

Use Every Minute

“There isn’t enough time to do everything we should be doing!” This is a familiar lament among church children’s choir directors. We want to help children learn songs, memorize words, sing for worship, learn music fundamentals, develop correct tone production, understand the meaning and purpose of the various parts of the worship service, study the hymnal, present a musical, give a concert, have a party ... and on, and on, and on. And, we seldom have more than an hour a week in which to do it all! With so much to accomplish, one of our most important goals as directors is to make efficient use of every minute we have with the children.

An efficient rehearsal does not mean one with a feeling of constant pressure. It does not mean a perpetually tense director resulting in equally tense children. It does not mean never finding a moment to have fun, to relax, to laugh in a rehearsal. It does mean carefully-planned and sensitively-paced activities led by a director who has clearly-defined goals and priorities and a definite plan for how to attain them. It means a director with the flexibility to adapt to any situation while still accomplishing the essentials for that rehearsal. It means a director with a dozen or more “extra activities” at his

or her fingertips to use in those “spare” moments that occasionally occur!

The following are suggestions for “using every minute” in a rehearsal. Obviously they must be somewhat adapted to fit each choir’s schedule, each director’s schedule, the size and age of the choir, the number of helpers available, and the room and equipment to be used.

Be sure to include times for you and the children to relax, to laugh together and to get better acquainted.

PLAN THE REHEARSAL

Know exactly what is to be rehearsed, with what aim, for how long, and in what order. A good general plan is to begin and end with something fairly familiar, work on the most difficult music about 1/3 of the way into the rehearsal, cover the

most essential music (such as the anthem for Sunday!) rather near the beginning of the rehearsal, alternate songs with different speeds, keys, meters, and styles (for example, don’t rehearse two pieces in slow three-quarter time in C major in succession – variety increases interest and attention and, therefore, efficiency), alternate sitting, standing, and moving activities, alternate full-group and small-group or individual activities. Make a written plan; don’t trust your memory!

On a chart to be placed on your music stand where you can see it at a glance, write a list of music to be rehearsed (include page numbers, etc., so you don’t waste time fumbling through a book), activities to lead, announcements to make, and an approximate time schedule for each activity. Include notes to yourself about things you must do, people you must talk to, messages you must deliver, etc., before and after the rehearsal.

Know and mark your music, know its form and some background about the composer, the form, the style, etc. Anticipate problem spots and plan a variety of ways to attack them; know the meaning of all musical terms; study the text and Biblical references and know the meaning and pronunciation of all words. Prepare any teaching aids you will need. Place a list of music to be rehearsed, in order, on the piano or organ so the accompanist can have each piece ready. The actual music, of course, should be given to the accompanist at least a week in advance so that it will be well-prepared.

PREPARE THE REHEARSAL ROOM(S)

If possible have the rehearsal room(s) completely prepared before children arrive. Give careful attention to arrangement of chairs, piano, director’s stand, bulletin boards, chalkboards, charts, posters, rhythm instruments and other materials. If possible, have music, letters to parents, notebook

Using Every Minute

Plan the rehearsal.

•
Prepare the rehearsal room.

•
Plan "early-bird" and "late-bird" activities.

•
Use helpers.

•
Use small-group and individual activities.

•
Write announcements

•
Use "spare moment" activities

•
Relax and be inefficient – sometimes.

pages, etc., placed on chairs or put in folders before the children arrive. Ask parent-helpers and early-arriving children to help with necessary last-minute preparations, leaving as much time as possible for you, the director, to work directly with children.

PLAN "EARLY-BIRD" and "LATE-BIRD" ACTIVITIES

Some children may arrive early and others may be late leaving the rehearsal. If your schedule allows, plan activities with rhythm instruments, flashcards, music games, pitch and rhythm drills on the tape recorder, etc., to put these extra minutes to good use.

USE HELPERS

Many routine and time-consuming jobs can be done by parents or other adult or youth helpers, giving the director more time to work directly with the children and music. These jobs include: taking attendance, making a list of absentees for the director, assigning robes, checking notebook pages, checking word memory, leading and correcting music games, tests, etc., collecting money, permission slips, music, etc. Many jobs, such as distributing and collecting music and equipment, can be done by the children and will teach responsibility and give a feeling of worth and accomplishment (especially important to those children who may not "shine" musically in the group). A large piece of poster board with slots for inserting paper name slips might list helpers for this week and next week.

