

Being a Choral Leader in Lean Times

Tobin Sparfeld, choral conductor and teacher

In healthy, prosperous economies, many choirs have achieved success in the face of financial hardship. In much of today's world, however, the fiscal outlook for many choirs can seem daunting, perhaps even bleak. The process of budget cuts and dwindling accounting figures can lead to a depressing outlook for the future. This depression might discourage us and prevent us from carrying out our main tasks: making great music and educating our young singers.

No matter how dire your financial situation may be, your choir can be successful, even with severely limited resources. Before discussing specific tactics of making your dollars go further, there are two rules which, when followed, almost always lead to savings.

1. **Plan ahead.** It is much easier to find an inexpensive solution to a problem when you have time to think. Commit yourself to planning activities and repertoire months ahead of schedule (planning a full year in advance is especially helpful for annual events). Creativity doesn't happen overnight; it is a process of trial and error which sometimes requires more effort than expected.
2. **Use your singers.** They are willing to help. Ask them for suggestions about anything the choir needs. I once heard a wonderful anecdote from a colleague who got his young male singers involved in helping to find an anvil for Verdi's 'Anvil Chorus' for an upcoming concert. They got so excited that they turned it into a scavenger hunt

where the goal was to find the hidden skills of your singers and their families. You never know when it might be valuable.

I have grouped the following specific ideas into five categories: music, rehearsal space, touring/traveling, general fundraising, and publicity/recruiting. None of these ideas is particularly new, and many are actually common knowledge. Nevertheless, they serve as a helpful reminder to us in difficult financial circumstances and may inspire you to discover other possibilities.

Music – Your choral repertoire largely consists of three categories: traditional/historic works, folk songs/traditional songs from different cultures, and contemporary works. With a little effort, you can get music for two out of three categories at virtually no cost.

- Check public domain websites like [org](#) and [IMSLP.org](#). These sites have been well known and talked about for years and have both improved their selection considerably over time and allow you to find free historical literature. Countries have different standards regarding what is public domain, so be sure to check that you are abiding by the law.
- Don't sell your abilities short: arrange your own folk music / traditional music. That way you can arrange a piece appropriately suited to your singers. In many instances you can use instruments and voicing that are more appropriate for your ensemble than those in print. Furthermore, many published arrangements were originally created by conductors with little or no money and for singers with unique needs.
- Some choirs have begun charging their singers individually for the cost of music up front. At the end of the year, singers can donate their music to the choir

(or the choir can offer to purchase it from them for a nominal fee), thus building up a choral library. While this places the financial burden on the singers, it can help defray costs.

Rehearsal space – Be creative and do not dismiss a possible location until you have seen it in person. Look for locations in your area that are not being used at times when you rehearse. They may be:

1. Churches or other places of worship
2. Schools
3. Government buildings
4. Retirement communities/nursing facilities
5. Shopping areas or other community centers
6. Unsold/unused properties
7. Private homes

As a choral singer, I have rehearsed in all of the places listed above. Some were not ideal, while others were surprisingly accommodating for the choir's needs. Many organizations and individuals are willing to let you use their space for a reduced fee or perhaps in exchange for a free concert.

Tour/travel – Just because you are short on funds does not mean you cannot participate in the wonderful activity of touring with your ensemble. Tours give your singers a goal to strive for and help them grow as a group.

- Homestay exchanges: offer to host a performing group from another area in your singers' homes in exchange for them hosting you when you visit them.
- When making travel plans, consider offering deals for tag-along guests, whose money can help subsidize the

singers' travel expenses.

General fundraising – This encompasses several categories, such as sales, services, bartering, or advertising. Fundraising works best if you connect a specific goal to your request instead of just a general need. A pledge drive to buy new risers or for a tour will be more successful than one for building an endowment or just paying off debt will be.

