

Nine Steps to Raise and Nurture a Community Choir

~ A Perspective drawing on Bahá'í Teachings ~

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Preface

Singing in a choir is one of life's most joyful and rewarding experiences. It builds friendships and a sense of community. It immerses us in a shared artistic experience that lifts our spirits while subtly teaching us about many spiritual truths. To have such an activity is a major social and spiritual asset. This booklet is designed to help communities gain this asset by going through the practical steps needed to establish and manage their own choir.

The human voice is perhaps the most basic and magical of musical instruments, and choral singing is inherently both an artistic and a social activity. These common features make the process of creating and maintaining a choir remarkably consistent in cultures around the world. To be sure, many of the practical steps involved are common to choirs of all kinds.

One feature that distinguishes this booklet from others on the subject is its reliance on the Bahá'í Teachings to guide the process of raising a community choir. The teachings illuminate a wide range of relevant issues, such as the essentially spiritual nature of music; the need for consultation within the community; work as a form of worship; treating professional artists fairly; the pursuit of excellence; unity in diversity; and the power of music to spread a spirit of love and unity. Bahá'í communities will naturally have an interest in applying these as they establish their own local choirs, for such principles are an essential part of their Faith's outlook.

While it is suited to assist Bahá'í groups, this booklet is in reality offered to all communities, whether religious or not, that wish to establish a choir. The basic concepts will work for any group. For those who may not be Bahá'í, and who may not view the Bahá'í Writings as spiritually authoritative, the quoted passages in any case shed light on the various subjects at hand.

Since this booklet was first written in 2001, Bahá'ís worldwide have embarked on a path of systematic community development. The program is drawing increasing numbers of people into a process of spiritual growth by inviting groups of friends to focus on the key areas of study circles, devotional programs, children's classes, and youth activities. Personal growth in turn is facilitated by outward-looking acts of service both to the Bahá'í community and to the wider society.

The set of materials in wide use for study circles is provided by the Ruhi Institute, whose series of courses focus on study of the Bahá'í Writings. In these courses, the vital role that music and the arts can play in the life of the individual and community is explicitly recognized and encouraged. Book 7 of this series states that the arts should be included as an "essential element" in "every study circle," for they can "enhance the spiritual development of the participants" and can contribute to the spiritual vitality of community life. Concerning music, Book 7 says the Bahá'í Writings "leave no doubt that music makes a significant contribution to spiritual upliftment." Participants in study circles, "as they progress in the study of the various books and they undertake specific

acts of service,” are encouraged “to take part in community events, whether local, regional or national, and contribute their musical talents.” (p. 111, 117, 119)

In some cases, a group of participants in study circles may decide to form a local choir as a long-term service project. It is easy to see how such a project can contribute directly to the vitality of all four key activities. As the members of a choir gain in musical skill and experience, they can do much, as individuals or as a musical group, to enhance the spiritual depth of study circles, the atmosphere of enkindled reverence in devotional programs, the teaching of children through songs, and the joyful spirit of youth activities. Clearly, then, the relevance that a guide for choir-formation holds for the Bahá’í community has increased since the first edition of this booklet, and can only continue to grow.

In the following pages, the reader will find helpful suggestions organized into nine steps. These are only suggestions, *not* an official pronouncement from any Bahá’í institution. However, they are distilled from a large pool of musical education, collective insight and experience. The final decisions will be up to the community to make, after much prayer, deepening, and consultation.

Introduction

We would do well to start by looking at the "big picture", by considering the way that the Bahá’í Writings invite us to regard music as a whole. Bahá'u'lláh singled out the art of music and gave it the bounty of an entire paragraph in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Most Holy Book. In paragraph 51, He writes:

We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God. We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are loath to see you numbered with the foolish.

With this one paragraph, Bahá'u'lláh removed the restrictions on music that jurists in some countries of the East, in their distrust of the sensual appeal of this art form, had tried to impose. In the process, He has given musicians both a tremendous bounty and weighty responsibility. He teaches us that music is a gift from God, and that it fulfills its highest potential by uplifting our souls to a state of communion with the all-loving Creator. Bahá'u'lláh thus reaffirms the ancient truth of a spiritual concept of music, a concept held at various times by cultures all around the world. But in the West, and increasingly in the East as well, music in popular culture today is in many instances becoming less a means for uplifting the soul, and more a vehicle for the glorification of “self and passion”.

What does this mean for musicians who embrace a spiritual perspective? It means that we need to make a shift, and regard the creation and performance of music in a new way. The mystic concepts implied in the above quotation are carried into the practical realm by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá.

The art of music must be brought to the highest stage of development, for this is one of the most wonderful arts and in this glorious age of the Lord of Unity it is highly essential to gain its mastery. However, one must endeavor to attain the degree of artistic perfection and not be like those who leave matters unfinished.

~ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Bahá'í Writings on Music*, p. 5-6

In this great dispensation, art (or a profession) is identical with an act of worship and this is a clear text of the Blessed Perfection. Therefore, extreme effort should be made in art and this will not prevent the teaching of the people in that region. Nay, rather each should assist the other in art and guidance. For instance, when the studying of this art is with the intention of obeying the command of God this study will certainly be done easily and great progress will soon be made therein; and when others discover the fragrance of spirituality in the action itself, this same will cause their awakening. Likewise, managing art with propriety will become the means of sociability and affinity; and sociability and affinity themselves tend to guide others to the Truth.

~ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 377

In more specific terms, what do these paragraphs mean for the professional and amateur musician? One implication is that we need to study our art and craft in both their spiritual and technical aspects, and strive always toward perfection. We must take the great gift we have been given and educate it, nurture it, and advance it as one would one's own child and then dedicate it to the Almighty, Who entrusted it to us in the first place. From this standpoint, all the choices we make in planning, preparing, and executing performances take on new importance. Ego has no place here. Individual effort is submerged in the greater collective endeavor. Like any musical ensemble, a choir takes on the likeness of the ideal community in microcosm, with each individual doing his or her part, according to capacity and aptitude, serving each other in creating an exquisite tapestry of voices which is itself both an act of worship and a service to humanity.

1. Make the Decision to Raise and Support a Community Choir

Consultation and Community Support. On the surface, the above heading may seem too obvious to need any mention. However, with so many factors to consider, the decision to establish a choir is not a light one, and should be made only after much study, consultation, and prayer. In the Five Year Plan, 2001-2006, the Universal House of Justice called on the Bahá'í world to give attention to the strengthening of music and other arts in community life. The raising of choirs can be seen as part of this ongoing process, but it is not something that can take root, flourish and evolve solely on individual initiative. A choir needs to have the active, whole-hearted support of both the community and a sponsoring body. In the compilation *Consultation*, we find the following words of Shoghi Effendi:

The principle of consultation, which constitutes one of the basic laws of the Administration, should be applied to all Bahá'í activities which affect the collective interests of the Faith, for it is through co-operation and continual exchange of thoughts and views that the Cause can best safeguard and foster its interests. Individual initiative, personal ability and resourcefulness, though indispensable, are, unless supported and enriched by the collective experiences and wisdom of the group, utterly incapable of achieving such a tremendous task. (30 August 1933)

Sing-alongs and Choirs. Many communities think they want to raise a choir when, in reality, what they want to do is have an individual or a small group to lead regular sing-alongs at their gatherings. While there are many similarities and much overlap, in terms of Western culture, there is a great difference between the two endeavors. Making music together is a great community-building tool. It brings hearts together in unified effort and mindset, and especially when one sings, one's whole body and intellect is brought into the effort. During sing-alongs, participants sing whatever part they want, high, low, in between, make it up as they go along, loud and strong, or do not sing at all; the idea is to have an enjoyable experience and forge bonds of friendship. A choral experience, on the other hand, requires personal and group discipline on the part of the participants. Vocal parts are meticulously delineated and fit together in delicate balance, with great effort made toward artistic merit, and in the spirit of providing an uplifting service for the audience.

Both sing-alongs and choirs have great merit, and the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive; but they differ in thrust and purpose, and their requirements are different in terms of official support, leadership, membership, and logistical feasibility. Sing-alongs, informal by definition, can be hosted anywhere, and can be led by any strong singer or instrumentalist, and participation will change from event to event. On the other hand, while a choir may make presentations with an *air* of either formality or informality, hundreds of person-hours' worth of formalized effort are behind each presentation. This requires satisfactory space for rehearsals; the leadership of someone capable in terms of knowledge, skill, experience, and temperament; and dedicated, regular attendance by the participants.

Both sing-alongs and choirs are effective vehicles for the teaching of noble principles. However, while a choir can lead a sing-along, a sing-along is not a substitute for a choral performance, especially in a formal setting.

In terms of the Bahá'í Faith, this difference is most evident when it comes to music in Houses of Worship. Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice have given guidance concerning music in this setting. We would do well to become familiar with what the Bahá'í Writings say about music and its uses, both in Houses of Worship and in general. A community may therefore wish to deepen on these Writings as part of the process of making the decision to raise a choir.

A Process of Growth. Regarding the emergence of choirs for Temples, until recently the only Temples to be built have been associated with continental regions. In 2012, however, the Universal House of Justice announced plans for a number of national and local Houses of Worship to be raised in various parts of the world. Many more are sure to follow in a growing stream.

Bahá'u'lláh called for Houses of Worship to be raised in every locality, and for singing (by individuals or choirs) to be an integral part of worship in every such temple. While the number of Houses of Worship is not large at this time, a pattern of local devotions is being established throughout the Bahá'í world as one of the core activities of community building. These devotional gatherings, interacting with other activities such as study circles and children's classes, are like a germinating seed that eventually grows in each community to become a future House of Worship, with associated singers, and its surrounding services to society.

Singing in a religious community's choir is surely a valuable service. In Bahá'í communities at present, though, it appears to make sense to form a local choir only if the necessary resources are available to raise and sustain it, and if the local community building process is advanced enough to spare a number of people to take part in regular rehearsals. Under such conditions, a choir, far from competing with community activities such as devotions and youth programs, could well reinforce them and enhance their spiritual character.

Inter-community Choirs. Further points of consideration for the community are listed in the steps below. With so much to consider, it becomes clear that the decision to raise a choir is one with far-reaching implications requiring much prayer, consultation, and commitment on the part of all concerned. For this reason it may be a more feasible endeavor if several communities pool their resources to make it happen.

A Formal Document. The decision to sponsor a choir is best served by a formal document that includes at least the following: 1) a statement of mission and goals; 2) expectations of behavior by those involved; 3) the choir director's role and responsibilities, including a clear definition of the sphere of activity within which she or he can function with relative autonomy; 4) how and by whom the choir's supporting activities will be carried out (these include recruiting, advertising, librarian and historian

duties); 5) assurances of specific kinds of support from the sponsoring body; 6) an outline of the chain of accountability; 7) provisions for the evolution of the enterprise; and 8) a budget. Such a document assists people in remaining cordial with each other should difficulties arise.

