

*Graham Sattler***Graham Sattler explains how primary teachers can confidently lead their school's choir...**

This article is written for K–6 classroom teachers who either have an interest in taking a choir, existing choir conducting responsibilities, or a sense that they may find themselves in the 'hot seat' (or podium...) at some time in the future.

Music is a performing art, it is an activity, and as such provides a real-life experience through which the theory can be heard, felt, and learnt. The theory relates to the activity, not the other way around.

In addition to those teachers already planning to lead a choir, this article may assist all K-6 teachers as they integrate inclusive activities as part of the K-6 Creative Arts syllabus. All five of the identified *musical concepts*, and the activities of performing, organising sound and listening, can be experienced, identified and developed through the integrating medium of group singing. *Please see the attachment at the end of this article for a unit of work for Early Stage 1 called [Sing and Move](#).*

The article discusses considerations and practicalities of:

- * training and working with inclusive *and* selective/auditioned groups;
- * repertoire selection for different stages and abilities;
- * conducting techniques and meaningful physical gestures;
- * working with young voices and limited vocal capabilities; and
- * articulating the group singing experience with curriculum outcomes.

First, we look at the place, purpose and benefits of group singing in the school environment - the *why* of the K-6 choir. We then explore strategies and methods for achieving confidence and effectiveness when working with a young singing group – Kodály principles and techniques (sol-fa), basic music literacy for the conductor and the choir, and how to choose appropriate songs - the *how*. The article concludes with the practical considerations of successful warm-ups, to balance and blend voices, and what to do with your hands to ensure clarity and meaning in the actual physical task of conducting. In other words, the *what*. The issue of 'tone-deafness' is also touched on, with a particularly passionate plea to *not* give up on students who appear not to be able to sing in tune.

Why Lead a K-6 Choir

Singing is fun. In most cases children sing before they speak, and children play singing games, or incorporate singing into their play, from long before they enter school.

Singing with others, in unison or in harmony, creates a team environment in which children are likely to feel safe and capable, regardless of their, or others', perception of their vocal and musical ability. Due to



the invisibility of the voice (and of music for that matter), children can participate in group singing, experiencing the joy and 'having their voice heard' without feeling conspicuous.

Every child can sing, and with encouragement and guidance, even children who initially produce a monotone or drone sound can be taught to pitch accurately (sing in tune), even if within a limited range.

Music is organised sound, and therefore it is an effective vehicle for learning pattern-related information. Songs also offer opportunities for learning about different cultures, including a child's own.

Unlike many other group activities, mobility, physique, dexterity and physical and/or developmental ability do not preclude a child from participating successfully in group singing. Every child has 'an instrument', singing is aerobic, and as with all musical activities, it triggers positive neurological activity in many parts of the brain simultaneously, including emotional, reward, language, and movement centres.

As we know, children learn through play. Being able to experiment, to take risks in a safe environment, is critical to a child's social and psychological development. Singing in a choir allows children to 'play'. They can take musical and sonic risks without making themselves vulnerable.

To co-ordinate, and fit in, with other voices, children must listen. Developing and practising critical listening skills aids learning in all learning areas and facilitates awareness of others, co-operation, social negotiation skills, and mutual respect. These are all valuable life-skills that can be encouraged through the group singing activity, particularly when led by a teacher who is confident in evincing all of the above. The next section deals with just that consideration; how to capitalise on the potential, and deliberately and purposefully utilise the activity to achieve the benefits discussed.

How to Begin

A more successful approach than "I LEAD; YOU FOLLOW", as suggested by Figure 1, is one in which the conductor demonstrates confidence, clarity, and simple and reliable gestures. Such an approach will empower the children, reassure them in their own capability, and encourage them to become confident learners and performers.



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Figure 1: a dubious list of rules? Maybe this is not the best approach.

A key to confident, accurate (well-pitched) singing is a good understanding of relative pitches - higher and lower notes, and how they relate to each other. That understanding facilitates accurate sight singing, that is the ability to pitch a melody accurately from music notation (written music sheets/whiteboard/smartboard etc.).

Kodály method

One particularly successful method of learning to differentiate pitches accurately is that which was developed by the Hungarian music educator, Zoltán Kodály, in the mid-twentieth century. Further developing 100-year-old choral training techniques developed by the Englishman, John Curwen, he instituted what has become an internationally recognised system that relies on a combination of sounds that are associated with particular pitches, and hand signals that provide a visual, physicalised identification of each note in the scale.

Kodály uses syllables to represent the notes of the scale. In tonic sol-fa, the tonic ('key', or 'home') note of any major scale is called 'Do'. The subsequent notes in the ascending scale are Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti, and (high) Do. Figures 2, 3, and 4 notate the 'moveable do' or 'tonic' sol-fa (also known as solfège) system recommended for use in any key:



Figure 2: C Major scale (all white notes on the piano keyboard) with sol-fa note names.