- Professional fundraising companies – Many companies give organizations the opportunity to raise funds by selling their products. While this can be an easy way for singers to raise funds, the profits will be split between your choir and the company itself.
- Sales of donated goods – Collect donated goods from the singers or the community and then organize a sale of the goods.
- Auctions – Local companies may be willing to provide gift certificates to you (either free or at a reduced rate). By auctioning off those items to the highest bidder, you can potentially raise more money than the value of the items themselves.
- Ticket sales – Require the singers to buy ten tickets (or any specified number) before the concert that they are required to sell to others. Many theatre productions use this method to buy theatre supplies before the performance. While this does place a financial burden on your singers for tickets they cannot sell, it gets them involved in helping the choir.
- Ruffling off a large prize or a group of prizes (check local laws regarding such events). This may include prizes such as airline tickets, vacations, vehicles, electronics, appliances, or cash.
- Special fundraising concerts
- Services and other events, such as a group car wash, a walk-a-thon, sing-a-thon, cooking party, etc.

- Singing at weddings, singing telegrams, singing Valentine's Day or other holidays
- Local restaurants and business are sometimes willing to donate a percentage of their weekly or nightly profit to your organization. This means, of course, trying to get as many people to frequent that business during that time as possible.
- Grants and corporate sponsors – There are books written solely about the process of applying for government grants, so I will not go into that here. In essence, though, corporations both large and small may be willing to support your ensemble. Connections to these businesses can often be made through your singers and close audience members.
- Bartering for services – Be willing to ask for discounts for any services by promoting their name throughout your organization. The worst they can say is “no”.
- Sell advertising space to appear in your concert programs.

Publicity and Recruiting

- Retention is the cheapest recruiting of all. Write a personal note to each singer thanking them for their participation at the end of the year. If you have a large ensemble, simply write several each week to spread out the work.
- Singing at schools or wherever young people hang out.
- Bring-a-friend night. Arrange a rehearsal where singers can bring a friend to join them. This can encourage visitors to join the ensemble.
- Studies have shown that word of mouth is the most effective form of advertising. It's also free. Explore as many ways as possible to get people talking about your choir. Your singers can help spread the word. Consider what options may work in your community.

- While a less effective means of communication, press releases to your local newspaper are free and can help increase audience attendance. Write the headline as well as the story, making the first several sentences of your release the most compelling and providing background and contact information.

I have used these methods as a conductor and ensemble member. Some may work better than others in your community. Nearly all of them require more effort on our part in planning, research, negotiation, and communication. While this work may not feel rewarding at the moment, we must always remember that saving money helps us fulfill our duty as musicians. Robert Shaw once said this about our duty as musicians:

“Don’t let anyone – including oneself – forget that we are all in the service of a human excellence and creativity vastly superior to our own, and that we have a responsibility to make this beauty and excellence available to our entire human community – not just a narrow stratum”.[\[1\]](#)

By doing more with less, we make the choral art available to a wider part of humanity and allow more singers to participate as well. As we all believe that music can heal mankind, let us strive to let our art shine as brightly as it can, edifying our fellow man when he needs it most.

[\[1\]](#) Blocker, Robert., ed. *The Robert Shaw Reader*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 388.

As a former member of the St. Louis Children's Choirs, **Tobin Sparfeld** has toured all over the world, from as far west as Vancouver, British Columbia, to as far east as Moscow, Russia. He has also sung with Seraphic Fire and the Santa Fe Desert Chorale. Tobin has worked with choirs of all ages, serving as Assistant Music Director of the Miami Children's Chorus as well as Associate Director of the St. Louis Children's Choirs. He taught at Principia College and was the Director of Choral Activities at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. He was also the assistant conductor of the Civic Chorale of Greater Miami. Tobin received his DMA in Conducting from the University of Miami in Coral Gables, studying with Jo-Michael Scheibe and Joshua Habermann. He also received an Artist Teacher Diploma from the CME Institute led by Doreen Rao. He is currently head of the Music Division at Los Angeles Mission College, part of the Los Angeles Community College District. Email: tobin.sparfeld@gmail.com



Edited by J. Aaron Baudhuin, Germany