Role of Sponsoring Body. It is vital that the sponsoring body consult periodically with the choir's director and representatives, regarding the unfolding of the project. At the same time, the sponsoring body should take care to walk a fine line that allows it to provide guidance, definition, and direction for the choir, while respecting the expertise of the choir director and allowing the creative process to flow unhampered. An example of such guidance would be to provide the choir director with general guidelines for the selection of a repertoire appropriate for different types of occasions. Such guidelines might include quotations from the Bahá'í Writings regarding the need for a sense of propriety and reverence in musical settings of the Sacred Word. On some occasions, implementing the guidelines may call for the exercise of patience, love, and forbearance, as it will be a learning process for all concerned.

2. Hire a Capable Director

Why hire a director when there may already be a musician in the community who can take on the role? There are many reasons! A well-liked community musician may or may not want the position, and may or may not be a suitable candidate. Volunteers are extremely difficult to dismiss; if someone is *hired*, they can also easily be *fired* if their services prove to be unsatisfactory. If a person is *hired*, then it is understood that they must answer to someone – in the case of a Bahá'í community, preferably to the sponsoring Local Spiritual Assembly or an appointed overseeing committee. This understanding of hierarchy is a blessing and a protection for both the director and the community.

Even if Salary is Symbolic. Bahá'í communities prioritize their spending with care; if a community is willing to put forth the funds to hire a competent director, it sends the message to the community that this is a serious endeavor, highly regarded and worthy of the support and commitment of the participants and community in general. Should the director turn out to be a Bahá'í, and one who *wants* to do the job on a voluntary basis, it will still be better all around if the person is *hired* – even if the salary turns out to be nominal and primarily symbolic.

Hiring entails a preliminary process of researching existing music programs within and beyond the greater Bahá'í community and the associated salaries and professional expectations, advertising, and interviewing. By going through this process,

the sponsoring Assembly, group, or committee gains an invaluable education in what is involved. We gain a new respect for those highly trained and engaged in the arts as a profession, and can better appreciate the implications of Bahá'u'lláh having raised music to the status of an act of worship and a service to God and our fellow human beings. It also reminds us that He says, in the Fifth Taráz, that people who are highly skilled should be fairly compensated for their services.

The fifth Taráz concerneth the protection and preservation of the stations of God's servants. One should not ignore the truth of any matter, rather should one give expression to that which is right and true. The people of Bahá should not deny any soul the reward due to him, should treat craftsmen with deference, and, unlike the people aforesaid, should not defile their tongues with abuse.

In this Day the sun of craftsmanship shineth above the horizon of the occident and the river of arts is flowing out of the sea of that region. One must speak with fairness and appreciate such bounty. By the life of God! The word 'Equity' shineth bright and resplendent even as the sun. We pray God to graciously shed its radiance upon everyone. He is in truth powerful over all things, He Who is wont to answer the prayers of all men.

~ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 38-39

(Note: The word for “craftsmen,” in the original language of the above quotation, was a broad term meaning literally “possessors of skill.” It refers not only to what we normally think of as crafts persons, such as potters and carpenters, but also to any productive activity that depends on learned skills.)

With regard to compensation, remember that if you expect something for nothing, you may get what you pay for.

A well-liked community musician may or may not have the knowledge, skills, experience, and temperament necessary to lead a choir. One can only teach what one knows, after all. Having a pleasant voice and some ability to play the guitar or piano does not necessarily qualify one to teach others how to sing together in beautiful harmony and balance. Similarly, superior training and skill in one particular style of music is not necessarily an indicator of whether a person can also successfully direct in other styles.

Need for Musical Diversity. Musical style can be categorized in many ways: by geography (from local to world-ethnic), by level of seriousness (from enduring works with high aims to short-lived entertainment), by the kind of ensemble (accompanied or unaccompanied), by melodic role (unison or harmonized), by social or spiritual function (devotional services or other settings), by historical period (Contemporary, Renaissance, Romantic, Impressionist, etc.), and the list goes on! It is clear that the concept of unity in diversity, the pivot of the Bahá'í community, applies also to diversity of artistic style. Shoghi Effendi pointed out that what seems a lovely style of music to one group of people might fall on the ears of others as unpleasant sounds. (See *Bahá'í Writings on*

Music, p. 12. Also *Mirror of the Divine: Art in the Bahá'í World Community*, p. 297, note 26.)

One of the best ways to overcome intolerance and exclusiveness in society, particularly in a culturally diverse society, is by embracing and performing as many different musical styles as possible, thus providing a variety of spiritual food for everyone. A well-rounded director can successfully navigate a vast sea of artistic diversity.

Requisites of Director. The best choir directors have had enough voice training themselves to understand the mechanics of the vocal instrument, what it can and cannot do, and know how to impart this knowledge to a group of singers. One who does not understand the vocal instrument *can do as much damage as good*, especially when young or inexperienced choral singers are involved. Mistreated and overused voices can develop vocal nodes, calluses on the vocal chords, which are the kiss of death for a singer and require months or years of recuperative silence. A choir director who truly understands the voice will know how to make intelligent repertoire choices based on the abilities of the singers, and will know how to devise exercises to stretch their talents gently, gradually, and successfully.

Similarly, a singer may be satisfactory as a performer, yet may not have the skills needed to conduct and lead a group. Assigning such a singer to be the director could end up relegating the choir to the status of "backup singers" for the soloist. While such an arrangement is by no means an unacceptable mode of performance, to make it permanent would greatly reduce the range of music the choir could perform. Moreover, it runs the risk that the participants may eventually come to view the simplistic nature of their role as "backup" singers not only as dull, but as retarding the process of their artistic growth, and, ultimately, as lacking in respect for the value of their efforts and service.

