



Designing the Community Choir Experience: Trust, Structure, and Singer Engagement in Volunteer Ensembles

by Matt Hill

Introduction: Moving Beyond Repertoire

In the choral profession, conversations about ensemble success frequently focus on repertoire selection, interpretive nuance, and the polished final performance. These aspects remain essential. Repertoire is, of course, the vehicle through which singers encounter artistry. However, the aspects mentioned above often overshadow a more foundational truth: the long-term vitality of a community choir depends far less on *what* we sing than on *how* we design the entire singer experience around human needs rather than musical demands alone.

I have spent more than twenty years balancing roles as a university choral educator, music minister, and community choir leader. In January 2007, I founded Sing Omaha, a nonprofit choral organization in Nebraska. Over the last twenty years, Sing Omaha has grown from a single adult ensemble into a vibrant ecosystem of nine choirs serving more than five hundred musicians annually across the Omaha area—including children, youth, and adult choristers, summer camp participants, and private lesson students. This growth is the direct result of years of intentional design that

placed the singer experience at the center of every decision, from the first rehearsal announcement to the final curtain call.

My work has also included significant experience in music ministry—leading volunteer (mostly adult) singers in worship settings that share many of the same dynamics as community choirs: intrinsic motivation, diverse musical backgrounds, limited rehearsal time, and high expectations for both artistic integrity and relational warmth. These parallel experiences across two decades have reinforced the consistent lesson that singers return and audiences grow when the experience feels thoughtfully designed.

Community choir participants choose to attend. They arrive after demanding workdays and family responsibilities, carrying varied musical backgrounds, and seeking both artistic fulfillment and meaningful human connection. When singers feel valued as whole people rather than simply as voices, they invest more deeply and stay longer.

Hilary Apfelstadt has long emphasized that rehearsals must “offer a logical sequence of strategies.”¹ Colin Durrant describes choral singing as a fundamental-

ly social activity, one shaped by the relationships and shared intention among singers.² Malcolm Knowles's andragogy theory further illuminates why adult learners thrive when experiences feel relevant, autonomous, and personally significant.³ At Sing Omaha, our guiding ethos is "Passionate Musicianship, Artistic Excellence, People First"—a triumvirate of virtues we aspire to daily.

In a previous *Choral Journal* article (November/December 2023), I focused primarily on rehearsal mechanics.⁴ This present article builds outward into a more comprehensive framework: sustainable community choir success rests on three interdependent pillars—trust, structural clarity, and purposeful engagement.

The timing feels especially meaningful as Sing Omaha marks its twentieth anniversary in 2026. Chorus America's *The Chorus Impact Study: Singing for a Lifetime* (2019) reported that more than 54 million Americans sing in choruses—an increase from 14% of the population in 2008 to 17% in 2019—yet traditional school and church ensembles continue to face ongoing participation challenges.⁵ Post-pandemic realities, hybrid expectations, retention pressures, and an aging yet socially hungry population have heightened the need for intentional design. Community choirs, alongside music ministry contexts, serve as vital engines for lifelong singing, delivering documented benefits including reduced loneliness (73% of singers reported feeling less alone), stronger social skills, greater optimism and resilience, and markedly improved quality-of-life measures—particularly for adults sixty-five years or older, where 69% rated their quality of life as "very good" compared to just 22% in the general population.⁶

By centering trust, structure, and purpose, we create environments where ordinary people willingly invest their time, energy, and voices in something larger than themselves. These benefits are not abstract; they manifest in the smiles on the faces of singers who tell us, "Rehearsal is the highlight of my week."

The Community Choir as a Distinct Ecosystem

Community choirs occupy one of the most complex leadership environments in the choral field. Unlike uni-

versity or school ensembles, they cannot rely on grades, credit, or degree requirements to compel attendance. Unlike professional groups, they lack contracts, stipends, or uniformly advanced training. Music ministry settings often mirror this hybrid reality, drawing volunteer adult singers who balance full lives with a desire for meaningful musical and spiritual contribution.

