

How to teach a choir song: The basics

Tips for teaching gospel choir songs by ear

By Joan Hall

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Teaching songs well is the most important skill a gospel choir director needs. Everyone sees you standing in front of the choir, waving your arms to give them direction, but the real work takes place before that, in rehearsal.

When you're a beginning choir director, preparing and teaching songs may be an intimidating task. But with practice, it gets more natural and comfortable.

This booklet describes the best practices for how to teach a song to a gospel choir.

*The contents of this e-book are also available online with some extra goodies (videos and polls).
Here's the link: [How to Teach a choir song: The basics](#)*

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1: Study the song thoroughly.

The choir director should know all the parts!

To be ready to teach a song, you have to know it. Study the song until it becomes a part of you, until you know it backward and forward. Some gospel choir songs have sheet music you can learn from, but most do not. You'll usually be studying the song by listening to a recording. If you're a beginning choir director, you may need to spend a lot of time training yourself to hear the individual soprano, alto, and tenor parts in the music.

Listen to the song and sing along with it. Practice singing the soprano part until you can sing the entire part correctly without stumbling. Now repeat the process singing the alto part until you have that down pat. Now do the tenor part, and then the bass part if there is one. Yes, you will be listening to the same song over and over and over. Yes, you will drive your family nuts. Even if you use headphones you will still test their patience because you'll be singing along, over and over and over.

I wrote a little more about learning this skill on my blog. Here's the link: [Learning to hear choir parts.](#)

If you have a higher voice, like most females, you probably can't hit the lowest notes on the tenor and bass parts. Likewise, if you have a low voice, like most males, you would not be able to reach the high soprano notes. Just sing the part an octave higher or an octave lower when you need to. The important thing is that you have full command of the part.

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know it.**

For extra insurance, you might want to write down some kind of notes that you can use as a reminder when you're teaching the song in rehearsal. If you know a little bit of music theory, you can make note of the scale tones that each part starts on.

When you stand before the choir you want to be *fully* confident that you can teach *every* part. Your goal is to be able to do this yourself without having to ask the musician, "What's the alto part on the chorus?"

By the way . . .

If there's a song you want to teach and the parts are hard to pick out, give me a holler at [ChoirParts.com](#). I'll do the parts for you and give you individual practice tracks for the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass parts.

For a sample of what the tracks are like, look here: [What is ChoirParts.com?](#)

2: Decide on your arrangement of the song.

Are you going to do the song exactly the way it is on the recording? The recorded version might be just right for your group and your purpose, but if not, adjust things to meet your own needs.

You might decide to do the song in a different key, based on the vocal ranges of your choir members. Or you might want to speed the song up or slow it down to get a different feel. Decide if you want to make any changes to the vocal parts or the words.

Some good tips from a choir director friend of mine: In some cases you might need to simplify a song. If you are going to have a limited amount of rehearsal time, you could leave out a complicated passage or stick with only one *vamp* (repeating chorus) when the song might have two or three of them. And if you're working with a choir of less-experienced singers, you may also leave out key changes and *inversions* (that's when the tenors jump to the alto part, the altos go to the soprano part, and the sopranos go up into the stratosphere).

The recorded version might be just right for your group and your purpose, but if not, adjust things to meet your own needs.

If you don't have a lead singer, you might leave out the lead verse. Another option when there's no lead singer is to have a whole section of the choir sing the lead verse. Our choir has a couple of songs where the whole soprano section or the whole alto sections sings a verse that was done by a soloist on the record. This works best if the verse has a very straightforward tune and rhythm that don't need a lot of embellishments, otherwise you're better off just leaving out the verse.

On the flip side, if you're going to be singing for a special occasion, you might decide to add some extra flourishes to a song. Add a dramatic introduction. Give it a more elaborate ending. Whatever you feel.

Also make plans for the instruments. On some songs you might want the full band. On others, maybe just a couple of instruments. Or you might begin the song with just the piano and then bring the rest of the instruments in. Do you want the drummer to use the sticks or the brushes?

Once you've decided how the song is going to be performed, then you're ready to present it.

3: Present the song to the musicians.

Your choir rehearsal will go much better if the musicians already know the music. Trying to teach both the singers and the instruments at the same time makes for a long rehearsal. And the singers will have a much harder time learning their parts if the instruments are still trying to figure out the song and making mistakes along the way. So bring the song to the musicians ahead of time so they'll be ready.

How do your musicians learn best? As you know, your gospel musicians probably don't read sheet music. With some, you can just hand them the CD and they handle the rest. (We all love musicians like that!) Others may need a paper that shows them the chords. This is called a lead sheet or a fake sheet. If you're familiar with chords, you can write out a fake sheet yourself. If you need help, there are some websites that provide chords for many well-known gospel songs. One very popular site is the [Chorded Songs](#) page provided by Earnest and Roline Ministries. There is also a collection of [chorded-out songs](#) that was done by Val215 at [learngospelmusic.com](#).

