

Thinking in a business-like and artistic way at the same time

Cultural manager and book author Alexandra Jachim on the foundations of successful choir management!

“Many lack the basic tools”!

More appreciation, clear distribution of tasks, more in-service training: Alexandra Jachim, author of a successful guide on the subject, discusses the foundations of successful choir management!

Interviewer: Daniel Schalz, editor of Chorzeit!

Ms. Jachim, what are the most important qualities a choir manager should be able to offer?

For a start, she or he should be singing in a choir or have sung in one, for on the one side you should know the special group dynamic processes active in a choir, but above all, on the other side, you need to know what it means to do musical work. This is really the case for any type of cultural management: basically one's got to think in economic terms, but one also needs a profound understanding of the special features of work in the arts – particularly as these two sides are often perceived to be contradictory. Therefore, in order to combine these two in a way that promises success, you need to deal with great sensitivity with the individuals and groups concerned – from the choral conductor via the various voice sections and soloists or other artists who might be involved, to outsiders like sponsors, representatives of the press etc.

Often, in this it is the choral conductor who is the toughest negotiator if the use of budgeted money or responsibilities of personnel is being debated...

That's right, and that's why it is so important that the choir manager, if at all possible, works on equal terms with the artistic leaders. Unfortunately many cultural enterprises – even large and famous ones – are still structured in a very hierarchical manner, and on the whole the artistic leadership remains perched higher up that tree than the management people responsible for organisation and balancing the books. Yet both areas are equally important – one is totally incapable of working without the other! What use are the most stunning artistic ideas if they can't be put into practice because no sponsorship money has come in or neither audience nor press attend the concert, because there's been no decent publicity? And conversely, the choir manager needs the product, namely the good artistic achievement, in order to fulfil his or her duties.



Nevertheless, in choral work, the music should be taking centre stage.

Of course. I would outline three goals, of which the first, the fulfilling of the cultural mission, namely making music for its own sake, certainly ranks top. However, there are two further aspects which are of equal importance for choral work if it is to be successful in the long term, which are often neglected or even totally ignored: namely the reaching of

certain groups of people – from the audience via the recruitment of new singers to public and private sponsors – , and also the looking- after of that which already exists – this, too, again refers, alongside the economic factor, to the singers as well as the public or other people or groups of people with an interest in the choir!

However, for many choirs and particularly their conductors, this leans far too much into the sphere of business – after all, usually, their motivation is not rooted in the making of money.

I, too, have observed this fundamentally skeptical attitude towards concepts like “groups we need to approach” or “the market”, particularly among amateur choirs. However, the procedure I describe is economic only at first glance, for in reality the two non-business dimensions of choral work have a much deeper effect: after all, we’ll only be singing together as long as there are enough singers – so we must be active in the recruitment of new members for our choirs. And the more those already on board feel happy and at home with us, the longer they will stay. We simply must not forget that whether somebody enjoys singing in a choir depends not only on the conductor or the repertoire, but to a considerable extent also on factors like the atmosphere in the group, successful concerts, public appreciation etc. Different polls and studies undertaken in the last few years have shown that the satisfaction of choir members actually depends more on these things than on the musical work. Therefore – as an example – the importance of the individual choir member for the group should not only be judged by his or her vocal skills, but also by social competence. Thus singers who actively look after new arrivals, explain to them the “rules of the game”, introduce them to the group, are unbelievably important for the mood within the choir. And if you feel content and happy, you also sing with more motivation – and better! However, usually the choir’s conductor is not in a position to look after these

apparent trivialities for lack of time – and usually this hadn't been included in his or her training either.



With this you have touched upon the options for basic and, later, in-service training in this sphere: do you consider what's on offer in the German-speaking world to be sufficient?

There's no question that in this respect, we've got a lot of catching up to do. As already said, in the training of choral conductors, the aspects of organisation and economics and questions of leadership get far too little attention. The practical result then is that after a few months in their first jobs, they notice – very much as opposed to their expectations – that three quarters of their work centres on non-musical problems. Here it would be of enormous help for them if these tasks were taken over by members of the choir, but many choirs simply lack the necessary tools of the trade for this. Especially among amateurs, there are far too few opportunities for training which would enable singers with the right motivation to acquire these skills!

In your opinion, why are there not more opportunities for further training?