Instead, these ensembles thrive in a space defined by four key characteristics:

- Voluntary participation driven by intrinsic motivation.
- Highly diverse musical backgrounds and life experiences.
- Limited rehearsal time.
- Elevated expectations for both artistic excellence and relational warmth.

Over the years, I have watched college students, professionals, and empty nesters discover (or rediscover) their voices in an atmosphere that respects their busy lives. Adults respond powerfully when structures honor their time while fostering both artistic and communal bonds.

At Sing Omaha, these dynamics have played out across nearly two decades of growth. What began with a single adult choir has expanded into a multi-generational program with clear pathways. Over nineteen seasons, we have observed strong correlations:

- Retention rates correlate more strongly with rehearsal experience quality than with repertoire difficulty or "wow factor."
- Singer feedback indicates high satisfaction when expectations, schedules, and feedback systems feel transparent and consistent.
- Audience attendance has grown steadily when concerts emphasize shared identity and community storytelling rather than isolated programming choices.

These observations reinforce the central premise:

ensemble design—not repertoire selection alone—drives long-term sustainability and impact. These patterns have proven resilient across changing seasons, programming, and external challenges, including the profound disruptions of the pandemic years from which we emerged stronger in ensemble membership, concert attendance, and community impact.

Pillar I: Trust as the Primary Rehearsal Currency

Choral singing is an inherently vulnerable act. The voice is internal, deeply personal, and is exposed the moment sound emerges. In volunteer community or church settings where singers owe the conductor nothing beyond their presence, trust becomes the central currency of the rehearsal room. Without it, even the most brilliant repertoire and efficient techniques yield limited results. Trust manifests in three interrelated dimensions, each of which calls for a corresponding rehearsal practice:

- Confidence that the conductor arrives thoroughly prepared and respects singers' time.
- Psychological safety that encourages musical risk-taking rather than perfectionism.
- Assurance that feedback is constructive, specific, and delivered with care.

The ensemble tone opens when singers feel supported; when they feel judged or exposed, it tightens. When volunteer singers gather weekly not for grades or pay but for a shared sense of meaning, the quality of trust in the room is immediately felt. Technical progress accelerates dramatically once trust is firmly established—both between the conductor and the ensemble, and within the singing community itself.

Practical Applications

Each of the following practices targets one dimension of trust directly—preparation, safety, and feedback—and all three have been refined through parallel work in community choir and music ministry settings.

1. Predictable Rehearsal Design. Every rehearsal follows a consistent, reliable arc: for example, 5–10 minutes of physical and vocal activation followed by purposeful work through repertoire with a balance of attention to challenging material and opportunities to sing well through better-prepared or more accessible passages. The focus is always on striving to achieve rehearsal balance devoted to ensemble integration and musical flow. This structure echoes Apfelstadt's call for purposeful sequencing⁷ while accommodating adult attention spans and energy levels after full workdays or ministry commitments.

This consistent arc scales naturally for the 90- or 120-minute rehearsals more typical of adult community choirs: the physical/vocal activation and targeted skill/section blocks remain brief and focused, while the ensemble-integration segment expands proportionally to allow deeper musical flow without sacrificing efficiency or singer energy. In practice, this means that even on weeks when energy is low after a long workday, singers know exactly what to expect and can settle in quickly. See Table 1 on the next page for a sample rehearsal arc.

2. Collaborative Language and Tone. Small shifts in wording create large differences in safety. Instead of “That vowel is incorrect,” try, “Let's unify this vowel. Listen for the warmth and roundness we're building together.” These invitations foster ownership and reduce defensiveness. Over time I have seen these subtle linguistic choices transform hesitant singers into active participants who offer ideas and corrections to one another and to me.

