

## How to run a Young Voices Festival

Leah Perona-Wright explains how you can use the RSCM Young Voices Festivals to encourage young singers.



RSCM Young Voices Festival at King's College School, Wimbledon in October 2007

'We don't have many young singers left in our choir' or 'The children don't produce much sound – they just switch off and rely on the adult singers'. These are common complaints I hear from worried choirtrainers. Although all choirs are understandably concerned with how to recruit new singers, an equally pressing issue is how to *keep* our young singers.

There are so many demands on the time of young people today with their school work plus a multitude of clubs and extra-curricular activities: sports, orchestras, music lessons, dance classes, while at home there are computer games, films to watch and friends to see. Competing with so many other activities, we need to keep the young people in our church choirs engaged and inspired, and develop their love of singing. If your current singers enjoy being part of the choir, they will be ambassadors for the group and do much of your recruiting work for you, bringing their friends as new members. And of course, by encouraging the young singers of today, we are helping to secure the next generation of adult singers.

One way that encourages young singers in a choir is to foster a sense of identity as a 'youth choir'. It can be helpful to arrange some rehearsal time with the children without the adults there – perhaps for 15 to 20 minutes at the start of your weekly practice. This will give them the space to begin developing their confidence as a group and for you to reinforce how important is the contribution of young singers to the choir. Some choirs have found it very successful to have an additional practice for their young singers on a different night.

At my home church in Ashted this has even resulted in the creation of a separate youth choir run alongside our mixed parish choir of children and adults. We started a separate weekly rehearsal for the children because we had reached a point of having only five children left in the parish choir. The additional rehearsal helped give the children a strong sense of identity as our 'youth choir' and has allowed extra time to introduce fun new repertoire, consolidate our Voice for Life ribbon training, foster good relationships with the children, and work towards special performances given by our youth choir only. Initially this consisted of singing an anthem during a service, with the adults there to sing the remainder of the service with them. As their confidence grew, this developed to performances of mini-musicals (e.g. on nativity or Easter themes), concerts, and festival services. The use of festival services has been particularly valuable in helping increase the engagement and focus of the children who sing in our main parish choir. Some of our young people now read regularly at the weekly Sunday services and participate in other parts of the service such as leading the prayers or taking up the offertory. The number of singers in our youth choir (meeting once a week for rehearsal and singing for occasional services and other performances) currently stands at 40, and of those, 10 currently sing at our weekly Sunday services with the main parish choir.

### Young Voices Festival Services

The RSCM Voice for Life programme produces a number of musical resources to help the inspiration and encouragement of young choral singers. This includes its range of Young Voices Festival Services. These services are compiled to encourage maximum participation from young people, and to develop their understanding of the theme of the service (e.g. searching for peace, caring for the environment, freedom from slavery). The readings include excerpts from the Bible, poems and other prose, the music is wide ranging in style, the prayers and responsories are accessible and there are accompanying quiz sheets on each theme.

As part of the Voice for Life outreach programme, young people from different schools and churches are invited to join together under expert direction to perform a Young Voices Festival Service on an annual basis. They take place in fabulous venues across the UK and offer an inspiring musical and spiritual experience for all participants. However, each festival service has also been designed to be used locally and individual musical and liturgical items from them can be introduced into services, concert programmes or assemblies throughout the year. With my parish choir we have been using the annually produced RSCM Young Voices Festival Service as an opportunity for the youth choir to lead a special service in our church. I know of a number of other parish choirs who do the same. Other parish choirs and school choirs dip into the service and use individual

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musical and liturgical items in their services and assemblies. RSCM Area committees are also beginning to use the services as a basis for putting on their own Young Voices event.

## Put on your own Young Voices Festival

Why not think about putting on a Young Voices Festival Service in your church or school? If you wanted to think bigger and encourage other local young choirs in their music making, why not host a Young Voices Festival and invite other choirs to join you? The service is already compiled – all you need to do is decide on your venue, fix the personnel and invite choirs to come.