Conductors need to possess, at a minimum, the basic conducting skills of beating time patterns and cueing entrances and cadences. However, good conducting also involves artistic interpretation of each piece. A well-composed piece of music utilizes many devices of melody, harmony, rhythm, meter, tempo, dynamics, and timbre in order to make a musical embodiment of the text which inspired it. The best conductors (choral or instrumental) are those who understand how to find these artistic devices in each piece and coach the performers into making their meaning come to life for the audience. Such performances are breathtaking in their beauty. Surely they are prime examples of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred to when He said:

...although sounds are but vibrations in the air which affect the ear's auditory nerve, and these vibrations are but chance phenomena carried along through the air, even so, see how they move the heart. A wondrous melody is wings for the spirit, and maketh the soul to tremble for joy.

~ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 147

Job Training. Suppose a favorite community musician possesses many of the skills our community desires in a choir director, but is lacking in some areas. Why not consider assisting this person in obtaining the training she or he needs? Suppose Ms. Y is an excellent singer, has great piano skills, is a natural-born leader, but what if she has never conducted in her life? Explore the possibility of paying for conducting lessons for her from a nearby music teacher or church choir director. Or, what if Mr. Z is well-trained and experienced in conducting instrumentalists, but knows nothing about the voice? The community or sponsoring body may wish to consider obtaining vocal training for him, to acquaint him with the capabilities of the human vocal instrument and how to manage them to the best effect.

Other Duties. Some other factors to consider, which may have some bearing on job description and salary, are recruiting, administrative, librarian, and archival duties. Recruiting new members is a never-ending enterprise. Who will be responsible for making and placing posters, placing ads, and keeping up the effort to acquire new talent? Administrative duties include things such as producing activities calendars, telephone and e-mail rosters, contacting members with information updates as required, handling financial matters, managing publicity for special performances, and so on.

A choir librarian would keep the music filed in good order, ensure there are sufficient copies, and distribute them to singers. An archivist would keep copies of programs, pictures, posters, and everything that future generations will want to see when they look back to the modest beginnings of a musical and cultural development in your community that grew to become a powerful form of outreach and enhanced the quality of community life. Will you expect your choir director to be responsible for all these as well as actually conducting? Will your community engage other people to handle these duties, or will you expect them to be managed by officials appointed from members of the choir itself?

A choir needs some measure of accompaniment; even an *a capella* choir (a choir that sings without accompaniment) needs a piano or keyboard occasionally for rehearsal purposes. A good choir director has some keyboard skill, if only enough to plunk out parts during the initial learning process, and frequently is quite capable. However, it is unrealistic to expect a director to take on the burdens of both conducting and accompanying for every piece, and to do both with equal excellence. If your choir requires full-time accompaniment, it will be necessary to engage someone for this purpose. Likewise with the other duties mentioned above.

For Bahá'í communities, it is not necessary for the choir director (or other officials) to be a Bahá'í, only that they be sympathetic to the Cause and understand the basis for many of the decisions that will be made.

3. Arrange for Suitable Rehearsal Space

Musicians need adequate quiet space with comfortable seating, good ventilation, controllable heating and cooling, good lighting, an available piano or keyboard, and access to washroom facilities and drinking water. Singers breathe deeply, so there must not be any strong odors, even that of flowers, and certainly not any nauseating or toxic fumes nearby, or they will become ill and unable to sing.

Finally, the space must be available on a *regular* basis. A singer who has to check constantly to learn where the next rehearsal will be, quickly becomes discouraged, exasperated, and finally, quits the ensemble. The importance of managing matters with propriety is emphasized by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. In *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 377, He is quoted as saying:

Likewise, managing art with propriety will become the means of sociability and affinity; and sociability and affinity themselves tend to guide others to the Truth.

Many types of spaces may be used, from a member’s living room to a rented rehearsal hall, but it *must* be adequate for the work being done. In many cases musicians have had to manage the best they can, rehearsing in whatever space someone is willing to grant them, from closets and boiler rooms to the actual performance space in front of guests and audience members. This is not fair to the singers and would not appear to be in keeping with ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s concept of “managing art with propriety”. One of the most loving and supportive things a community can do to help its choir blossom is to provide good rehearsal space.

4. Recruit Members from All Walks of Life

Some duties and service opportunities in a community are of a kind that virtually anyone can accomplish. However, those with an aptitude for singing are uniquely qualified to serve in a particular way.

If there are people in your community who like to sing, but whose time is already taxed with managing other activities, such as domestic duties, consider what might happen if someone else in the community could relieve them of those responsibilities and thus grant them time to rehearse and perform. What an incredibly loving and supportive thing it would be for your budding choir, and what an example it would set of living a godly life! With the support of the community, your choir director will be able to achieve amazing things. She or he is not, however, a magician. The talent must be made available and there must be dedication to the effort. This requires *active community support*.

Auditions. Your choir director may want to audition prospective members. The purpose of auditions is not necessarily to select some candidates and exclude others. If your community is blessed with hundreds of prospective singers beating down the door to

join your choir, then you may need to employ auditions for the purpose of selection. On the other hand, some directors may have a policy of accepting practically anyone who wants to join. Even in this case, however, it is a good thing for the director to audition members so that he or she will be able to evaluate the available skills and thus be able to make appropriate choices of vocal exercises and repertoire.

It is discouraging for a group of singers to work and work and never be able to learn a piece well, because the piece is simply beyond their ability. Conversely, it is also discouraging to highly skilled singers who yearn to dedicate their talents to God, to be stuck singing the same simple tunes over and over. A good choir director who, through auditions, has become well acquainted with the individual and collective ability of the choir members, will be able to make intelligent choices and modifications in order to achieve the optimum blend and balance of voices and repertoire.

