



## **Case Study 4**

### **TYNDALE CHORAL SOCIETY**

#### **"ABC 2008"**

#### **The Absolute Beginners' Course**

##### **Genesis**

The TCS is in its 48<sup>th</sup> year; membership had peaked at one stage at 110, but over recent years it has bounced around between 55 and 65. The average age of members was not getting any lower. To secure the future of the society, new members must be found. Open rehearsals had attracted would-be choral singers, but most left at the end of the evening, saying that the sight-singing was a problem, that they had never learned how to read music, and they consequently couldn't cope in rehearsal. We were also aware that many were too shy to come along and try it out – they found the prospect far too daunting. There are no appropriate evening classes in the area that we could find, so we did it ourselves.

##### **Aim**

To teach enough basic music theory/notation and voice training to give students the confidence to join the choir in rehearsal, with the accent on Having Fun and the social life of a choral society.

##### **Logistics**

The course was held during the TCS closed season, January to March, on the usual rehearsal night, in the usual rehearsal venue, from 7.30-9.30pm; this to encourage good habits from the outset – Monday night is choir night! An ice-breaker evening was followed by 10 classes. There was then one week off for Easter before the TCS rehearsals began. We had free coffee/biscuits each week to encourage the social side; an equally important benefit of choral singing.

A charge of £32.50 was levied and 'graduates' of the course would also be able to join the TCS in its summer concert rehearsals without paying any subscription. They would also be able to sing in the concert, at the discretion of our MD. This represented a very good deal indeed. If they wished to continue after July, then subscriptions would be payable.

##### **Teacher**

Bethan Diaz, graduate B Mus of Cardiff University, with a fine soprano voice. Bethan teaches piano and voice privately, so this course was a learning curve for her too, and she adapted the course content as the weeks progressed as she gained a feel for the abilities of the class. Bethan's strengths were her musical knowledge, personality, lightness of touch, sense of humour, respect and understanding for the students.

## **Marketing**

Word of mouth, handbills, posters, website. Applications were slow until the local newspaper, the 'Gazette', took up the project and gave us a full page spread on 6<sup>th</sup> December. The 'Gazette' featured Miriam Yagud, one of the students already on board, and wrote a follow-up piece on 28<sup>th</sup> February, again interviewing Miriam. The 'Gazette' will also attend the concert and do a final write-up. We overshot the self-imposed maximum of 20 students, and closed the books at 36. We still had a waiting list.

## **Students**

They were a very mixed assortment of absolute beginners, returners, and really quite experienced singers. There were no auditions.

## **Course Content**

A handout was prepared by Bethan for the ice-breaker, with the basics of staves, note values, time signatures etc., and sight-singing practice snippets. This was followed by a further handout in week 3, with details of intervals and scales, and some practice snippets to read. There were also pieces of music to practise with. For this first half of the course, rhythms were clapped, intervals practised, pieces sung. In week 5, the concert extracts prepared by TCS conductor Ian Harrold were distributed and worked on from that point. Bethan also introduced breath control, voice production, tuning, diction, various exercises, choral discipline and practice.

## **Making Friends**

Existing Tyndale members came along to ABC evenings to get to know the students and help them along. Everyone wore name badges. This eased the transition at the end of the course to TCS rehearsals, when ABC students would be paired with choral 'buddies' to keep them on track.

## **Conductor**

Our conductor Ian Harrold attended several classes, and led one of them. This was invaluable, as it allowed the students to get to know the person they will be singing for, and his style. It also allowed Ian to appreciate what work had been done in class, so that he could bear this in mind when rehearsals started.

## **Finances**

The project started on the basis that perhaps only a dozen students might enroll, and perhaps 5 complete. It was felt that 20 would be a manageable maximum. Although it was hoped that break-even might be achieved, it was also deemed acceptable for the course to cost the Society up to £500, given that it was an experiment and one considered worth doing, and certainly within the scope of our charity's aims.

In the event, we had 36 students (including one Tyndaler) in total. This put the project on a sound financial footing, and enabled a tweaking of the budget and other refinements to be paid for; name badges, board markers, flipchart paper, excellent biscuits (!) and so on. The small amount of money remaining will subsidise the free membership for the graduates when they go to full rehearsal.

## **Outcome**

Only the very basics of music theory could be covered in such a short time with such a disparate group of students, and it would be true to say that some found it easier than others. We cannot know who put in some effort between lessons. An end-of-term theory test showed that some had not grasped as much as others had. C'est la vie.

However, of the 36 who started, 28 completed the course (the 8 who did not finish had various reasons – eg, pressure of work, illness, etc).

Of the 28, 25 (excluding the one existing Tyndale member on the course) felt confident enough to try the unknown waters of a full TCS rehearsal. Only time will tell how many continue on to become full TCS members.

We have now swelled our ranks with 8 altos, 10 sopranos, 4 basses, and – wait for it – THREE TENORS! (aren't you green with envy?)

## **On-going care**

We have provided CDs of practice MP3 files (written by Ian) for each of the voice parts, so that ABC graduates can swot at home. Ian provides us with a rehearsal schedule, so that we know what is going to be covered each week, thus allowing everyone to prepare. Tyndalers are primed to reassure and encourage the faint-hearted as the weeks go by.

## **Summary**

Overall, a very successful experiment. To be frank, we are elated.

There were many appreciative comments from students regarding the warm welcome they received – we feel that this was key to its success, as was the tone set by tutor Bethan. This would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support of Tyndalers and our MD, Ian. It was a real team effort.

We would encourage any sister society to do the same. Have courage; and, to misquote the tag line of the film, 'Field of Dreams': "Organise it, and They Will Come!"

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