The tonic (Do) is moveable. That is, a Major scale can start on any note. Figure 3 shows the D Major scale using the sol-fa note names. Notice that the Do is on the note that was Re in the C Major scale.



Figure 3: D Major scale with sol-fa note names. The two #s at the beginning of the music indicate that the black notes directly to the right of each of the Fs and Cs replace the normal Fs and Cs on the piano keyboard).

The third example of tonic sol-fa (Movable Do) is the F Major Scale. Notice that the Do (starting note) was the Fa in the C Major scale. The flat sign (*b*) at the beginning of the music indicates that the black note directly to the left of each of the Bs (B flat) replaces the normal Bs on the piano keyboard.



Figure 4: F Major scale with sol-fa note names.

Higher and lower notes

To assist with learning the tonic sol-fa, and understanding the concept of higher and lower notes, hand signs are associated with the different sol-fa names and relative pitches. Note that they are specific in shape and relative position in the air (see Figure 5):



Figure 5: Sol-fa scale represented by the Curwen¹ hand signs.

As seen in Figure 5, the relative position of the hand, on the vertical plane, is critical as a visual indication of higher and lower pitches.



Song choice

Now we need to get serious about what the group is going to sing. Time for repertoire selection. As with any age group, the conductor needs to make sure that the repertoire is appealing to, and relevant for, the group. There are three principal considerations when it comes to this issue, and they are vocal range, appropriate text, and ‘singability’.

The range of the song, how high and low it goes, must not be outside the vocal capability of the singers; remember that the exercise must be designed for success. A good rule of thumb is to not go outside the range represented below in Figure 6.

While some individual children will have a greater range, including notes higher or lower (or both) than what is indicated below, the guide represents a safe zone for primary school-age cohorts. This will align with the majority of well-written repertoire.

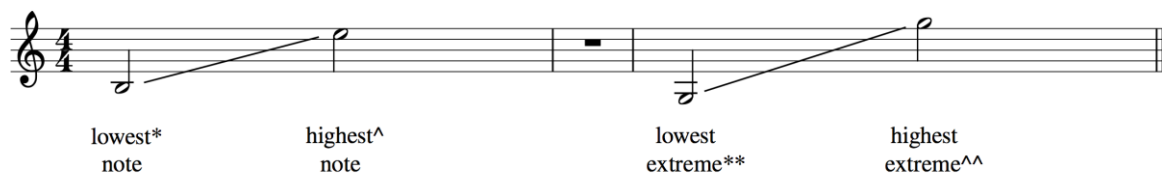


Figure 6: K-6 vocal range guide. * and ^ very safe in most cases. ** and ^^ with some caution; requires good understanding of individual children’s comfortable vocal range. This extended range would be most suitable for an auditioned choir, for which individual vocal ranges would be assessed.

Appropriate text is a simpler issue to attend to, for as K-6 teachers you will be well versed on age-appropriate literature and subject matter. If you think the subject matter is inappropriate – dealing with issues, or referring to, adult and/or culturally inappropriate themes, or simply age-irrelevant content... then it is inappropriate.

There are many, many songs that are available that avoid these pitfalls. A key message here is that if the repertoire is well written and accessible for the children, they will enjoy it. Don’t think that they will only enjoy pop songs sung by adults that deal with adult themes, just because they know them from the popular media. Children enjoy being children, and you can enrich that enjoyment with your song choice. This will be reiterated at the end of the article, and the Teachers Federation Library is developing a terrific resource of appropriate repertoire, and should be a first port of call in terms of actual songs and resource references.

By ‘singability’, I am referring to the following considerations:

- will the melody be identifiable and ‘rememberable’?;
- is the melody, (and any harmony parts if the song are in two or more parts) something you as the conductor can sing and demonstrate?;



- and is it teachable?, by which I mean will the children be able to tell when they are singing it correctly?

These are important considerations.

What to do in the Choir Session

The K-6 choir session, which typically would be between 30 minutes and 60 minutes in duration, needs to commence with a warm-up session. Five minutes or so is plenty, but it needs to take the children from the mindset of whatever has come directly before (breakfast, recess, lunch, class, sport or whatever environment that might be) to energetic, calm, focused, listening and ready to team-sing.

The warm-up is for body, mind and voice. Exercises that encourage good posture, tall and relaxed and able to breathe deeply, should be followed by vocal exercises that encourage listening and gentle singing. This should be followed by more energetic group vocalising that engages more energetically and challenges the mind. Singing games, up and down the scale using numbers, or simple sol-fa patterns using the hand gestures (and always choosing a pitch for Do), can be ideal for this purpose. Again, the [NSWTF Library](#) has suggested resources for safe and beneficial group vocal warm-ups at your disposal.

Following the warm-ups, the repertoire that you have selected (see above) will need to be conducted with clarity and with predictable, meaningful hand gestures, with most of the songs you will use being in either a 2, 3 or 4 beat pattern. The music sheets will identify either C (common time) or 4/4 (4 beats in a bar); 2/4, 2/2 or 6/8ⁱⁱ (2 beats in a bar); or 3/4 (3 beats in a bar). These symbols are called time signatures.