It seems to me that the cultural and particularly the choral scene is very much bringing up the rear in developments in society in general. Thus in many societal areas it has long been accepted that questions of the structure and style of leadership, communication within and outside the organisation

or processes of decision-making are not so-called “soft skills” but of elementary importance if people are to work together. Even the Roman Catholic church with its unbeatably hierarchical structure has by now started to occupy itself intensely with such questions. It is only in the realm of culture that it’s still just a few people who decide upon the direction of travel, top down, and in choirs that is often the conductor who makes nearly all decisions, on his or her own. In the long run this model will fail. Of course, even in a choir the artistic director will always make decisions on certain matters on his or her own and on his/her own responsibility – you can’t have a democratic vote on every musical question. But what I’m really trying to emphasise is that there is a fundamental attitude: am I prepared to delegate the competence for certain decisions to the group or even individuals, because they may have more time or simply are better qualified to do so?



Talking of qualifications: particularly among amateur choirs, the organisational tasks are usually taken on by volunteers who never had any relevant training.

Correct, that is definitely the current reality – as in the overwhelming majority of not-for-profit organisations. Apart from the lack of concrete, crafts-type knowledge – e g for publicity or fundraising – above all it is difficult because as a rule these people are not trained for leadership, but the task of a choir manager is a leadership role. And it is a multifunctional one: a choir manager is spokesman/woman for

the choir, in charge of drawing up and administering the budget, liaison officer, concert agent, publicity worker, fundraiser and much more, all at the same time.

Quite a lot of responsibility for one individual!

Exactly – and that’s why I recommend two fundamental first steps to choirs preparing to tackle these problems. Firstly there should be a very clear definition of what the choir stands for and the goals it hopes to achieve: what music do we want to sing? What shape is our publicity to take? In which way may we be unique among other choirs? A group should really take time for these deliberations, e g by going away together over a weekend to thrash this out. The second step then consists – based on the goals decided upon – of the definition of very clear tasks, to be distributed among the members of the choir according to their skills. This is something many choirs sadly lack: these clearly defined fields of responsibility. Thus e g younger members of the choir could be entrusted with the establishment of a Facebook page. However, in all this it is very important that the group formulates its clear expectations of those asked to bear responsibility, so that they can decide whether they are really up to this. Particularly in the voluntary system people are often overloaded with tasks which they cannot master for lack of qualification and of time. This leads to frustration all round. A classic example are the webpages of choirs: often people who are good at computing are asked to set these up, but afterwards, they lack the time to update it with new concert dates or reviews, so that the page remains more or less derelict – because at the start, there was no clear decision as to what should be done in future. This is also particularly valid for the relationship between conductor and the board of the choir – especially those in key positions should be aware of clear agreements as to who does what.



However, often the choir is glad if anybody comes forward at all to take on such work.

And that is exactly the nub of the problem! It is too simplistic simply to be content that fortunately somebody has taken on whatever. Not only is it permissible, but it is absolutely necessary that in voluntary work, too, high standards of work are demanded. In the long run it pays for all those involved if a bit more time and care is invested in the search for the right people for certain jobs. It is easy to underestimate the damage that can be caused by wrong personnel within organisations: if the person selling tickets at the door can't cope with stress and thus is unfriendly towards members of the public whose reserved tickets aren't ready and waiting, this will directly influence the mood in the hall, and then the choir wonders why the audience doesn't respond in spite of really superb singing. Generally choirs often forget the importance of the setting of a concert – the audience is supposed to feel at ease! What does the hall look like? Does the lighting support the content of the programme? What support is given to the audience to ease its access to the works to be performed? Will the concert feature a host? Can the traditional stage situation be broken up by e.g. distributing the singers around the hall? What about the interval? Most people attend concerts no longer just because of the music, but because they hope for an all-round emotional experience. The quality of the product "concert" must be right – but that applies also to the quality of service all round!

All choirs should bear that in mind. It is impossible for the choir conductor to look after all those matters – but one or several choir managers could do so.

Alexandra Jachim MAS, born 1969 in Vienna, read business studies and cultural management. For the last 25 years she has sung in choirs and been a member of the boards of choirs, occupying herself for many years with the subject of the theory and practice of choral management. For the last 20 years she has worked in cultural enterprises, among her jobs that of a choir manager in Vienna. She is currently in charge of the administration of WERK X, Vienna. Author of “Successful Choral Management; a Guide” (facultas.wuv 2013). Lectures and workshops on choral management.



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