USE SMALL-GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES

For more efficient learning and to become better acquainted with individual choristers, some rehearsals should include some activities in small groups

or with individuals. This is especially important with a large choir or one with a wide age span. Some children, especially the younger ones, will need extra help with basics and with word memory. Older children, or children who have had private music lessons or who play in school bands and orchestras, will need more advanced activities to keep them interested. Small-group or individual activities will allow progress at individual rates, making more efficient use of time. Adult helpers will be a great aid at this point, allowing supervision of many varied activities. The tape recorder may be used to prepare activities for some groups or individuals, especially the more advanced students, thus adding to efficiency.

Give announcements and directions clearly and quickly and establish a pattern of saying things only once and expecting results. When you give a cut-off at the conclusion of a song or section, immediately give directions for the next activity ("Begin at the top of p.3 and follow the dynamic markings this time!" or "Look at the chalkboard and raise your hand when you know the name of the scale I am writing," or "in your folder find a song by Mozart.") Avoid giving the cut-off, allowing a time of confusion, getting attention to give directions, allowing another time of confusion, then getting attention again to proceed with the activity. This wastes time! At some rehearsals efficiency will be increased by writing a "Magic Number" on the chalkboard indicating how many pieces of music you aim to rehearse that day. As each song is completed ask a child to lower the number. Children usually respond well to this visual evidence of their progress; it may help you, the director, to keep moving, too! Occasionally you may wish to use the old "if we hurry

and sing these songs, we'll have time to choose songs (or sing a favorite) at the end of the hour." This may accomplish an immediate result, but used too often it borders on "bribery" and may imply "if we work hard on this 'not-so-fun' music we'll be allowed to sing the 'fun' music at the end of the rehearsal." So, use with care! Other ways of keeping a rehearsal moving include:

- Taking a fairly familiar song at an extra fast tempo (especially when drilling on word memory)
- Using "positive reinforcement" by commending children who are in their places, with music ready, and watching director at the beginning of the rehearsal or as a new song is announced
- Establishing a pattern of a child raising his hand when he "gets lost" in a piece of music and having a parent-helper respond and help (rather than interrupting the flow of the rehearsal for the whole group).

A certain amount of routine, of always doing things in the same way, will increase efficiency and save time in a rehearsal. Ways of passing out and collecting music, of standing and sitting, of getting robes, of moving from rehearsal room to sanctuary, of lining up for the processional, etc., are more efficient if done in a definite predictable way. On the other hand, in the actual rehearsing of songs a few "surprises," a different way of introducing a song, a "new twist" to an old way of working on a problem, can add interest and can, therefore, keep the rehearsal moving.

WRITE ANNOUNCEMENTS

It is more efficient in terms of time and accuracy to write (type, mimeograph, stencil, write on chalkboard or

posters) most announcements, time schedules, etc. A verbal reminder or reinforcement is wise and usually essential, but the details are more efficiently covered in writing. Messages for individual children or parents may be written and put on a child's chair or in a folder before rehearsal begins rather than by taking the time to relay messages during the rehearsal.

USE "SPARE MOMENT" ACTIVITIES

When you have a few moments at the end of a rehearsal or when you need a quick attention-getter or a change of pace within the rehearsal, it is good to have a number of one or two-minute activities at your fingertips. The suggestions below are just a few of the many that may be used:

- Rhythm Activities might include recognizing notes and rests, reading or notating rhythm patterns, or asking choristers to guess the song from the rhythm that you clap.
- Pitch Activities might include listening for discrimination between higher, lower or same; sight-singing two to five note patterns, or having children sing answers back to your questions.
- Music Symbols Activities such as naming music symbols from flashcards or music symbol Jeopardy (It

raises a note one-half step. What is a sharp?), can provide review for new choristers in a fun way.

RELAX AND BE INEFFICIENT – SOMETIMES

As you work to increase rehearsal efficiency, be careful not to go to the extreme of creating a too rigid, too rushed, too tense rehearsal. Be sure to include times for you and the children to relax, to laugh together and to get better acquainted. In your effort to use every minute of rehearsal time, don't forget to communicate the joy as well as the job of singing our faith. And, in your most efficient rehearsals include time to be flexible. Working with children brings surprises, often time-consuming surprises! But, these surprises just may offer opportunities to communicate our faith and our love of sharing it through music not even thought of in the most efficient rehearsal plan! The director who regularly plans efficient rehearsals

Working with children brings surprises that offer opportunities to communicate our faith and our love of sharing it through music.

and who has a wide repertoire of "spare moment" activities is the director who will be most able to be flexible, to be creative, and to cope with and take advantage of all "surprise situations." In other words, one of the main results of being efficient is to allow us to be, when needed, inefficient – efficiently!

This article by Beth Appleby is reprinted from the November 1980 issue of Choristers Guild LETTERS.