



# CULTURE IN THE REHEARSAL ROOM

**I**magine that you are about to embark on a new venture in liturgical music ministry. For years, the parish multicultural celebrations have included the various ethnic choirs and you (part of the English-speaking and dominant “American” culture) have coordinated the rotating acts of the various choirs: the “American” choir sings the opening song, the Hispanic choir sings a Spanish Gloria, the Filipino choir sings the Alleluia, and this ping-pong rotation continues throughout the Mass. This approach was a good beginning—it has informed the parishioners of the multilingual repertoire in the community and has offered the various choirs a place within the celebration—but the time has come to progress to another level of interaction.

You wish to bring the choirs together in one room to learn some common refrains, maybe sing some pieces bilingually, perhaps even learn some short acclamations in each other’s languages. Rather than launching into linguistic guidelines for multicultural celebrations, you’ll want to focus on the practical aspects of having a combined choir rehearsal. The main premise is this: choirs from various cultures are not the same. I do not refer to the obvious musical and language differences. What happens in the rehearsal room is an expression of different worldviews and subconscious values and beliefs. The key to a successful intercultural choir is to consider the culture of the rehearsal room.

Start with a simple exercise. Put this magazine down and write a list of what your “American” choir rehearsal is like. Then continue reading and compare what you wrote to what follows. You might have listed some of the same characteristics, you might have new ones, but the first step is to state your own cultural vision of a normative choir rehearsal.

It would also be useful to visit the other choirs in your parish, or even at a nearby parish. Sit in on their rehearsals to just watch and learn. If someone from that choir were asked to describe their rehearsal, would their descriptions be similar to what you listed?

Here is a starter list of some areas to consider when bringing people together from various cultural groups.

## WHO IS IN THE ROOM AND HOW DO THEY RELATE TO EACH OTHER?

In describing your choir rehearsal, how did you describe the participants? As someone with a Western music education, I would probably list people by their vocal range and count how many were in each section. Other volunteer church choirs are often based on family relations. Especially in the Filipino and Hispanic communities, at least 30% or more of the people in that room are related to each other. They might describe the group by who belongs to what extended family. Because the rehearsal is more of a family affair, sometimes people attend who are not members of the music group. They accompany the singers as babysitters, because they drove them to church, or just to spend time with the group for purely social reasons. So before bringing the choirs together, be aware that the self-identity of the choir may differ. While one group will only allow members to enter the room after they have passed a formal audition, another will be accompanied by relatives, friends, and others who may have no formal role in the choir.

Another aspect to observe is how genders are mixed or separated during the rehearsal. Do the singers separate into rows? Gather in a circle? Sing while standing, seated on chairs, or cross-legged on the floor? When the groups all come together, who will decide what the norm for the multiethnic choir will be? What will happen to choir members when someone from another choir occupies their regular seat?

## WHAT IS THE FLOW OF THE EVENING?

When describing your choir rehearsal, did you list prayer time and food? Who leads the prayer? Who brings the snacks, and are these shared before, in the

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middle, or after the music rehearsal? More importantly, could you give reasons why your group rehearses on that particular night of the week?

In addition to having to work with what spaces are available, some groups prefer a Friday or Saturday night rehearsal because weekend nights do not interfere with work or school the next day. Others may see a Tuesday or Wednesday night as the preferred rehearsal night to avoid conflicts with personal plans on the weekends. Perhaps in other cultures, the choir rehearsal is the time to be with relatives and friends, so a Friday or Saturday night is not seen as impinging on personal recreation time. Rehearsal times can be closely tied to culture.

For many cultures, food is a large component and gatherings may center around it. For a Tongan or Samoan choir, rehearsal often begins with extensive socializing and eating, and it eventually segues into a music practice. For some cultures, to meet without food present is unthinkable. Being aware of the various traditions of each choir before bringing them together allows for greater sensitivity in arranging a common rehearsal night, designating some common prayer leaders and familiar prayer styles, and incorporating food as vehicle for group interaction and conversation.

### HOW IS MUSIC APPROACHED IN THIS TRADITION?

Liturgical choirs have numerous ways of learning music. Singers might be given a choral arrangement with SATB parts, or they might hold a paper with a single melody line. Other groups, especially in some African-American traditions, might work from a lead sheet, but the director usually only uses this as a blueprint for extensive improvisation of the notes. Some groups may not pass out any hymnals, octavos, or pieces of paper; all the music is learned by rote. Presenting music to singers in a style that is familiar to them will enable them to participate fully in the rehearsal.

Can the common repertoire be prepared in a style that the singers and instrumentalists from other traditions can manage and understand? One of the greatest challenges is handing the classically trained keyboardist a piece of paper that has only lyrics (in a foreign language!) and chords (maybe a sol-fa system) and no notes on the page. Another challenge is teaching regulated vocal entrances to those who have no experience being directed under someone who has been trained in Western choral conducting. Mini-rehearsals with only instrumentalists or some ethnic group sectionals might be best to prepare everyone for the full group rehearsal.

### CROSS-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS

After observing the other ethnic choirs in the parish, you'll probably realize that your style of running a choir rehearsal is just one culturally influenced approach. More important than the food, sheet music, and membership is acknowledging the cross-cultural perceptions that enter the rehearsal room along with the singers. For example, many Latino singers do not read music and may be very intimidated sitting next to people willing to share their SATB arrangements. Many ethnic groups are not funded by the parish budget and may have poorly photocopied materials. How are they likely to feel about themselves when they see the professionally engraved and quality-printed octavos in the hands of the "American" singers? And how will newcomers still mastering English feel about their poor accent or limited vocabulary?

On the opposite side of the room, some "Americans" underrate themselves, believing they have no culture. They admire the strong devotional expression or spirited musical rendition of other ethnicities and might view their own musical style as boring. Some "American" accompanists who cannot play by ear or from chord charts might be intimidated by the improvisational skills of the guitarist or keyboardist from the other choir.

The role of the choir director is to establish an atmosphere of mutual reciprocity in the room. All have something to offer, and all have something to learn. We come together for the worship of God and building up of the Kingdom. To help set the mood, the joint rehearsal needs to have opportunities for dialogue, not just music. As one ethnic group teaches another a particular piece, allow all to hear the cultural imprint of that song: What stories, emotions, or memories are associated with that hymn? Share with each other the fuller context of the music, not just a translation and how to pronounce the words.

### A WONDROUS OPPORTUNITY

A multiethnic choir rehearsal requires immense preparation. First, one must explore the various cultural factors that affect the rehearsal. The points listed here are not exhaustive; your situation is unique and must be researched. Second, we all need to admit that maybe everything we learned and experienced in the past may now hinder making music with others.

The intercultural choir rehearsal is going to stretch everyone and make everyone a little uncomfortable, but it will also provide an opportunity to model how the Gospel calls us into one body of Christ. Maybe we are just practicing for what the choir rehearsal will be like in heaven, where "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9) will join in the eternal praise of God. What a privilege and wondrous opportunity it is to enlist in this new venture.

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