

Programming: Finding and choosing repertoire

There are lots of different ways to go about programming for your choir but, whilst you shouldn't feel constrained by conventional formats, there are a number of things you should consider which could have implications for your music choices:

- Where to find repertoire
- Copyright and staying within the law
- Suitability
- Challenges
- Length of programme
- The journey through the programme
- Attractive to an audience, to your singers and to you

Where to find repertoire. If you don't have time to go browsing music shops then there's a great deal of music available online, including free scores on sites such as; CPDL (Choral Public Domain Library) and IMSLP (International Music Score Library Project). Sing-Up also has a song-bank of free repertoire for schools choirs, and there are many other free sheet music websites.

Most music publishers will carefully vet scores before agreeing to publish them, to make sure they're well written and will represent quality and good sales for their company. The same may not be true of free scores, so you should make sure to assess them properly before committing to perform something.

If you request perusal scores from composers and publishers they will very often send you a copy free of charge to consider it for inclusion in a programme. You can't often do this with online stores, though some will allow you to view or download sample pages. Listings for pieces on publishers' websites are often detailed with difficulty ratings to help point you in the right direction. Of course, one of the best places to find new repertoire is in the market place at the ABCD's Annual Convention!

Copyright and staying within the law. If you are intending to photocopy or print a set of scores you will need to be sure that it is legal to do so. Copyright law is very clear about what is allowed and a piece of music remains in copyright until 70 years after the death of the composer, or until 70 years after publication. Look on your score for the date that it was printed (if there are multiple dates, choose the most recent) and add 70 years to calculate when the copyright expires. Public Domain websites (such as CPDL) are a good source of scores "not in copyright", but always check this is stated on the score before copying anything.

There are very few cases of music organisations being fined for photocopying illegally, but it has happened, and the potential fines could reach as much as £2,000 per copy (for a choir of 100 singers that would be £200,000).

Under some circumstances a publisher will grant permission for copyright works to be photocopied, for instance; to reduce the weight of heavy compilation books during a performance, or in cases where already purchased scores have not arrived in time for a rehearsal/performance. You are supporting composers and their publishers by purchasing scores and, better still, why not commission a new work?

Suitability. What is the vocal range of the piece and is it within the range of your singers? How many parts is the piece divided into and does this fit with the numbers of singers in your choir? Is the piece fitting to the performance situation/theme/date/etc?

Challenges. What language is the piece written in? Singing in foreign languages is very important for widening the musical experience of your choir, but make sure to factor in sufficient time to teach the language pronunciation accurately, as well as time to master it yourself first.

What are the rhythmic, phrasing, melodic and harmonic challenges within the piece and are there any technical constraints?

Length of programme Quality not quantity! Be careful not to over-programme, as dropping pieces from a programme later can knock the confidence of your choir. Consider how long you would like your concert to last and then calculate how many minutes of music you will need (after accounting for pauses between pieces, introductions and thank-you's). For example; If a concert lasts from 7.30pm until 9.30pm, with a 20 minute interval, there would probably need to be around 80-85 minutes of actual music.

The journey through the programme. You might consider having a theme for your performance, or to present an eclectic selection of pieces. Whatever the format of your programme, you will be creating an experience or journey for your audience. Consider the overall shape and style of your programme, and how you will take your audience on this journey. Will you travel chronologically/geographically/seasonally or will you zig-zag through your programme. Listening to very similar music over a period of time can become hard work for the ears of the audience, so consider how you could vary the mood, dynamics, speeds and styles, as you move through your programme.

The classic format has a beginning, a middle (often with an interval) and end. If you're planning to have an interval, consider how you will leave your audience at the end of the first half (perhaps giving them something to chat about over their interval drinks) and then how you will grab their attention again at the start of the second half.

You might also consider the progression of keys used in your programme. Some pieces of music do not sit comfortably next to each other, and the relationships between pieces can be enhanced by considering what key a piece ends in, and then what key begins the next piece.

Attractive to an audience, to your singers and to you. Dare to be different, but make considered choices. Be excited by your programme – you will need to inspire your singers with it. Do some research into how other similar choirs programme their concerts (but try not to copy them, have your own ideas) and think about how your programme will appeal to your potential audience.