



Take Notes – How Do Choirs Work? By Kaley Frye



Source:https://christchurchpelham.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/IMG_0264.jpeg

When people think of choirs or CHORAL music, many of them think of Christmas music. The classic holiday choir image is not necessarily incorrect – CHRISTMAS is one of the few occasions in which choral music gets a chance to be front and center in the modern music scene. What a lot of people don't realize, however, is that choirs are involved in much more than just religious music – they perform year-round, and sing all different types of songs, from COMPOSITIONS dating all the way back to the fourth century to new works being created today. Yes, some of that music is traditional church choir music, but just as much of it is based on SECULAR (non-religious) lyrics, or even POEMS set to music. So, what is it like to be in a choir? And how do they create that distinct sound? These questions and more are about to be answered!

Spell: CHORAL COMPOSITIONS SECULAR

What rhythmic, non-musical pieces of writing are often set to music for choirs? POEMS

What holiday are choirs associated with the most? CHRISTMAS

Choirs are involved in much more than just religious _____. MUSIC

Define secular. NON-RELIGIOUS, NON-CHURCH, LAY

Name a type of music choirs perform? RELIGIOUS, COMPOSITIONS,

TRADITIONAL CHURCH CHOIR MUSIC, SECULAR, EVERY TYPE

VAKTivity: Never Enough - Stellenbosch University Choir (3.30 min)

https://youtu.be/LxwCFsy0y_U?feature=shared

Tell me about seeing or hearing choral music?

Choir music dates back to the 4th century BCE, although it sounded a lot different back then. The earliest form of choral music was called the GREGORIAN CHANT. Gregorian chants were sung in UNISON by groups of MONKS and were part of MEDIEVAL church services. The Gregorian chant eventually EVOLVED into music sung in HARMONY, though it was still exclusively an activity for boys. In general, women didn't join the choral club until the late 1700s, and even then, in a more limited capacity than is seen today.

Spell: MEDIEVAL EVOLVED HARMONY

What were the earliest choral compositions called? GREGORIAN CHANTS

Groups of _____ sang Gregorian chants. MONKS

Gregorian chants were first used in what kind of services? CHURCH

What century does choir music date back to? 4TH

Women weren't allowed to join choirs until what time period? 1700s

Which gender was the first to sing choir music? BOYS, MALES, MEN

Gregorian chants first sung in _____. UNISON, HARMONY

Why do you think choirs were all male at first?

One of the things that makes choir so DIFFERENT from other musical styles is the number of people singing. Most popular music today is sung by SOLOISTS or bands that may have two to five singers. In contrast, while choirs do not have an official MINIMUM number of people, it is generally agreed that they should have no less than ten MEMBERS, and they can have many, many more than that. In fact, according to Guinness World Records, the largest choir ever created was in INDIA in 2011, and it had 121,440 singers!

Spell: DIFFERENT MINIMUM MEMBERS

The world's largest choir was created in what country? INDIA

Most popular music today usually has two to five what? SINGERS

What is the minimum number of members a choir should have? 10

How many singers were in the record-setting Indian choir? 121,440

The number of people in a choir sets it apart from performers such as ____.
SOLOISTS, BANDS

If you met a choir as big as this one, what song would you ask them to sing for you?



<https://www.creativityaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Shower-cover-photo-565x209.jpg>

It is this unique TRAIT of having so many people singing together that allows choirs to create their DISTINCT sound. If you've ever sung before (and let's admit it – who hasn't hummed a tune in the car or the SHOWER?), you know that a single human being can only sing one note at a time. When there's a big group of people, however, they can sing different notes at the same time, which is called singing in harmony. The notes sung at the same time in choral works are referred to as CHORDS, and chords are specially chosen to create a certain sound or FEELING.

Spell: TRAIT DISTINCT CHORAL

A group of people singing different notes at the same time is called singing in ____.
HARMONY

What are the notes called that are sung at the same time in a choral work?
CHORDS

Chords are specially chosen to create a specific ____.
SOUND, FEELING

Name a place where people like to sing for fun.
CAR, SHOWER

VAKTivity: Video of the author's choir performing

<https://youtu.be/hc4ymNUWwa0>

While listening to that song, what emotion did you feel?

How do you think the music contributed to those feelings?

If chords are made up of NUMEROUS people singing different notes, how does it get decided who sings what note? Or is it just completely random? If choir members were randomly assigned notes for every single chord, REHEARSAL would take a very long time. So, who sings what note does get decided ahead of time. What almost every choir does to make this process as efficient as possible is to split the singers up into small groups, called vocal parts, also known as voice parts or SECTIONS. Each vocal part is assigned a note to sing in RELATION to others – for example, some always take the highest note, whereas some always take the lowest note, no matter what that note is. What vocal part a person takes is determined by their birth GENDER and the natural DEVELOPMENT of their vocal cords.

Spell: NUMEROUS REHEARSAL DEVELOPMENT

Vocal parts are each assigned a ____ to sing in a chord. NOTE

Vocal parts are assigned in _____ to others. RELATION

If a choir has 20 people and is singing a chord with four notes, how many people would be in a vocal part if you evenly divide them? $20/4=5$

What are the small groups called that a choir is split up into when assigning notes to sing? VOCAL PARTS, VOICE PARTS, SECTIONS

What traits in a singer determine their vocal part? BIRTH GENDER, GENDER, DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR VOCAL CORDS, VOCAL CORDS

Vocal cords are part of what bigger structure that forms a passage to your lungs, which allows you to breathe and speak? LARYNX

How important is the conductor in making a choir sound good?