Below are the more common conducting beat patterns, with the conductor typically using the right hand. The crosses represent the 'bottom' or 'point' of the beat. These lines and contours show the direction and shape of the beats, were the conductor to conduct with a whiteboard marker in contact with a whiteboard. It is important to have a clear, consistent, and predictable beat.

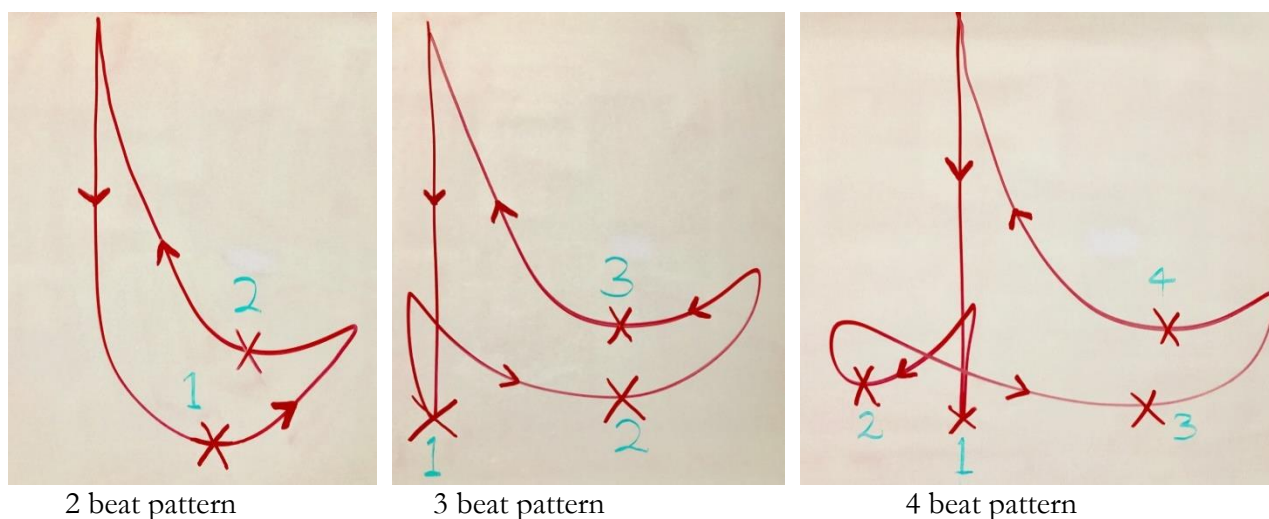


Figure 7: Common beat patterns for conductors.

Concluding Thoughts

A school choir is the most accessible format for group music making in the K-6 environment. Percussion groups and other instrumental ensembles can certainly be valid and effective, but group singing offers itself as essentially 'ready to go' in the classroom, in the school hall or wherever the group of children can gather.

While not all classroom teachers may feel sufficiently capable to teach and lead group singing, it takes little more than organisation, a little support, and the will to apply the class management and pedagogical skills every teacher possesses to make it happen.

Resources *are* available, and by considering and applying the ideas, strategies and techniques outlined in this article, non-music-specialist teachers can lead successful and enjoyable group singing programs. This is the case whether the group is auditioned or inclusive.

Also remember that by utilising the Kodály method all children will be able to sing in tune, even if it takes some time to re-awaken their innate musicality, and it is within a limited range. The author's research, and practice over more than twenty years of working with children and adult choristers, indicates that an inability to pitch accurately *is* reparable.



The NSW Teachers Federation's [Centre for Professional Learning](#) has been enthusiastic over the last few years in sourcing and hosting professional learning in the delivery of K-6 music programs, and the [NSWTF library](#) has a growing body of quality resource materials at your disposal.

Dr. Graham Sattler holds a Diploma of Operatic Art and Music Theatre, Master of Performance in Conducting, and PhD in music education. From 2001 to 2012 he was Director of the Orange Regional Conservatorium, engaged from 2007 to 2011 in the design and delivery of the Associate Degree in Music Education with Charles Sturt University. Regularly presenting at international Music Education and Arts Health conferences, he has carried out research in Australia, North America and Bolivia. Graham's performance career encompasses trombone, opera and music theatre, choral and orchestral conducting. Executive Director of Mitchell Conservatorium since 2014, and executive member of the Association of NSW Regional Conservatoriums (2003-2016), Graham has written and delivered music professional learning courses in partnership with the NSWTF's CPL for the past three years. Since 2015, he has also been engaged as casual academic with Central Queensland University.

ⁱ John Curwen (1816 – 1880) developed the hand signs, later adopted by Zoltán Kodály.

ⁱⁱ If slow, pieces in 6/8 can also be counted in 6