getting the notes right is of course important, but there is a lot of other interesting work that can be done at every stage of learning, whether you are beginning a new piece or polishing a piece you know well. Your choir needs to be alert and on its toes at all times, or the resulting performance will sound rather safe and staid. Take lots of risks and take them early in the learning process before habits are formed. You can always ditch an idea that doesn't work, but in my book it is far better to be extreme in rehearsal than to play it safe.