Talk to your musicians about how much advance time they need before a song is going to be taught to the choir.

4: Think about how you want to teach the song to the choir.

What's your "lesson plan"?

When you're teaching the singers, you want them to start getting an understanding and a feel for the song as soon as possible. Decide beforehand what you think will be the most effective way to teach the song so that they'll grasp it well.

For a lot of songs, it will work fine to just start singing the first part of the song and proceed from there. But with some songs you might want to take a different approach. If a song has a lot of words, you should probably present the words first before the tune. If there are complex rhythms, talk through the song with them, at a slower speed if necessary. Once they have the rhythm down, then teach the melody.

And which vocal part will you teach first? Usually in gospel choir songs the sopranos have the melody which makes them a natural first choice. But if the altos or tenors are the part that really holds a particular passage together, start with them.

If a song is long or complicated, consider just teaching a portion of it at one rehearsal, then teaching the rest of it the next time.

And here's another tip from the choir directing community: If you're going to be doing the song about the same as the original recording, you may want to play the recording for the choir when you first present it. The choir can hear the finished product and perhaps sing along with it. This can give them a boost of confidence and generate some excitement about the song.

5: Start teaching!

OK! You're all prepared, the musicians know the music, the choir is here, let's go!

My motto for choir teaching is "**Drill, baby, drill!**" You'll notice as you read that I use words like "repeat" and "again" and "over" a whole lot. This is an important point. Since gospel choirs sing from memory, parts must be repeated until they've been internalized. Drill, baby, drill.

Give the choir a little bit at a time. Whichever part you're starting with (usually the sopranos, but not always), give them one line at a time. You demonstrate it first, and then have them sing it back to you. Let them repeat the line until they look and sound like they're comfortable with it. Then add the next line to it and repeat that until they've really got it. Then bring the two lines together and make sure that they can sing them smoothly. Keep adding a line at a time until they have learned the whole verse.

Be prepared to take questions at any time.

It is important to deal with mistakes right away.

After they have the whole verse, move on to the next group of singers and repeat the process. When they have learned the verse too, you may want to have the two parts sing it together, or you may want to move on to the third group of singers right away. When all the parts have learned the verse, have them sing it again together. Make sure that everyone is able to keep on their part even when they're hearing the other parts singing. If anyone seems unclear on their part go back over

it. It is important to deal with mistakes right away. If you let someone sing a part incorrectly several times, it will be difficult for them to unlearn those wrong notes.

After the choir learns one portion of the song, go on to the next portion (the chorus or bridge or whatever). Teach it the same way, a part at a time, a line at a time. Be sure to practice the transitions from one portion of the song to another! Some choir directors make the mistake of teaching each portion in isolation and the choir has trouble figuring out how to get from the chorus to the bridge ("Do we wait four beats, or do we come straight in?").

After you've taught the whole song, sing it again from beginning to end. If the choir is hearing the song for the first time, they may have forgotten the beginning parts by the time you get to the end. Go over the whole thing to refresh their memories.

Practice your transitions from one portion of the song to another!

Let your choir members know that they can ask questions at any time during the rehearsal. If there is a part they are unsure about, you want them to ask you immediately. Otherwise they might forget the question. And every time someone asks a question there are probably two or three other people who were wondering the same thing.

6: Do it again at another rehearsal!

Don't expect the choir to remember a song perfectly after only one practice. Once they leave the rehearsal, they will start to forget. You will need to rehearse the song at least two or three times before you can be confident that they will be ready to sing it in a church service.

There are very few songs that are easy enough to learn completely in only one rehearsal. If you need suggestions for super-easy songs, you can check out my [one-rehearsal songs](#) page. Otherwise, plan to practice a song several times before you sing it.

At the second rehearsal, try having them sing the song all together just like it was a performance. They might be able to do it, or they might be shaky on their parts. That is normal. If you need to teach the parts again, go ahead. It won't take as long as it did at the first rehearsal.

More tips for more complex songs

You've just read the basics about teaching a choir song. The web page below takes it to the next level with information about teaching more complicated material.



[Teaching difficult songs to your choir](#)

You hear a choir song that's just fantastic, but you know that it will be a serious challenge for your choir to learn it. Can you do it? Gospel choirs love...

God bless!

I hope that this gives you some ideas and some inspiration for teaching your choir.

[Check out the rest of my web pages that support gospel choir ministry. I cover a lot of topics.](#)



[Joan's Choir Pages - Resources for the gospel choir and choir directors](#)

These pages are full of information to help gospel choirs and choir directors achieve excellence in their ministry. We talk about how to teach different types of gospel choirs, how to choose the best songs for any occasion or purpose, and how to get the best out of your choir.