3. Demonstrated Preparation and Score Mastery. Timothy Mount's guidance on the first rehearsal is especially relevant for volunteer ensembles: conductors must know the score intimately before singers arrive.⁸ Inefficient pacing signals disregard for limited time; efficiency in rehearsal is itself a profound form of respect. As David Brunner has observed, “most of the conductor's work is actually done behind the scenes,” and the rehearsal hour itself depends on whether that

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preparation “uses the available time in the most productive manner.”⁹

These three practices are especially powerful for singers with highly diverse musical backgrounds: the returning adult who has not read music in decades,

the gifted amateur who plays piano but struggles with sight-singing, the recent high school or college graduate eager to continue high-level music making, or the lifelong church singer whose primary training has been aural rather than notational.

Trust lowers the fear of “being wrong,” structural

Table 1. Sample 120-Minute Rehearsal Arc

Time	Piece	Special Instructions
7:00	Welcome and Vocalizes	
7:05		Teach by rote
7:10		Begin memorization right away
7:15		Review the A section rhythms on "doh"
7:20		Review pitches from mm. 22 – 33 on "toom"
7:25		Tease pitches mm. 11 – 21
7:30	Echo	Pitches mm. 1 – 17 on 'dote' on all choir 1
7:40		Pitches mm. 18 – end
7:55	Lift Thine Eyes	Remind tone color filter, run on text
8:00	Break	
8:10	Announcements	
8:15	Sound the Trumpet	long-line phrases - consistent tone color
8:20		Start soft, steady crescendo through long tones
8:30	Widmung	Pitches all the way through on 'loh'
8:35		Soprano 1s only on the top of 3-part mm 37-38
8:45	Hotaru koi	
8:50		Run through twice on "doh," once slowly, once at near tempo
9:00	Dismiss	

clarity provides explicit pathways (such as optional notation tutorials or section-leader mentoring), and purposeful engagement connects every singer's contribution to the ensemble's larger story. When adult learners see that their varied life experiences are assets rather than deficits, technical progress accelerates and retention soars—exactly as Malcolm Knowles's andragogy principles predict.¹⁰

When trust is present, singers take risks that elevate the entire ensemble. Hesitant volunteers will blossom into confident contributors once they feel genuinely supported.

Pillar II: Structural Clarity and Singer Buy-In

While trust operates at the interpersonal and emotional level, structural clarity functions at the organizational and systemic level. Clear structure answers the three silent questions every volunteer singer carries: *What is expected of me? How do I succeed here? What does sustained participation look like?*

Without clarity, even high-trust environments can erode under confusion or perceived unfairness. In my experience, the absence of a clear structure is one of the quickest ways to lose even the most dedicated participants. Volunteer singers thrive when structures feel fair, predictable, and respectful of their lives outside of choir.

Each of the three silent questions above can have a structural answer, and each has a music ministry parallel:

- 1. Visible Ensemble Pathways** (What does sustained participation look like?): A multi-level structure can create a natural trajectory, encouraging long-term investment from singers and audiences alike. Singers can literally see their journey from childhood into adulthood, creating a sense of progression and belonging.
- 2. Explicit and Consistent Expectations** (What is expected of me?): Attendance policies, preparation guidelines, and communication protocols should be outlined in a concise singer handbook

and reinforced consistently. Consistency matters as much as clarity: policies applied unevenly are almost as corrosive to trust as policies that are never communicated at all.

- 3. Administrative Simplicity** (How do I succeed here?): Streamlined online tools (e.g., the TeacherZone app) minimize logistical friction, allowing singers and staff to focus on artistry and relationship building rather than administrative confusion.

Structural clarity does not constrain a community choir—it liberates it.

Pillar III: Engagement Through Purpose

Participation opens the door; purpose keeps singers returning. Purpose crystallizes when singers understand why the music matters, what their unique role is within the ensemble, and what larger impact their collective work has on the communities they serve. Singers must feel connected to the expressive intent of the music. In community and ministry settings, that connection must extend beyond the notes on the page to the ensemble's broader identity and community role.