Diversity of Membership. It is desirable to welcome members from all ethnic and religious backgrounds. It will enrich your membership beyond measure. For example, for a Bahá'í choir in the United States it would be wonderful to have a person of Hindu background as a member, particularly if he or she is able to help pronounce the words of songs in Hindi, and to understand Indian perspectives on melody, vocal technique, and the use or non-use of harmony. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us how important it is to consort with people of all backgrounds with "joy and fragrance."

Inasmuch as your origin was one, you must now be united and agreed; you must consort with each other in joy and fragrance. He pronounced prejudice – whether religious, racial, patriotic, political – the destroyer of the body politic. He said that man must recognize the oneness of humanity, for all in origin belong to the same household, and all are servants of the same God.

Bahá'í communities having a choir with some non-Bahá'í members will have many opportunities to extend to such members the love and outreach that are at the heart of every faith. Such choirs will find their services welcomed in a variety of local Bahá'í venues, such as devotional programs, Holy Day observances, public events, study circles, youth activities, and children's classes. The spiritual Feasts held in Bahá'í communities once every nineteen days also provide a natural place for choirs to offer their uplifting services. For a choir having some non-Bahá'í members, however, the Nineteen Day Feast may be an exception, as the Feast is intended for Bahá'ís only; but such choirs can still avail themselves of the many other Bahá'í venues available.

Provisional Membership. If there are individuals who want very much to be in the choir, but whose skills fall far short of the group, and it is the policy of your choir to accept all singers, then consider granting membership of a "provisional status"; that is, they can join the choir, but it is expected that they will obtain specified training in order to improve their skill level. It is an especially loving thing to do if training can then be provided to such individuals by the director or someone else in the choir, and

compensation provided to the instructor either by the students, by the community, or both.

The director may also prefer to have the trainees rehearse with the choir for a period of time without performing, until both the director and the individuals are pleased with the progress being made and confident that the blend and balance of the ensemble is enhanced rather than hindered by the trainees. If your community is blessed with a very large number of prospective choir members, one could field a “training” or “preparatory” choir for those whose skill and experience is below the desired level. Even if this is not initially feasible, it might be worthwhile to include, in the choir’s formal document, a provision for such beginning ensembles in the future.

5. Choose a Widely Diverse Repertoire

The choice of repertoire is best accomplished by consultation. All will have their favorite pieces they want to sing, or want to recommend. Explore as many possibilities as you can find. Remember to apply the principle of unity in diversity not only to the membership of your group, but also to its repertoire. Not every piece of music will be appropriate for every occasion or every venue, but there is no reason why any choir sponsored by a Bahá’í institution or group should limit itself to only one style or genre of music. Try including light-hearted, entertaining music along with the more serious settings of the Sacred Word. In a multicultural society, the more languages your group is able to use in its singing, the wider the scope of your appeal will be, and the more hearts you will be able to touch. The more styles of music your group is able to embrace, the greater the variety of occasions and events you will be appropriately prepared to serve. In a letter written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly, Shoghi Effendi said:

The further away the friends keep from any set forms, the better, for they must realize that the Cause is absolutely universal, and what might seem a beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating ... would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sounds – and vice versa.

The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith, p.17

Memorization. Some choir directors like to insist that all repertoire be memorized. There are many pros and cons to both sides of the issue. Having the music memorized enables the singers to keep their eyes on the conductor at all times, which of course, is desirable. On the other hand, if the music is very long or complex and the singers have many cues and instructions marked in their scores, it may be unrealistic to expect them to memorize the piece, especially if they have not had many rehearsals before having to perform it publicly. The decision to use music scores or memorize is probably best left as a group decision on a case-by-case basis.

Practical Benefits of Music Notation. To the writers' knowledge, there is nothing in the Bahá'í Writings that directly addresses whether music notation should be used in the learning and performance of music. However, in the Bahá'í teachings there are at least two basic principles with a clear bearing on this matter. One is to value cultural diversity and respect cultural traditions that are in keeping with spiritual values. This might seem to argue against adopting music notation in the practice of oral music traditions. The other principle, however, is to be open-minded and willing to apply beneficial concepts and procedures that may have originated in a culture other than one's own, so humanity can, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "carry forward an ever-advancing civilization." This would argue in favor of being open to the adoption of music notation even when the musical style or genre was traditionally an oral one.

On this question, some choir directors require that all their repertoire be learned by rote, and in fact, refuse to permit the singers to use printed music. Frequently this attitude arises out of a wish to be faithful to an oral music tradition in which music notation played little or no part. While the desire to honor a cultural tradition is laudable, it need not keep us from adopting features from other traditions that have proven to be beneficial.

Today's standard system of music notation evolved over a period of centuries. As a practical tool, it is being used world wide. In some cases, the music a choir wishes to perform may have features that do not easily lend themselves to being written with the standard notation system. An example would be a melody that uses microtones and is heavily embellished. In the United States such melodies are found, for instance, in gospel solos. They are also found in many of the musical traditions of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Even in cases such as these, however, there are ways that notation can be modified, adapted, or even re-invented, to record the basic rhythms and pitches of virtually any musical tradition.

If a choral director working in an oral tradition decided to use music notation to help teach the songs to the choir, she or he would find support in the counsel of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

God has given us eyes, that we may look about us at the world, and lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living.

