



From Accompanist to Choral Leader: Reflections on Three Years of ABCD Training

by James Church

When I enrolled on ABCD's Initial Course, I had only just started directing my first choir. The new post was unexpected and filled me with fear and self-doubt. Although I was an experienced accompanist, I was shy and dreaded speaking in front of groups. And I was certainly not a singer!

I felt nervous about attending the course and was afraid that I would feel out of my depth. Wouldn't everybody know more than me? It was a relief to find that the teaching, lead by two dynamic and highly skilled tutors, was tailored to the specific needs of each participant. New skills were introduced gradually and nobody was put on the spot.

It was particularly inspiring to work alongside a diverse group of people, ranging from young singers and classroom teachers, to retired musicians. We all learned from each other and quickly developed a great camaraderie.

During the course we were asked to prepare new songs to conduct between sessions. The videos of us taken throughout the course and the handy guide that we were given on how to prepare a score really helped me with that. The effort that I put in at home had a positive effect on my subsequent conducting experiences and helped me appreciate the value of thorough preparation to rehearsal success.

By the end of the course I had gained much more confidence as a choral leader. I had learned many things, including multiple approaches to teaching songs and warming up voices, the advantages of demonstrating rather than explaining to my singers, and how to make my conducting gestures clearer and more effective. However, the biggest revelation for me personally was realising the connection between gesture, breath, and singing quality.

The sense of achievement I felt after the Initial Course motivated me to move on to the Emerging and Progressive courses. The musical and technical challenges from these courses were more compelling and we were given extra podium time to explore the music in greater detail. The tutors also suggested a number of useful books, including Brock McElheran's *Conducting Technique*, and Brenda Smith & Robert T. Sataloff's *Choral Pedagogy*, that really enhanced my understanding.

Thanks to the techniques that I learned on all three courses, the quality of my choir's singing has improved considerably. Because of this noticeable improvement, my singers feel more confident, they have much higher aspirations, and their performances are starting to sound more polished and spirited.

The courses have also introduced me to some beautiful pieces by a range of composers, such as John Dowland, Charles Wood, Sarah Quartel, and Will Todd. Some of these pieces have become exciting additions to my choir's repertoire.

Perhaps the most valuable change that I have made to my rehearsal process is to try and anticipate difficulties well in advance. I often turn these difficulties into exercises or address them in warmups. It's amazing how quickly longstanding problems can be overcome when incorporated into short exercises. This has had the added benefits of boosting my singer's morale and saving precious rehearsal time.

When I began the Initial course I had no idea that leadership training would have such a positive effect on my skills and confidence. I am now grateful to be in a position where I can support my singers much more effectively. Another unexpected benefit of the training has been the support I've received from the new friends that I have made on the courses.

I am now eager to develop my skills even further and hope to progress to the Advanced course next year. What a wonderful gift to look forward to!