

The Mature Choir: **Singing with Grace,** Part 2

by Patsy T. Snodgrass

Leading choirs of senior adults requires attention not only to music-making but also to the safety, comfort, and well-being of each participant. Many adults over the age of 65 have some degree of hearing loss. This doesn't preclude them from singing, as long as they can match pitch, but it does mean that rehearsals must be planned with communication in mind. This was a challenge I hadn't anticipated when I accepted a position as director/accompanist of a neighborhood chorale fifteen years ago. There were 35 members, mostly retired, with an age range from mid-fifties to mid-eighties.

On my first day, I arrived with a lot of new music and a basket of freshly sharpened pencils so they could note my instructions. The group sang enthusiastically and well, but whenever I had to give verbal instructions, chaos broke out! ("What did she say?" "Which page?" "Where do the men come in?") Sitting behind the piano, my voice was simply not heard by many in the group. I soon realized the importance of standing, facing the choir, and speaking clearly. To save rehearsal time, I marked edits in the music myself. Phrasing and dynamics were modeled from the keyboard, only stopping to discuss them if my leadership was not followed. Announcements were made via email before the rehearsal and repeated verbally on the day. A no-chatter policy during sectional rehearsals helped ensure clarity. These small adjustments improved communication not only for those with hearing difficulties but for everyone. Today, portable voice amplifiers provide an inexpensive option, and a facility's sound system can also be used as needed.

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Our church choir rehearses on Saturday mornings, a time chosen to accommodate members who do not drive at night as well as members who are still working. In the past, singers entered through a side door left unlocked for rehearsals. One Saturday, however, two strangers walked in asking for money! Fortunately, no harm occurred, but the experience prompted us to revise our entry procedure. The door now remains locked before, during, and after the rehearsal. A member greets singers for ten minutes before rehearsal begins, and a doorbell was installed for those arriving later. While churches strive to serve their communities, choir rehearsal should never involve unnecessary risks.

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Photos: St. Mark by the Sea church choir, courtesy of the author

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



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To prepare for rehearsals, I arrive early to lay out music and adjust the room temperature. Our women's group provides a basket of clean shawls for anyone who feels chilly. I check to see that walkways are clear of obstacles. Good overhead lighting is important, especially for those who may have diminished vision. We purchased inexpensive clip-on lights for use during dimly lit services.

Our goal is to maximize time spent singing. We use a four-anthem format, allowing multiple brief exposures rather than long cram sessions. It has been my observation that older singers learn their music just as readily as other age groups. Many in this generation can read music, having grown up with piano lessons or school band participation. Those who are singing "by ear" benefit from multiple repetitions and sitting next to strong sight-readers.

Hydration is another priority. As we age, the sensation of thirst often diminishes, so reminders are necessary. We encourage all singers to bring water bottles into the choir loft, and when their time at the church extends beyond two and a half hours, snacks and beverages are provided.

Even more vital than physical care is nourishment for the soul. For members of the church choir, the lyrics of beloved anthems offer sustenance for life's challenges. While the congregation hears the words only once during worship, the choir members have sung them repeatedly—sometimes a dozen times or more. Several singers have shared that when they awaken at night, the words of an upcoming anthem are in their thoughts. These words of faith become deeply imprinted.

Some of their favorite anthems:

"What a Friend We Have in Jesus" arr. by Charles McCartha, SAB, Augsburg Fortress, 978-1-4514-7950-8;

"Total Praise" by Richard Smallwood, arr. by Joel Raney, SATB, Hope, C6061;

"O Lord, I Call to You" by Jayne Southwick Cool, SAB, Augsburg Fortress, 978-1-4514-7942-3;

"Oh, How I Love Jesus" arr. by Lynn Shaw Bailey, two-part with optional eight handbells or handchimes, Choristers Guild, CGA1643.

Simple adjustments—such as ensuring secure entry, preparing a welcoming rehearsal space, communicating clearly, and encouraging hydration—create an atmosphere in which older singers can thrive. Just as importantly, the music itself offers lasting nourishment, embedding words of hope and faith into their hearts.



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.