Aligning Artistic Vision with Community Engagement

While purpose begins within the ensemble, it must ultimately extend beyond the rehearsal room. For community choirs in particular, artistic success is inseparable from audience engagement. Unlike school or church ensembles, which operate within institutional or liturgical frameworks, most community choirs depend on ticket revenue, donor support, and sustained public interest as core components of their economic model. As a result, season planning must account not only for artistic integrity but also for audience accessibility, thematic clarity, and marketability. This reality does not diminish artistry, but it does reframe it. The question is not whether to prioritize artistic or audience considerations but how to align them in a way that strengthens both.

Designing with the Audience in Mind

Effective community choir programming begins with a simple but often overlooked question: Why would someone choose to attend this concert?

In my work with Sing Omaha and in similar community-based settings, audience engagement has proven most consistent when programming reflects three interrelated principles:

1. *Clarity of Theme*: Concerts framed around a clear, compelling idea provide an entry point for audiences who may not initially connect with repertoire alone. Titles and themes should communicate immediately without requiring specialized musical knowledge. Graphic design for social media promotion and concert programs is also both enhanced and simplified by a unified theme.
2. *Emotional Accessibility*: Programs that balance depth with approachability invite a broader audience base. This often includes repertoire that is text-driven, narratively cohesive, or culturally familiar, even when presented alongside more complex works.
3. *Communicability*: If singers can easily explain the concert's purpose to a friend or colleague, the program is more likely to generate organic audience growth. In this sense, singers themselves become the most effective marketing agents.

These principles align closely with Colin Durrant's assertion that choral singing is fundamentally a social activity.¹¹ The concert, then, is not simply a performance. A concert is a shared experience between ensemble and community.

Three High-Engagement Community Choir Concert Models

Community choir organizations often find sustained audience growth by programming within one (or more) of the following high-engagement concert types:

1. Thematic/Narrative Programming

Concerts built around a unifying idea or emotional arc (e.g., Choral Canvases [music inspired by visual art], The Poet Sings [secular texts by famous poets], Music in the Reeds [woodwind accompa-

nied]). A unifying theme provides continuity for the audience and a sense of shared purpose for multi-choir organizations.

2. Popular/Genre-Based Programming

Concerts centered on recognizable styles, eras, or cultural touchpoints (e.g., Yacht Rock Party, Sing Omaha Loves the 90s, Icons, One-Hit Wonders). These programs offer immediate accessibility and are particularly effective for audience expansion and first-time attendees. Venue matters: a club with a stage for a band may be more suitable for a pop/rock concert than a church, school, or community center.

3. Collaborative/Event-Based Programming

Concerts defined by partnership or scale (e.g., choir with orchestra, guest artists, interdisciplinary collaborations, commissions/premieres). These events often serve as anchor performances within a season, creating heightened visibility and artistic ambition.

Most successful seasons include a strategic balance of these models, allowing organizations to engage diverse audiences while maintaining artistic variety and depth.

Case-Based Observations from Practice

Shifts toward audience-centered thematic programming will likely correspond with measurable increases in attendance and engagement. More traditional concert offerings will benefit from this approach. Rather than presenting repertoire as a collection of individual works, framing concerts as unified artistic experiences—built around ideas such as reflection, celebration, or a well-conceptualized theme—will strengthen both audience connection and singer investment. Importantly, these gains are not the result of simplifying or even necessarily unifying repertoire, but of *contextualizing it more effectively*.

Balancing Artistic Integrity and Market Reality

For conductors trained primarily in academic or sacred traditions, the integration of audience-centered planning can feel like a departure from established

norms. However, it is more accurately understood as an expansion of the conductor's role. In community settings, the conductor functions not only as a musical leader but also as a curator of experiences and, to some extent, a steward of organizational sustainability. Thoughtful season design acknowledges that:

1. Programs must sustain singer engagement *and* audience interest.
2. Concerts must function as both artistic events *and* community gatherings.
3. Repertoire selection operates within a broader ecosystem that includes marketing, storytelling, and audience expectation.