For those who are interested in putting on a Young Voices Festival Service, some tips follow here on how to go about it. Good luck! I hope you find this an effective way of inspiring and encouraging the young singers in your choir or area. For further advice on the resources available, the practicalities of hosting an event, or to let me know how you get on, you can email [voiceforlife@rscm.com](mailto:voiceforlife@rscm.com)

## The Music and the Order of Service

Decide which of the RSCM Young Voices Festival Services you wish to use. All singers need to arrive with their own copy of the music and should be as confident as possible with the content. If you are interested in our most recent services, *Search for peace* (2008) or *How can I keep from singing?* (2007), each choir needs one copy of the photocopiable Voice for Life Songbook as all the musical items are taken from that book – photocopies of the relevant items can be made for the singers. Each choir will also need a copy of the relevant CD ROM containing the order of service (hymns, readings, prayers, etc., with which the singers join in). The order of service also needs copying for the congregation.

For any other services, e.g. *Road to freedom*, *Care for the world*, *Bread for the hungry*, choirs need to purchase a set of the appropriate service books for their singers. Each book contains all the musical items, readings, and prayers. CD ROMs are available for each service containing the order of service to be printed for the congregation, recordings of all of the musical items, and piano accompaniments for rehearsal purposes.

## Staff

To run a Young Voices Festival you will need:

- ▶ a director
- ▶ an accompanist (piano or organ)
- ▶ a chaplain
- ▶ a steward

If you are running this in your own church, a steward is only needed to hand out orders of service to the congregation as they arrive. If however, you are hosting a Young Voices Festival event to which you are inviting various choirs, your steward will have greater responsibilities (see below).

## Logistics

You will need:

- ▶ a venue suited to conducting rehearsals and service
- ▶ either a piano or organ (or both)
- ▶ a designated area for singers to leave belongings
- ▶ an area for singers to eat their tea during the afternoon break

## Preparation

Make sure:

- ▶ you allocate the readings and prayers to singers before the event
- ▶ the chaplain, accompanist and director have orders of service in advance
- ▶ you have copies of the order of service for the congregation
- ▶ you have decided what the dress code is (e.g. robes, or school/choir uniform, or 'smart black') and inform the singers

You will need to confirm a schedule for the event. If you are running the service in your own church or school with your own choir then you will be well rehearsed already and will not need a long rehearsal prior to the service. If you are running an event with several choirs, then the following is a suggested schedule:

- ▶ 1.30pm – arrival and seating
- ▶ 2.00pm – rehearsal
- ▶ 4.00pm – break for tea; readers rehearse
- ▶ 5.00pm – service
- ▶ 5.45pm – depart

## On the day

For events with several choirs attending, the steward should be on hand to answer queries as people arrive and direct singers to their seats. If the festival director is not from the host venue, at the start of the rehearsal someone such as the steward should give a welcome and introduction before handing over to the director.

The rehearsal should start with a short warm-up to encourage good posture, breathing and vocal production. At the end of the rehearsal, the chaplain should be available to rehearse any spoken responses. When the singers break for tea, the chaplain should then rehearse the readings in situ.

It is suggested that there is no procession at the start or end of the service. The steward should ask singers to move into their places five minutes before the start, hand copies of the order of service to the congregation as they arrive and co-ordinate a retiring collection.

◆ Leah Perona-Wright is director of the RSCM Voice for Life programme. In addition to her work for the RSCM, she is a professional singer, director of the Youth Choirs at her church in Ashted, and teaches singing. She also directs and sings with the upper voices group *Vox Angelica*. Leah has a passion for singing and enabling others to enjoy using their voices with confidence

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Young Voices Festival Services available from RSCM:

- ▶ *Search for peace* (The search for peace in our troubled world)
- ▶ *How can I keep from singing?* (A celebration of music and singing)
- ▶ *Road to freedom* (Slavery to liberation, and a celebration of African and Gospel music)
- ▶ *Care for the world* (A celebration of creation, and a look at environmental problems today)
- ▶ *Bread for the hungry* (Poverty, hunger, harvest)