~ *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 3

It has... been clearly and irrefutably shown that the importation from foreign countries of the principles and procedures of civilization, and the acquisition from them of sciences and techniques – in brief, of whatsoever will contribute to the general good – is entirely permissible.

~ *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 31-2

Music notation in relation to performed music is much like writing in relation to spoken language. The widely spoken languages in the world today each have a written script in order to facilitate communication among members of a specific culture and between cultures, as well as to record and preserve history and tradition for future generations. Consider how a musical style, formerly oral in its tradition, and perhaps appreciated only within a limited population, could be made accessible by the use of notation. The learning of such music would be greatly facilitated and the richness of the culture it represents could be propagated and honored by ensembles worldwide.

In truth, the fact that much of the world's wonderful variety of folk music has joined the international mainstream during the last century is due in large part to the efforts of devoted music scholars who used recording equipment and music notation. These souls, launching themselves on difficult artistic treasure hunts, often in remote and nearly inaccessible areas of the world, came across magnificent musical forms and techniques, recorded and notated them for posterity, and made them available to the general public. Artists, in turn, have taken these gems of humanity's diversity and infused their beauty into existing forms, thereby creating new artistic wonders. As an example, the rich, sonorous spirituals of the southern United States were eventually published as notated music and later became standard classical vocal repertoire, due partly to the efforts of music scholars (who were of both African American and European American descent).

One common misconception about written music is that those who know how to read music supposedly cannot learn music by ear. The truth is, at least half of formal musical training is *ear* training. No musician can stay in tune or in rhythm with any other performer without a good ear (with the exception of deaf and partially deaf performers who are able to "feel" the rhythm and play an instrument that requires no tuning). What *is* frequently lacking in formal music education is instruction and experience in *improvising* melody and harmony in various ways.

Another misconception is that writing down the oral music traditions of various ethnic origins somehow "ruins" their essence. It is true that music notation has been used for centuries to record compositions in which the details of pitch, rhythm and other features have been worked out beforehand. For composers who prefer to work this way, notation is the only way to distill and crystallize the essential elements of their creation. However, once music is set down in writing it becomes a permanent document. For musicians whose oral tradition emphasizes spontaneity and improvisation as a natural part of musical performance, the fixed nature of a written document may seem to leave no room for improvising or being spontaneous. The writing on the paper seems to say, "This is how the piece should sound and you can't sing or play it any other way."

But there is no need to let music notation be so limiting. During the era of classical music in Europe, for example, composers were expected to be good at improvising as well as writing. In fact, Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were famous as great improvisers on the keyboard before they became established as composers. And Chopin had a reputation for never playing his own written compositions twice the same

way. In the last century, jazz musicians, too, have worked with standard music notation and have adapted it to their needs in the form of “charts”. They have put printed music to good use by treating it as a basic blueprint, a rough sketch, to which performers should add their own creativity and inspiration.

When it comes to ethnic music with an oral tradition, the fact is that writing down such music with notation is, in many cases, precisely what allowed it to survive, to become well known and have an enthusiastic following today.

There is another practical advantage to using music notation. Educational researchers have discovered that when people use more than one of their senses, the time needed for learning is greatly reduced. Singers who are able to learn by sight, using printed music, combined with a highly developed ear, can master their repertoire very quickly indeed.

As a choir’s repertoire grows, it becomes more and more difficult for the singers to perform everything from memory. A choir with 100 songs in its repertoire will find printed music an extremely useful tool to have. Is it therefore necessary for all the singers in a choir to be musically literate and use printed music? No, of course not. But it would be very limiting if they were *prevented* from using it.

In sum, there are several benefits to using music notation. 1) It can provide an enduring record of oral music traditions, thereby helping to keep them alive and vigorous. 2) It can facilitate international communication between musicians, allowing musical styles that were little known to be learned, appreciated and performed world wide. 3) It can be modified to faithfully reflect the special features of a musical style. 4) It can be combined with learning “by ear,” and with improvisation. 5) It allows singers to learn their parts at home, between rehearsals, thereby reducing their dependence on the director. 6) It allows singers to use both their ears and eyes, which speeds up the learning process. And 7) it allows choirs to greatly expand their repertoire without straining the singers’ memory. The choir director may therefore wish to include the study of basic note-reading either as part of the rehearsal routine, if time permits, or make it a provision of membership in the choir.

Music in Houses of Worship. A further word should be included here about special requirements for the use of music in Bahá’í Houses of Worship. According to the wishes of Bahá’u’lláh, music in the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár must be that of the unaccompanied human voice(s). The text must come from the Words of Bahá’u’lláh, the Báb, the prayers of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, or from the Sacred Writings of the world’s revealed religions, such as the Torah, the Gospel, the Qur’án, the Bhagavad-Gita, and others. Solo vocal or choral music is called for, but not congregational singing by the audience. As Bahá’ís envision Houses of Worship arising in steadily growing numbers, choirs that will be fortunate enough to have a Temple in their area may wish to begin preparing themselves to present such music. The Universal House of Justice has provided guidance on this subject:

Your Assembly is free to use its discretion in choosing excerpts from the generally recognized scriptures of the older religions...

Music in the House of Worship is to be vocal only, whether by singers or a singer. It does not matter if a guest a capella choir or soloist is used, provided such use is not made the occasion to publicize services of Worship and the precautions you mention are taken. No doubt the excellent recordings available today would assure the highest quality of performance at low cost, but all references to vocal music in the central Edifice imply the physical presence of the singers.

~ Lights of Guidance, p. 609

We have your letter of 22nd January, 1973 asking whether it is proper for choirs or groups to sing or chant prayers in unison.