When these elements align, the result is amplification: audiences grow, singers feel increased ownership, and the ensemble's artistic impact expands.

Practical Considerations for Season Planning

Conductors seeking to integrate audience-centered design into their work might begin with the following questions:

1. **Theme Development:** Does each concert have a clear, communicable idea that can be articulated in one sentence?
2. **Audience Entry Point:** What elements of this program invite first-time listeners into the experience?
3. **Singer Advocacy:** Can ensemble members easily describe and promote this concert to others?
4. **Program Arc:** Does the full season offer variety in tone, style, and accessibility to sustain long-term audience engagement?
5. **Alignment with Mission:** Do the selected themes reinforce the ensemble's identity and values?

These questions do not replace traditional considerations of balance, difficulty, and stylistic breadth. They

do, however, extend them into a broader framework of sustainability and community impact.

Sing Omaha Examples

1. **Programmatic Identity:** Concerts are framed as cohesive artistic journeys with thematic unity and community storytelling in multi-ensemble performance.
2. **Audience and Community Engagement:** Our pop concert attendance increased from 105 attendees in 2017 to 381 in early 2026 through intentional strategies and partnerships. This growth was not the result of flashy marketing; it stemmed from singers who felt so connected to the series' place in our mission that they became its most effective ambassadors.
3. **Shared Traditions:** Annual rituals, including our "Christmas Fanfare" featuring all nine choirs with professional brass and percussion, and milestone celebrations including anniversary events, give singers ownership and build belonging.

Singers have become enthusiastic advocates, recruiting others because they are invested in the organization's story—patterns I have also observed in music ministry volunteer groups over the years. When a singer tells a friend, "You have to come sing with us," that invitation carries far more weight than any brochure or social media ad. The three-pillar framework described in this article evolved through reflection across nineteen seasons at Sing Omaha. While the early years emphasized repertoire variety, challenge, and a desire to preserve continuity from singers' previous high school and/or collegiate experiences, later reviews revealed the greater power of process and design. Our post-pandemic returns highlighted purpose as a reconnection tool. After the return to in-person singing in 2021-2022, purpose-driven programming around themes of resilience and community healing proved especially powerful. These lessons show the pillars as interdependent and mutually reinforcing. My university teaching has also been enriched by these real-world insights.

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Practical Tools and Self-Assessment

Conductors can apply this framework immediately through reflective practice and simple tools. See Table 2 for a Community Choir Design Rubric based on the three-pillar framework.

Core Self-Assessment Questions

1. Trust: Do singers display confident tone and willingness to experiment?
2. Structure: Are expectations clear and consistently applied?
3. Purpose: Do singers articulate why the work matters and recruit others?

Five-Question End-of-Semester Singer Feedback Survey

(Anonymous, 5-point Likert scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. I feel psychologically safe to take musical risks in rehearsal.
2. Rehearsal structure and expectations are clear and respectful of my time.
3. I understand how my contribution fits into the ensemble's larger purpose and community impact.

4. The conductor demonstrates thorough preparation and constructive feedback.
5. I would recommend this choir to a friend (and why/why not optional open comment).

Five Red Flags of Weak Design

1. Rehearsals frequently run over or feel disorganized.
2. Singer questions about policy or expectations go unanswered for more than one rehearsal cycle.
3. Feedback is consistently vague or public/critical rather than specific and supportive.
4. No visible long-term pathways or milestone celebrations exist.
5. Singers stop recruiting friends or begin missing rehearsals without explanation.

Implications for the Field and for ACDA

Community choirs stand at the center of choral music's future in the United States. ACDA is uniquely positioned to support community choir conductors in this work through its long-standing focus on musicianship and repertoire; and with growing attention to organizational leadership, adult pedagogy, and culture-building.

