

## CREATING A WARD CHOIR WITH TEN MINUTE REHEARSALS

Doctrine and Covenants 136:28

By Raymond White

*D&C 136:28 ...praise the Lord with singing, with music...*

*D&C 25:12 ...the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me...*

Question: How do you create a choir in a choir-resistant ward? You know, those wards where nobody has the time or the will to come to rehearsal. Every choir director knows that begging people to come is like pulling teeth. Ever been in a ward like that? That's practically every ward in the church, isn't it? Maybe you have just accepted the calling of choir director and are struggling to do the impossible — create a choir, like fiat creation, out of nothing.

How do you do that and have any chance of success, and take the pain out of it?

I'll tell you a story how I recently created a choir out of almost nothing and how it can be done in practically any ward.

In 2007, my wife Cyndi and I moved to the Santa Cruz, California ward so that she could take a job in that area. Roger and Ruth befriended us. Ruth, it turned out, is a highly talented musician, professional quality both in piano and voice. So we had music in common.

But this ward had no choir. Ruth told me that no ward in the stake had a choir. The problem? As always, no one has time to rehearse. That's the church wide problem.

Well, after a year in the ward, I decided it was time to do something about this. I went to the bishop and volunteered. I said, "Bishop, let me have a shot at this." He said, "Go and do."

I would not have been so bold except for two things: One, I had a great accompanist. Ruth sight read music flawlessly, and she was eager to see a choir happen. And two, I had a plan.

The next Sunday just happened to be Fast Sunday and that gave me the soap box I needed. I went to the pulpit to bear my testimony and this is what I said, more or less:

"Brothers and Sisters, I have been called to be the ward choir director. Now, before you groan and think, 'oh, no, not again,' let me tell you how this is going to work. Rehearsals will be exactly ten minutes long. No more, no less. They will be in the primary room because that's the last room heading to the parking lot. And our first rehearsal is today, at, well let's see — church is done at 1:00, so I'll see you eager singers at 1:10 in the primary room. Ten minutes tops. I promise." I was done, and I sat down.

When the 1:00 bell rang, I gathered up Cyndi and Ruth and headed for the primary room. Ruth took her position at the piano, I took my position standing next to the piano, and Cyndi took her position at the door to hand music to any who might venture in. The song I chose for our first effort was: "The King of Love My Sheppard Is". I picked that song because I knew that a choir would not gather to sing music that was either too easy (no hymns), or too hard (no chromatic weirdness), or anything less than magnificent. To catch their interest, the choir had to love the music. This song fit the bill. This song is in five flats, but for Ruth, that was not a problem.

So: How many people came? Two. Was I discouraged? Heavens no. We were just getting started. How many came the second week? Seven. The third week? Three. And so it went.

Here were my rules:

1. No waiting for late arrivals. At 1:10 sharp we started singing.
2. I never told people when to come or go, they were free to drift in and out as they choose.
3. No prayer. Cyndi, Ruth, and I already had a prayer. The ten minutes was for singing.

4. No warm ups. Too much time gets wasted warming up. We're there to sing.
5. No sitting. Just stand around the piano and sing. Primary chairs are too small anyway.
6. Children were welcome to come play, hang out, or whatever. It was their room anyway.
7. Everyone who can't sight read, stand next to someone who can, or at least sounds good.
8. No lingering. At 1:20, we were done, even though some ask to stay. Nope, done, go!
9. No borrowing music. This was my music and I didn't want to lose it. Cyndi collected it.

We sang the song through, we practiced parts, we did whatever anyone wanted to do. I dutifully directed of course, but it was a democracy. Anyone could say, "I need help on page whatever," and we'd all turn to page whatever and work on that part. One thing I like to do for an ailing part is to have the other three parts sing a cappella quietly while the piano plunks out the challenging part loudly. That works because singers get to hear their part but at the same time hear how it mingles with the other parts. Also the other parts don't get bored waiting in silence.