The first vocal part is the SOPRANOS. This term is often used in REFERENCE to female OPERA singers, which may lead you to correctly guess that the sopranos are the singers who always sing the highest, or top, note in a chord. Sopranos are traditionally women, and their vocal cords have developed to be able to sing higher than the other TRADITIONALLY female vocal part, the altos. In many pieces (though not all), sopranos sing the MELODY, which is the vocal line that is the main theme of a song.

Spell: MELODY REFERENCE TRADITIONALLY

What type of singers are sopranos usually associated with? OPERA

The first vocal part is the _____. SOPRANOS

Sopranos are traditionally _____. WOMEN

Which note do the Sopranos sing in a chord? HIGHEST, TOP
Tell me something about a melody. SOPRANOS TYPICALLY SING IT,
MAIN THEME OF THE SONG

The word “soprano” is often more popularly associated with opera singers than choir singers. Name a popular opera. MADAMA BUTTERFLY, THE MAGIC FLUTE, CARMEN

The next vocal part is the ALTOS. Like sopranos, altos are traditionally women, but their vocal cords have developed to be able to sing lower than the sopranos. In a chord where each vocal part has only one note, the altos sing the lowest note sung by the female vocal parts, which is the second highest note overall. Altos tend to have a slightly more SOULFUL TIMBRE (musical QUALITY) than sopranos, who generally tend to have a purer, cleaner timbre.

Spell: ALTOS DEVELOPED QUALITY

Altos sing ___ than sopranos. LOWER

Musical quality was the definition of what word? TIMBRE

Altos tend to have a more ___ timbre than Sopranos. SOULFUL

What shared quality do altos and sopranos have? WOMEN, FEMALE

Which note do the altos sing? SECOND HIGHEST, LOWEST FEMALE



<http://operawire.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/piimage-1-5.jpg>

Next up are the TENORS. Tenors are traditionally men whose vocal cords have developed to sing relatively high. Although many choirs who struggle to find male singers will have some altos sing the tenor part. Tenors serve

as the highest of the two main male vocal parts, and, in our basic four-note chord, they sing the third highest note. Most young boys are tenor singers, and can only switch to the next voice part, the BASSES, once their voices have dropped during PUBERTY. Since the altos and tenors sing the notes in between the sopranos and basses, they are sometimes referred to as the inner voices.

Spell: SWITCH VOCAL BASIC

Singers from what female vocal part tend to join the tenors if a choir is struggling to find male singers? ALTOS

Most young boys are tenor singers, until their voices drop during ____.
PUBERTY

Tenors and altos are sometimes collectively referred to as ____ voices.
INNER

Name one of the male voice parts. TENORS, BASSES

Tenors sing which note? THIRD HIGHEST, SECOND LOWEST, HIGHEST
MALE

The last voice part is the basses. As previously mentioned, most basses start off as tenors and then transition into basses when their voices drop. Basses are the lowest of the male vocal parts, and the lowest overall singers in the choir. They are often referred to as the “BACKBONE” of the choir because if something goes wrong during a PERFORMANCE, the go-to fix is to match up with whatever the basses are singing.

Spell: LOWEST BACKBONE PERFORMANCE

Basses are often referred to as the ____ of the choir? BACKBONE

Most basses transition into basses when their _____ drop. VOICES

Basses are the vocal part that others _____ in case of an error in performance. MATCH

Which note do the Basses sing? LOWEST, BOTTOM

VAKTivity: Listen to how low some bass singers can go! <https://youtu.be/-XTQJbKdfyY?t=324> (5:24-6:55)

What vocal part do you think you are?

At an average choir rehearsal, besides the singers, there are two other very important people: the CONDUCTOR and the ACCOMPANIST. The

conductor oversees the choir: he or she typically picks the music, runs rehearsals, gives FEEDBACK, and keeps the RHYTHM while performing. The accompanist, who is typically a pianist, plays the instrumental music underneath the singing. Many choral pieces only require PIANO ACCOMPANIMENT, and for those that require other instruments, the accompanist will typically play the musical lines on the piano in rehearsal so that other instrumentalists can join in later, closer to the concert. The conductor and the accompanist, along with the choir singers and countless other people involved in the concert process, work together to put on a musical experience that can leave audiences wowed!

Spell: CONDUCTOR ACCOMPANIMENT FEEDBACK
The accompanist plays the instrumental ___ underneath the singing.
MUSIC

What does the conductor oversee? THE CHOIR

What instrument does an accompanist typically play? PIANO

What is one of the conductor's responsibilities? PICKS THE MUSIC, RUNS REHEARSALS, GIVES FEEDBACK, KEEPS THE RHYTHM

Besides the singers, one of the two very important people mentioned in this paragraph are the _____. CONDUCTOR, ACCOMPANIST

What is a job position that wasn't mentioned that you think would be necessary for a successful choir concert?

Creative Writing: If you were to compose a song for a choir, what would you make that song about? Would you write your own lyrics, or set a poem or other pre-written text to music? Why would you pick this specific topic?

Kaley Frye grew up in Orlando, FL, and is currently a student at Emory University studying psychology and linguistics. Outside of class, she enjoys a variety of hobbies, including being a member of Emory's Concert Choir and competitive ballroom dance team.

References:

- [A Brief History Of Choral Music – Calgary Children's Choir \(calgarychildrenschoir.com\)](http://calgarychildrenschoir.com)
- [The History of Women's Liberation In Choral Music on JSTOR \(emory.edu\)](http://emory.edu) [BBC - Last Choir Standing - The Great Choir Debate - Question 10](http://bbc.com)

- [Largest choir | Guinness World Records](#)