



SING
for
PLEASURE

SfP Pointers

#18: Taking Your Choir to Church

Churches and cathedrals are some of the best performing venues out there, and so inevitably we all end up conducting in them at one time or another. Some of these performances might be concerts, but often singing in a church or, especially, a great cathedral, means singing in a service. This can be a daunting prospect for choirs unfamiliar with church services, but there are some simple steps we can take as conductors to ensure the choir has the best experience possible when performing in religious buildings.

Booking a Service

You've decided you want to take your choir to sing a service. That's great, but how do you organise it? It very much depends on the place, but a rough guide is:

- ❑ **Church** – Email the Director of Music or, if there isn't one, the Priest in charge. All these details should be on the church's website, or on noticeboards outside. Churches normally only have sung services on Sundays, so you will have to discuss a suitable week with the church. This may be during the regular choir's holiday, depending on the church. Often if you ask, churches are delighted to welcome choirs to sing, so always best to get in touch.
- ❑ **Cathedral** – These tend to have more established procedures. Normally if you look on the website there is a section for visiting choirs, which may include submitting an application. For bigger, more prestigious cathedrals, you may need to submit a recording or a reference. In cathedrals, visiting choirs tend to be invited on the resident choir's weekly day off, or during holiday periods. It is advisable to try and book such dates around a year in advance to ensure you find a date that works for you.

Choosing Repertoire

Well done! You've got the booking. You know when and where you're singing. Now you have to decide what you're actually going to sing. This will differ depending on the service you're going to sing. Assuming it's a Church of England service, it could be Eucharist (Mass) or Evensong. Today we're going to focus on Evensong, as this is more common for visiting choirs.

Evensong contains lots of different types of music, much of which might seem quite unfamiliar. Therefore, the most important thing is to make sure you choose music your choir can sing well. You want your choir to be confident in the music, because it's likely they'll be worrying more about when to stand and sit, and what comes next, than what they're actually singing! Evensong music is split into five sections:

- ❑ **Responses**
These are the first thing you sing, and will probably not enter your concert repertoire as they're unique to these services. Essentially the Priest, or Cantor, will sing a simple phrase, and the choir then responds in glorious harmony. One of the hardest things about responses is the first note of each response. Make sure your choir know how to find their note from the Priest's introduction, particularly as the Priest may not always be confident singers themselves. There are so many settings of the responses, but as they may be brand new, choose something straightforward. Good examples are the settings by Ayleward, Smith, Reading, and Radcliffe.
- ❑ **Psalms**
This is the bit of the service that will seem most unfamiliar and yet will be most important to your hosts. Psalms are a unique part of Evensong, being sung to Anglican chant. This can be typed and performed in many ways, but one version can be found here:

<http://www.boroughchamberchoir.org.uk/StD2013%20downloads/psalms/Chant%20tutorial%202013.pdf>

Your hosts will tell you which psalms to sing, and you should rehearse these thoroughly. Start by learning the chant really well, so that the choir only needs to look at the words. Then practise chanting those words in speech rhythm, not changing speed when the note changes. If you want to listen to some examples, listen here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6F4m5zXtYvQ> . There are lots of books you can take psalms from so, unless you're experienced in singing them, don't make your own the first time.

☐ **Canticles**

The *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* are two pieces of music that are sung to the same words at every Evensong. There are countless versions of these texts, the majority accompanied by the organ. You can treat these like you would any other piece of music – they should feel a lot more familiar – but again try and choose something in a style you are used to.

☐ **Anthem**

This is where you have more flexibility. Most sacred texts could fit in this spot, however do try and match the theme of the service, either by asking your contact at the venue, or by looking through the readings for the service. Remember, Evensong is a short service, and the anthem should be something effective you can perform well, at about 2-7 minutes. If you want to go beyond this, you should ask the church/cathedral.

☐ **Hymn**

Finally, you might have to sing one or multiple hymns in your service. Make sure you know which hymn book your venue uses as each book has different words and music. It is common to sing the first and last verse of each hymn in unison (i.e. everyone singing the melody), with the middle verses in 4-part harmony. But just do what your choir is able to – singing harmony while reading the words on another page can be quite a challenge.

So there we are. A lot of music in Evensong, but hugely rewarding when you pull it off. Keep it well within reach for your first service and then, as your choir gets more familiar and confident in their surroundings, you can branch out.

All the music mentioned above should be available from sites like Musicroom, or the Royal School of Church Music's shop, and some good music collections are:

English Church Music Vol 1 (Anthems) -

<https://www.rscmshop.com/english-church-music-volume-1-anthem-and-motets.html>

English Church Music Vol 2 (Canticles & Responses) -

<https://www.rscmshop.com/english-church-music-volume-2-canticles-and-responses.html>

Open Thou Our Lips (Upper Voices) -

https://www.rscmshop.com/open-thou-our-lips.html?__store=german

Church Anthem Book -

<https://www.rscmshop.com/new-church-anthem-book-paperback.html>

Your Accompanist

When choosing your music, keep in mind where you will be singing. Some churches have big organs, whereas some only have small instruments where bigger anthems and canticles won't work so well. Some music written for piano accompaniment can work well on the organ, whereas others sound odd. If you're unsure, always ask the resident organist where you're visiting.

When choosing an accompanist, remember that a pianist is not an organist! You want to be really confident in your accompanist for your first service, so make sure you choose someone confident in the instrument that you are performing on. Every organ is quite different, so always communicate with your accompanist, both before and during rehearsals.

Preparing for the Performance

Singing a service requires some quite different preparation to performing a concert. Overleaf are just a few of the things you can do to give your choir the best chance of success:

Layout

In a concert you can stand wherever you choose. For a service you are often restricted by the location of the choir stalls. Often these are placed opposite each other, so the choir is split down the middle, with half of each part on each side. If your choir is not used to this, it is advisable to practice in this format. Get the choir used to what they can see, who they can hear, and how it feels to be split up like this.

Order of Service

During the service, the choir is responsible for leading the spoken parts, as well as the sung sections. You should take your choir through the order of service (which you should be able to borrow from the church). Make sure the choir knows when to stand, and when to sit; what words they need to join in with; where the music takes place (the responses, for example, are split in two at different parts of the service!). Often not much is announced in these services, so you need to be ready to stand and lead your choir through the event.

Dress

Make sure you plan what your choir is going to wear, and check with the church. Normal concert dress will most probably work, but different places have different policies, so it's always worth checking. Remember it's a service, not a performance, and the dress should appropriately reflect that.

The Big Day

You've made it! You've booked your service, chosen your music, and are at the church/cathedral ready to sing. What do you need to bear in mind to ensure it goes smoothly?

Rehearsal

Even having spent time rehearsing in the church layout, the new acoustics are likely to take some getting used to. Try starting your rehearsal with some listening and blending exercises to get the choir comfortable. Once you're comfortable, focus on the accompanied pieces – the organ will feel very different to a rehearsal piano! Finally, the Priest singing for the service should come and rehearse the responses with you at the end of the rehearsal, so make sure you leave time for this.

Processing

Even when all the music is rehearsed and prepared, and you're familiar with the order of service, there's still one more thing to rehearse, and that is processing! Services tend to start and end with a procession. Get your hosts to show you how they process, and have a practice - once you start a procession you can't reform, so you have to be in the right order. This is even more important if you have to process while singing a hymn.

If you've managed to do all of this, you should be brilliantly prepared, so go and enjoy the service. It's different to a concert, but just as rewarding, and is a great experience for any choir. If you have any tips to add, do let us know, and do tell us about your performances. Good luck!

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