In answering a similar letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of Uganda and Central Africa about congregational singing in services at the House of Worship we said:

Singing by a congregation present at a service in the House of Worship should not be confused with congregational prayer prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh for the dead...

Regarding singing in the Temple, we must bear in mind the reference made by Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas to the need for the person who enters the Temple to sit silently and listen to the chanting of the verses of God...

In connection with the desire of the Africans to sing, this aptitude in them should be encouraged. The Guardian elucidated this principle in a letter written on his behalf by his Secretary: 'Shoghi Effendi would urge that choir singing by men, women and children be encouraged in the Auditorium, and that rigidity in the Bahá'í service be scrupulously avoided.' (Bahá'í News, September, 1931)

~ Lights of Guidance, p. 412-413

Copyrights and Commissions. A final word: be sure to budget sufficiently for the acquisition of music. Research copyright laws, and get an understanding when you may and when you may *not* photocopy, what permissions you must have to do so, and what royalties you must pay for the privilege. If the community, an institution, a group or individual, wishes to commission special pieces to be written or arranged for the choir, they should be prepared to pay a fair amount for it, as indicated in the *Fifth Taráz*, quoted on p. 8.

6. Make Prayer and Deepening an Integral Part of your Routine

Beginning and ending every session with prayer helps musicians maintain a spiritual perspective on their activities. Studying the Bahá'í Writings pertaining to the arts and artists in general, and to music in particular, helps us to understand the Source of our art, its station, uses, and future. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá said,

In this great dispensation, art (or a profession) is identical with an act of worship and this is a clear text of the Blessed Perfection. Therefore, extreme effort should be made in art and this will not prevent the teaching of the people in that region. Nay, rather each should assist the other in art and guidance. For instance, when the studying of this art is with the intention of obeying the command of God this study will certainly be done easily and great progress will soon be made therein; and when others discover the fragrance of spirituality in the action itself, this same will cause their awakening. ~ Bahá'í World Faith, p. 377

Studying together not only helps us to deepen our understanding of Sacred Text, but helps us to get to know each other better and begin to understand how one another's minds work. It helps us to love each other more and ourselves less. Clashes of ego are *the* most destructive force in an artistic group; prayer and deepening are the most effective way to resolve this particular problem. Shoghi Effendi gave this guidance:

First and foremost, one should use every possible means to purge one's heart and motives, otherwise, engaging in any form of enterprise would be futile. It is also essential to abstain from hypocrisy and blind imitation, inasmuch as their foul odour is soon detected by every man of understanding and wisdom. Moreover, the friends must observe the specific times for the remembrance of God, meditation, devotion and prayer, as it is highly unlikely, nay impossible, for any enterprise to prosper and develop when deprived of divine bestowals and confirmation. One can hardly imagine what a great influence genuine love, truthfulness and purity of motives exert on the souls of men. But these traits cannot be acquired by any believer unless he makes a daily effort to gain them...

~ *Living the Life*, pages 1-2

If the text (or lyrics) of a particular piece is drawn from the Sacred Writings, it is essential to study their meaning, especially within the artistic context of the piece. This will shed a whole new light on the piece, and with new understanding comes a new depth of performance from the singers. You may also find it enlightening to explore musical philosophies from a variety of sources, including other faiths, or the ancient Greek, Chinese, and Sufi masters; you will find many similarities and many contrasts, all of which will help your musical offerings to come from a deeper place in the soul.

7. Establish a Regular Rehearsal Routine

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has given musicians a mandate to pursue excellence:

The art of music must be brought to the highest stage of development, for this is one of the most wonderful arts and in this glorious age of the Lord of Unity it is highly essential to gain its mastery. However, one must endeavor to attain the degree of artistic perfection and not be like those who leave matters unfinished.

~ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Writings on Music*, p. 5-6

Importance of Regular Rehearsals. Education researchers have discovered that it takes humans approximately six hours to master a new skill. Applying this formula very simply to the rehearsal process, if one were to work on a new piece of music for 30 minutes at a stretch, it would take 12 sessions in order to master that piece. Rehearsing once weekly, that means three months to master the piece. Of course, there are many factors to consider, such as the skill level of the singers, the skill of the conductor, the difficulty and length of the piece of music, and so on. But the point is that research bears out what musicians throughout the ages have always known: ensemble members must meet and work in a disciplined fashion on a regular basis.

Length. Two hours is a good length for a rehearsal. From a practical standpoint, most people can find two hours to dedicate to such an effort. Longer sessions can become burdensome and require a substantial break. Longer than three hours is taxing on the vocal instrument, and should be reserved only for those occasions when there is no other way to manage.

Frequency. Groups whose rehearsals are spaced more than a week apart, especially those in which the collective skill level is low, will find themselves starting their learning process over again at every rehearsal. The risk in this arrangement is that their progress may be so slow and discouraging that members quit. Weekly rehearsal is the most manageable (most people are not able to commit to more), and singers are able to keep what they have learned relatively fresh in the mind from week to week.

Discipline. Endeavor to be punctual and disciplined. Showing up on time and beginning on time are courtesies we show toward each other, acts of love and respect for the service the group is preparing to render, and acts of love and respect for the importance of one another’s life and time availability. The friends will want to chat and visit, but it will be a great boon to everyone involved if they can curtail their chatter and pay attention to the business at hand.

Attendance. There is a good chance your choral director will want to make regular attendance a condition for belonging to the choir. She or he may even decide to impose a penalty (such as losing the chance to take part in the next performance) on a singer who misses too many rehearsals, while offering a reward to those with consistent attendance. This is because a choir is a team, and depends on *every* member of the team to do his or

her part. Have you noticed that your daughter or son will not be allowed to stay on the soccer or baseball team unless they attend every practice? Again, it is because their team needs *every* member to participate regularly in order to function effectively.