I told Ruth she had to sing while she played. In church performances, that's taboo for accompanists to sing, but this is just rehearsal. I also told her to switch hit. By that I mean when the sopranos need help, sing soprano; when the altos need help, sing alto. And she did. And she played at the same time. I could sing both the tenor and bass parts so we were covered.

People began coming. They loved the song and they loved the experience, and no one felt burdened. After all, it was only ten minutes.

But the only strong voice was Ruth's and so I had to make a change. "Ruth," I said, "I love your piano skills, but the choir needs your voice skills more. Who in the ward is a natural choice for accompanist?" Without hesitation she said, "Claudia."

Well, what a coincidence. Bob and Claudia had been asking Cyndi and me to their home for dinner, and so we went. "Bob," I said. "Can I ask your wife a favor?" "Of course," he said. "Claudia, can I ask you a favor?" "Sure," she said. "What's up?" I continued, "The favor has five flats." And so it was that Claudia became our accompanist, and Ruth was free to help the sisters learn their parts.

And the choir got good!

One rule that I had established with the Bishop was no set performance date. When we were ready, we were ready — the calendar was not our boss. I would set the date.

As it turned out, the choir set the date. I kept asking for more rehearsals. But the choir started insisting, no, we've got it, we're ready. Since it was a democracy, I guess we were ready.

"Bishop," I said, "We're ready." And the next Sunday we performed.

Something magical happened. At no rehearsal had there been even a dozen people, or so I thought. But people had drifted in and out more than I had realized. And when we took the stand, more than thirty people stood up there with us.

I tell you sincerely, we sounded like the Tab, (the Mormon Tabernacle Choir). And I wondered, where was all this magnificent sound coming from? Surely angels had joined in. And why not? After all, with only ten minute rehearsals, even angels could break away from their busy schedules for that.

The ward had its choir.

Sadly, the story ends there for Cyndi and me. My wife got sick and had to quit her job. We had to leave Santa Cruz so I couldn't stay for round two.

The bishop asked me, "Who do you have in mind to replace you?" I said, "Not Ruth and not Claudia. What they do is too important. I think you should pick someone who is not a strong

voice but loves the choir. But let Ruth and Claudia pick the songs.” The Bishop did pick someone who was appropriate, and Cyndi and I were gone the next week.

I love Santa Cruz. I love the people in that ward and I loved that choir. I imagine they are still singing today. I hope so. Ruth, Roger, Bob, Claudia, and the rest, we miss you.

I offered this story to encourage choir-resistant wards throughout the church to try one more time to create a choir. Everyone runs on tight schedules and short on time. Here is my rule: The way to succeed is don’t expect so much. The less you expect, the more people will give. That’s the paradox of it.

There is one more thing I want to leave with you, a list of my favorite choir songs, the songs in my own private collection. Some people collect coins, others collect stamps, I collect choir songs. When I die they will go to my granddaughter Carissa who plays piano very well and one day, I hope, as well as Ruth.

So here’s my list, the greatest choir music ever written (in my opinion) that should be in every ward choir’s collection. This is the kind of stuff that makes people want to sing in choirs.

	<u>Composer</u>	<u>Comments</u>
Angel’s Carol	Rutter	Christmas
A Mother’s Eyes	Jones	Mother’s Day
A Father Up In Heaven	Allen	Father’s Day
Come Unto Me	Nickel	includes flute
Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing	Smith	
Consider the Lilies	Hoffman/Lyon	
Fount of Love, The	Lund	
Have Mercy at Calvary	Liebergen	stunningly beautiful, a must do
He Shall Feed His Flock	Beck	
Is Your Heart Prepared For a King	Lau	Christmas
I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked		
Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring	Bach	
King of Love My Shepherd Is	Shelley	
Lord’s Prayer, The	Mallote	
My Shepherd Will Supply My Need	Thomson	
Oh Lord My Redeemer	Hansen	

Now, go and do.