Table 2. Community Choir Design Rubric (Simple 1–5 scale for each pillar; conductors may complete quarterly)

Pillar	1 (Weak)	3 (Developing)	5 (Strong)
Trust	Singers appear guarded; tone is restricted	Occasional risk-taking; some hesitation	Confident tone; frequent musical experimentation
Structural Clarity	Expectations unclear or inconsistently applied	Most policies clear but occasional confusion	Handbook, pathways, and communication are transparent and predictable
Purposeful Engagement	Singers attend but do not advocate	Growing ownership; limited recruitment	Singers articulate ensemble "why" and actively recruit others

Across the association, there are a variety of ways this conversation might continue to develop. At the national, regional, and state levels, conductors are already exploring questions of singer engagement, retention, and ensemble design through conference sessions, reading sessions, and collegial exchange. Continued attention to these areas—whether through interest sessions, informal mentorship, or the sharing of field-based practices—has the potential to further equip conductors working in volunteer, limited-rehearsal settings.

Within the National Repertoire & Resources Committee, particularly in areas related to Lifelong Choirs, there is meaningful opportunity to continue elevating practical frameworks that connect musical excellence with sustainable ensemble design. In many cases, the most effective contributions may be those that remain adaptable, scalable, and grounded in real-world application—offering conductors tools they can shape to fit the needs of their own communities. Ultimately, the sustainability and growth of our art form will depend on our ability to design experiences that foster trust, provide structural clarity, and ignite genuine purpose.

If we accept that people—not repertoire—are the true defining factor in community choir success, then the conductor's role expands into something both more complex and more deeply rewarding. We move beyond being mere preparers of music to intentional designers of human experience.

Chorus America's 2009 *Chorus Impact Study* documented that 54% of adult singers in their survey participated in community choirs compared with 38% in church choirs.¹² Comparable comparison data was not collected in the 2019 study, but the broader landscape—patterns of religious disaffiliation, post-pandemic volunteer fatigue, and the changing shape of adult civic life—suggests that community choirs continue to play an outsized role in adult lifelong singing. Conductor training must evolve accordingly to meet the needs of adult singers in limited-rehearsal environments.

We are not simply teaching notes or polishing music for public performance. We are crafting spaces where people feel safe enough to be vulnerable, clear enough about the ensemble's purpose and their role in it to invest fully, and inspired enough to give their voices—literally and figuratively—to something larger than themselves.

Final Thought

We began with a simple reframing: that what we sing matters far less than *how we design the experience around the singing*. When we design for people first, artistic excellence follows—not as a goal, but as a natural outcome. **C**

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NOTES

- ¹ Hilary Apfelstadt, "Taking Our Rehearsal Temperature," *Choral Journal* 55, no. 10 (May 2015): 65–68.
- ² Colin Durrant, *Choral Conducting: Philosophy and Practice*. 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2017).
- ³ Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*. 3rd ed. (Gulf Publishing, 1984).
- ⁴ Matt Hill, "Improving the Rehearsal Experience: Strategies for Success," *Choral Journal* 64, no. 4 (November/December 2023): 46–54.
- ⁵ Chorus America, *The Chorus Impact Study: Singing for a Lifetime* (Chorus America, 2019), <https://chorusamerica.org/resource/chorus-impact-study-singing-lifetime>.
- ⁶ Chorus America, *The Chorus Impact Study* (2019).
- ⁷ Apfelstadt, "Rehearsal Temperature."
- ⁸ Timothy Mount, "The First Rehearsal: A Guide for Choral Conductors," *Choral Journal* 64, no. 1 (August 2023): 39–44.
- ⁹ David L. Brunner, "Carefully Crafting the Choral Rehearsal," *Music Educators Journal* 83, no. 3 (November 1996): 37–39.
- ¹⁰ Knowles, *The Adult Learner*.
- ¹¹ Durrant, *Choral Conducting*.
- ¹² Chorus America, *The Chorus Impact Study* (Chorus America, 2009), https://chorusamerica.org/sites/default/files/ImpactStudy09_Report.pdf.