Routine. During the rehearsal time allotted, establish a routine; for example, announcements, opening prayer, deepening on the Sacred Writings, and warm-up exercises will probably consume the first half hour. The rest of the time will be budgeted by the director for working on repertoire. There is comfort in routine; human beings crave it, children thrive on it. If the director ever has to be absent, keeping to the routine will allow a skilled member of the choir to take over the session and carry out a successful rehearsal with minimal discomfort to the others.

8. Establish a Regular Performance Schedule

Music and the other arts are a powerful means to spread the spirit of love and unity. Shoghi Effendi stated:

Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.

~ *The Bahá'í Faith and the Arts*, #45

Goals. The director and the sponsoring body, in consultation, should establish a schedule of regular public performances. Singers need something to work toward. One special occasion may be a good start, but without ongoing commitments, choir members will drop out. Start with a basic goal, and let it grow and evolve as the ability of the ensemble warrants. Some groups may set the goal to perform one or two (new) pieces for each Holy Day observance throughout the year. If the collective skill level permits speedier mastery of new pieces, a goal might be set to perform for each Feast and Holy Day. As the group grows, and expands its repertoire, it can establish even more active schedules of weekly performances.

Make sure that your goals are realistic and achievable. Even the most gifted director cannot take a group of people, half of whom do not read music, and get them to master the Bach B Minor Mass in one rehearsal! Performances require as much advance notice as possible in order to arrange the schedules of all the singers to accommodate the event, plus plenty of rehearsal time, especially if special music is wanted. It is also important to give members a hiatus once or twice a year. Singers get tired and need time off, just like those who render any other kind of long-term service.

9. Create Growth, Outreach, and Collaborative Activity

Some communities may think it is best to start with a children's choir and then let the musical efforts grow from there. However, if the children do not see the desired behavior modeled by the adults in the community, they will tend to fall away from it as

they get older. The saying, “Do as I say and not as I do,” comes to mind. It is better to have the initial group be dedicated adults, then grow from there. Your director and your community may decide to permit youth and even pre-youth into the choir alongside the adults, especially if there are not enough interested children to raise a children’s choir. This can work very well as long as the youngsters are old enough to stay in one place and do the work, can carry a tune, and the repertoire is not too taxing for their young voices.

Children’s Choirs. Working with children and developing a children’s choir takes special training, expertise and the gift of patience. Do not assume your adult choir director will automatically be qualified or have the desire to take on this task, unless the possibility was covered during the initial hiring process. Do not assume that every mother or father with a guitar can do it, either.

Performance Venues. Let the new choir gain experience performing in the home community first. People who have never performed before may get extremely nervous, and getting their initial experience in front of their loving, supportive community members creates the positive experience that gives them the confidence to continue. When your group is solid and confident in its repertoire, consider looking for performance opportunities at public events sponsored by your local community, then opportunities outside the local community, and so on. It can be very exciting watching a group develop and grow, rather like watching one’s child grow and mature and strike out on his or her own.

An ideal occasion for choirs to perform is the local Bahá’í devotional program. A brief performance every other month in this loving and supportive setting may be a very reasonable goal. Further, the Universal House of Justice indicated that these services should be regular and “open to all”, and that they should be “among the initial goals of the community” (from a letter to an individual, dated March 13, 2001). Your community and teaching work can benefit enormously by inviting choirs from nearby churches and temples to perform in your local worship program, and by offering in exchange to have your choir perform in their houses of worship.

Including Instrumentalists. If there is instrumental talent within the community, a wise director will jump at the chance to incorporate it into some of the choral efforts. If you are blessed with enough instrumentalists to form a separate ensemble, the choir may inspire them to do just that. Again, do not assume that your choir director has the expertise and desire to take on this task; if it looks like it might become a possibility, be sure to include this subject in your interviews.

Collaboration. Collaborate whenever possible! Never turn an opportunity down if you can help it. For Bahá’í choirs, this can mean collaboration with other Bahá’í ensembles, or with community or church choirs in your locale. Remembering the principle of unity in diversity, each collaborative effort provides opportunities to learn new repertoire, new techniques, new perspectives and insights, and above all, opportunities to form new bonds and to spread the divine spirit and teachings!

In a Tablet quoted in *The Bahá'í Faith and the Arts*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges all to “strive to widen the scope of their knowledge”.

At this time, likewise, I most urgently request the friends of God to make every effort, as much as lieth within their competence, along these lines. The harder they strive to widen the scope of their knowledge, the better and more gratifying will be the result.

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Some Resources on Music and the Arts

An Annotated Inventory of Bahá'í Choral Music: A Reference Manual for Choir Directors, Kathryn A. Tahiri, (Wilmette, Illinois: Celestial Navigation, 1999)

The Bahá'í Faith and the Arts, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, www.ee.pdx.edu/~pamela/bahai/comp/arts.cindex.html

Bahá'í Writings on Music, compiled by the Research department of the Universal House of Justice, (Oakham, England: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973)

A Gift of the Holy Spirit: Bahá'í Writings on the Arts and Artists, compiled by K. Tahiri, (Wilmette, Illinois: Celestial Navigation, 2000)

The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith: A Compilation, (Thornhill, Ontario: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1999)

Lights of Guidance, compiled by Helen Bassett Hornby, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996)

Mirror of the Divine: Art in the Bahá'í World Community, Ludwig Tuman, (Oxford, England: George Ronald, 1993)