

# Breaking into the Pro Choral World

BY KATHRYN MUELLER

*Singers often leave choral music behind when they begin their professional lives, but what if you could build your career on a variety of paying, musically rewarding choral singing gigs?*



photo by Gene Kosoy

Last month I wrote about the exciting and enriching world of professional choral singing. Work in professional ensembles allows singers to have satisfying careers, whether solely as choral musicians or combined with solo work. As promised, in this article my colleagues and I share advice to singers wanting to prepare for and find work in this field.

First, what are the skills and personality traits you need to get hired and, more importantly, get hired back? Most singers agree on the common things conductors and administrators are looking for: solid technique, excellent sight-reading skills, flexibility, professionalism, and the ability to get along with others.

## Filling Your Toolbox

Advanced musical skills are a must for members of professional choral ensembles. Sight reading is the first thing that probably comes to your mind, but it isn't the only requirement. "I know many good sight readers who don't listen well or tune in an ensemble," points out contralto Emily Marvosh, "so I would add ensemble experience and affinity to that skill requirement." You must also be able to sing with excellent intonation and precise rhythm, to blend easily into the sound of your section and of the choir, and to adapt to a wide range of musical style and periods.

Language skills are very important, and you'll be asked to sing in languages other than those required of voice majors in school. Tenor Patrick Muehleise recommends being comfortable with English, Latin, German, French, Spanish, and Italian. Beyond that, you may have to sing in Slovak, Korean, or Zulu! Choral ensembles won't demand that you already know these less common languages, but they'll expect you to pick up the pronunciation quickly, often after a single reading by a coach. Having a good command of the International Phonetic Alphabet is useful in these situations.

As in all professional singing, good vocal technique is of paramount importance. You must have the control over your voice to sing in tune, blend with your section, and produce a range of vocal colors—and do so in a healthy way. According to Marvosh, a good technique "will enable you to use as little or as much tone, vibrato, volume, etc., as requested with no ill effects. And it will give you the stamina to make it through six-hour rehearsal days and still have something left to give tomorrow." Good technique for choral singing is the same good technique you learned in school for any classical singing, but you sometimes apply it in different ways to produce the colors and blend a conductor wants. The chief difference is that you will often be



American Bach Soloists Festival Orchestra and Chorus



asked to sing with straight tone and you must know how to do this in a healthy way (yes, it's possible!), or you may find yourself in vocal trouble.

Flexibility is a word that often comes up when talking with professional ensemble singers. According to baritone Dashon Burton, choral singers must have "absolute flexibility: emotional, vocal, mental, and intellectual." This flexibility, he says, helps you to be a good colleague and allows the singers in a group "to make the most beautiful music in the most efficient manner."

The final requirement of a professional ensemble singer is professionalism. Of great importance, according to Marvosh, are "organization and preparedness. No one likes to teach notes to their neighbors, especially if they're earning the same fee!" You must be generous to your colleagues, respectful of the conductor, and sensitive enough to a situation to know when it's OK to make a musical suggestion and when you should keep your ideas to yourself. Lastly, you should have a genuine interest in choral music. Conductors and other singers will be able to sniff out right away if you're just biding your time until your big solo break, and they want to make music with people who love ensemble singing.

### How to Get There

What if you're not already a great sight reader? Or you're not sure how to blend perfectly into a section sound?

On-the-job training is the best way to learn, even if that "job" isn't paid to start out. "You should expect to sing for free for a while at the beginning of your career to gain the experience and repertoire knowledge that will make you a competitive choral singer," says Marvosh. Become a volunteer member of a good church choir that sings a large amount of repertoire each week and demands constant sight reading. You can also join a local community chorus or chamber choir with some paid members who can help connect you to professional work when you're ready.

Once you have the musical skills and repertoire experience, you're ready to start working your way up the professional choral ladder. "Conductors are usually very hesitant to hire someone with no professional choral experience," says Muehleise. "A great pro choir church gig and some regional choirs are a great start." Marvosh believes a church job "should be a requirement to graduate with a vocal degree!" Acting as a section leader "will improve sight-reading and awareness skills, and the sacred repertoire is the cornerstone of the industry. Most churches do not require their [paid] singers to believe the same things as the congregation. You can be quiet and respectful during a church service without compromising your own belief systems."



Members of Chanticleer, 2012



Another way to gain choral experience and make connections is to participate in a pay-to-sing summer program. “Professional choral training programs are beginning to be much more common and they’re great resources for networking and access to professionals in the field,” says Marvosh. “CORO ([www.coroonline.org/vocal-artists](http://www.coroonline.org/vocal-artists)) has a good one as does Seraphic Fire ([www.ProfessionalChoralInstitute.org](http://www.ProfessionalChoralInstitute.org)) and Chanticleer ([www.chanticleer.org/education/chanticleer-in-sonoma](http://www.chanticleer.org/education/chanticleer-in-sonoma)).”

Where you live can also make a big difference. “You may want to consider relocating to a large urban center to start your career,” says Marvosh. “It will give you access to high-quality performances and more audition and networking opportunities.”

Once you have some basic professional experience, you’re ready to approach higher-level ensembles for auditions. Each ensemble chooses new singers differently; some have live auditions, others find singers mostly from audition recordings and résumés, and still others hire singers almost entire-

ly upon recommendations from other singers and conductors.

Research professional choral ensembles in your city and across the country. The best way to find out about groups is through word of mouth. Talk with other choral singers you know and ask them who they sing with and what

tation is for advice and ideas, not for them to hook you up with instant gigs.

Once you’ve researched a number of choral ensembles and their audition requirements, you can send off your materials or request an audition. Having a professional-looking résumé and good recordings is important.

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other groups they know about. Attend a concert of a group you’d like to join. Read the singers’ bios in the program and note their lists of ensembles. Burton recommends looking for ensembles in musical organization directories such as MusicalAmerica.com, EarlyMusic.org, and ClassicalSinger.com. You can also approach a member of a professional group for an informational interview. Just make sure your expect-

“Have a few high-quality recordings of contrasting pieces that you can send to different conductors and ensembles,” recommends Muehleise. “Listen for your intonation and a free, healthy tone.”

“It’s good to invest in well done recordings of yourself,” agrees Burton. “After that, make sure you get to talk personally with people either in the ensemble or, preferably, the conductor



Members of Seraphic Fire




photo courtesy of Seraphic Fire

or artistic director to let your intent be known. And just keep following up! It's tough for conductors to hear 'I'll get you my stuff!' without anything to back up that promise."

Perhaps the most important advice for becoming a professional choral singer is something you learned in kindergarten: play nice with others. Throughout your training and as you launch your career, remember that you are developing your personal as well as your musical skills. "Be a genuine, good colleague!" advises Muehleise. "Word-of-mouth and professional recommendations are possibly the most important when you are looking to be hired. Choral ensembles are so personal—and when you work so closely with others, one bad apple can really spoil the bunch. Aside from the vocal and musical aspects, people will hire singers they want to be around."

In exchange for hard work and a high level of professionalism, professional choral singing offers rich rewards. It may not be what came to mind when you first imagined your singing career, but joining your voice with talented and interesting colleagues provides some of the most fulfilling music making there is—as well as work that is challenging, varied, and inspiring.

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