

# *The Mature Choir:* **Singing with Grace,** Part 1

*by Patsy T. Snodgrass*

This is the first installment of a two-part series on leading choirs composed primarily of senior adults. Part One explores the importance of warmup, the selection of appropriate repertoire, and the creation of a collaborative atmosphere where feedback is encouraged. Part Two will focus on providing an environment that supports the well-being of older adult singers and promotes their success.

Retirement offered me a gift: time to pursue music not just as an avocation but as a joyful responsibility. From accompanying to directing, I've had the privilege of working with mature voices—singers whose lives and stories deepen the music we share. Whether leading a community chorus or directing a church choir from the bench, my goal has remained simple: to inspire people to sing beautifully and purposefully together.

My current church choir has 16 members during the winter, when our "snowbirds" from the north are with us, and 11 singers after they return home. Most are over the age of 60. Aging voices are full of character, but they often come with limitations in range and breath support. Beginning each rehearsal with a thorough warm up is essential, and careful repertoire selection is equally important.

Thanks to generous donors, we have been able to purchase many new pieces well-suited to our group. The church's music director and I select literature together while also considering suggestions made by the choir members. We seek a variety of styles that support the seasons of the church year and the lectionary readings. Before purchasing a new anthem, I read through every line to ensure it fits the singers' ranges. No matter how much I may like a piece, I do not choose music that will strain their voices.

Anthem scheduling is done in two-month increments. Each period, choir members receive an outline with upcoming lectionary readings, weekly themes, psalm settings, and anthems, giving them context for their contributions to worship. Some anthems are simple to learn, while others require more preparation.

We have shifted the paradigm away from insisting on four-part harmony every week, often using pieces for two-part mixed voices (such as *I Am the Vine* by Robert Lau, Lorenz; *Blessed, How Blessed* by David M. Cherwien with text by Susan Palo Cherwien, MorningStar; and *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus* by Nancy Raabe, Augsburg Fortress) or Part I/Part II arrangements (such as *Come, Let Us Worship God* by Ray Makeever, arr. by Katie Houts, Choristers Guild; *Magnificat* by Ruth Elaine Schram, Augsburg Fortress; and *Think About These Things* by Bob Burroughs, Augsburg Publishing), which place all voices in a comfortable mid-range.

*Photo* **St. Mark by the Sea church choir,** *courtesy of the author.*

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Partner Songs are also good, giving everyone the chance to sing a melody. (Some examples are *Love Came Down [A Partner Song with "Away in a Manger"]* by Ruth Morris Gray, Alfred Choral Designs; *Meditation for Lent* arr. by Michael Bedford, Augsburg Fortress; and *I'm Gonna Sing with Over My Head* by Terry D. Taylor, Choristers Guild.)

Although my title is choir director, I see the role as collaborative rather than authoritative. Members know they are welcome to offer feedback and ask questions. This year we introduced an "end of year" survey. I listed all the titles sung throughout the year and each member was asked to select their five favorites. We enjoyed lively discussion over the most popular pieces. (And I quietly noted which ones received no votes!)

This group does not shy away from new experiences. Recent occasions include an Annual Meeting Day concert with combined choirs and handbells, a musical celebration of Black History Month, participation in the Palm Sunday drama, a choir banquet, a bilingual worship service with members of the Slavic Evangelical church that shares space in our building, and the purchase of new choir robes. Whew!

Directing this choir has been one of the most rewarding chapters of my musical life. These singers bring not only their voices but also their wisdom, humor, and faith to every rehearsal and service. Together, we prove that music is ageless, and that when voices—mature or otherwise—join in harmony, the result is always something greater than the sum of its parts.



**Patsy T. Snodgrass** retired from a career in health care administration and since then has devoted herself to music, her lifelong avocation. She was director/accompanist for the Marsh Creek Chorale, a community chorus, from 2010 through 2018. She is currently choir director and pianist at St. Mark by the Sea Lutheran Church in Palm Coast, FL.

