

# **Big Sing!**

## *An Exploration of the Aural Tradition and its Application to Choirs and Communities*

Welcome to the Big Sing!

Take a seat in the circle and take a moment to introduce yourself to those around you, singing is one of the best ways to build connections with others and begin the hard work of establishing community.

Please take the opportunity today to forget about “every good boy deserves fudge” and proper vowel shading and precise diction and remember what it was like to just sing something that felt good, with people that loved to sing. Maybe it was your first choir in elementary school, maybe it was on your Grandpa’s knee, maybe it was singing a lullaby to your child. If you haven’t had a moment in your life to let go of being right and just sing, I sincerely hope today will be that day for you.

Included in this packet are song suggestions, teaching strategies, suggested resources, and links to videos of community sings and community singing situations. Feel free to peruse that information after the session, it’s time to put this paper under your seat, breathe, and sing.

Thank you so much for joining us, and for sharing your voice today.

# Getting Started as a Songleader

First, you'll need some songs. I've shared many of my favorites with you today, and the list of suggestions should be more than enough to get you started. Ideally, you'll throw away my list and instead look inside and find the songs that speak most to you. Take those songs and share them with others, share them with your family, with your choir, with your spouse, children, colleagues and friends.

Once you have some beautiful songs in your head ready to go, and you've begun sharing them with others, it's time to take it to a larger venue. There are many ways to start this, some safer than others. The first few meetings of a choir in a season are ideal for community sing situations, you can get a healthy sound, discuss basic technique, assess the ability level of the singers, and have fun all without handing out folders. If you serve in a church or are a person of faith (or even if you aren't, but you love the music) large hymn-sings are quite popular and often well attended. Most churches are more than happy to host you for an afternoon or evening of song.

As you get more ambitious, consider branching out and incorporating community singing into your choral concerts. I know this is terrifying, so dip your toe in the water by programming a simple repetitive arrangement with your choir, or an arrangement with a call and response element, and have the audience join in on the last verse. For your first time, it's wise to make it a well known tune.

Speaking on behalf of parents, administrators, students and faculty, these large interactions between choir and audience are odd at first, but quickly become a cherished memory and an anticipated aspect of concerts. One of my earliest experiences featured my grandmother singing next to my mother and young cousin in the audience, and my mother remarking "I had no idea my mother could sing!"

These large events are wonderful and a lot of fun, however, I see songleading less about creating a big ruckus and more about living a lifestyle of song. Taking the time to appreciate a beautiful melody, valuing an impactful song enough to learn it "by heart" (what a great phrase!). But more than appreciating song, the songleader is so filled with the love of singing that sharing song with others is a natural and automatic thing. A songleader sings in the car, sings in job interviews, sings on first dates, and sings at the pub with friends. A songleader is a songlover, and expresses love through the gift of song.

# Songleading Toolkit

It's helpful to have a **pitch-giving device**, such as a tuning fork, pitch pipe, electronic pitch pipe, ukulele, guitar, piano, xylophone, etc. (be creative!). Be smart about which key to sing a song in, not-yet-singers have smaller ranges and need some accommodating. If a song is a bit too high or low, feel free to stop the singing and **change the key** to make it more comfortable, no one will mind, in fact they'll probably thank you!

If it makes you feel more comfortable, **accompaniment** can be a great enhancement to community singing. Guitar and piano are the obvious choices, though they limit your ability to use your hands to communicate musically. I prefer singing with voices and only voices, but that is just one style, and all styles have their advantages. Percussion instruments can also add a lot, provided you pair them with appropriate song choices.

For some populations, a **sheet of paper with lyrics** will be helpful. This will make teaching a bit easier, though it will make eye contact and singing by heart more difficult. Weigh the pros and cons and decide for yourself, I prefer singing the song as long as it takes to learn it and adopt it as one of your own. It will quickly become clear to you that if some people have something to hide behind while singing (a hymnal, a lyric sheet, a folder, a score, a piano, a neighbor) they will make every effort to do so. Open hands and engaged eyes encourage connection and communication, if it means some notes/words are flubbed, so be it.

A good compromise is to **project the lyrics on a large screen**. This works well for those audience engagement pieces on choral concerts. Again I avoid them myself, as I'd rather take the extra few minutes to learn the words fully so that the singers are looking at each other. If most people (including conductors) have something with words to look at, they will do so, even when they have the piece memorized.

Sing the song all the way through before breaking it down to teach. Everyone needs a chance to get it in their ear, and to see the structure. Once they've heard it once (or thrice) there are a few different strategies to try. Easiest is to keep repeating and let singers join when they feel comfortable. Alternatively, break the song into single phrases and have the community repeat after you. A nice method is to have them learn the last phrase of a song and join there, working backwards to the beginning of the song. This way they feel more confident as the song progresses.

Once they are singing, knowing how long to go with a song comes with experience. Even the masters move to quick or drag a song too long on occasion. I do it more than occasionally. Just make an effort to connect with the room and if you see too many wandering eyes, switch to an up-tempo song in a major key.

# **Basic Arranging For Songleaders**

**Unison** – Default choice. Many melodies (particularly ballads) lend themselves to unison singing and need to harmony to maintain interest. There is nothing wrong with the entirety of a community sing being in unison.

**Rounds/Canons** – You'd be surprised how many melodies lend themselves to being sung in a round. Choirs love trying this with melodies from their concert repertoire, especially when it results in interesting clashes. This is a great introduction to part-singing and harmony, as the entire melody can be learned in unison and then slowly split off into many parts.

**Ostinato** – Establish a repeated pattern on the tonic and/or dominant, very basic and simple. A good way to get reluctant singers involved (even football coach dads will begrudgingly sing one note)

**Partner Songs/Quodlibets** – a personal favorite. Once you have a set of songs that fit well together (same basic harmonic outline) you can teach as many or as few of them as feels right, and experiment with putting them together. I've worked with large audiences that could handle 8 or more independent melodies simultaneously, and ones that just rocked out in unison while I sang a second melody against them. These arrangements are very nice for combined concerts at a district level, the elementary choirs can learn one or two basic melodies (or a melody and simple harmony), middle school choirs can learn two or more melodies, and the high school can sing a chordal accompaniment, sing multiple melodies, or intermix with the younger choirs to bolster their strength. This sort of combined singing does a lot for retention and growth in a music program.

**Basic Harmonies** – As Nick Page likes to say, just pick a note and keep singing it til it doesn't sound good anymore, then move up or down a bit. Simple scale passages and repeated notes can be used to make a very simple bassline or descant to compliment a melody. Low singers can rock out on dominant and tonic, while high singers can jump in on parallel thirds and adjust where necessary. Feel free to write down your arrangements to help you learn them, but make sure they are solid before teaching them to others.

# Starting Song Suggestions

## Barbershop:

Sleepy Time Down South (tag)  
My Wild Irish Rose

## Carols:

The First Noel  
Silent Night  
Jingle Bells

## Folk Songs:

Shenandoah  
The Water is Wide  
Scarborough Fair  
Loch Lomond  
Danny Boy  
Down in the Valley  
Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair  
Down By the Sally Gardens  
Down By the Riverside  
Peace Like a River  
Shall We Gather at the River?

## Hymn Tunes:

Amazing Grace  
Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing  
Rise Up, O Men of God

## Lullaby:

All the Pretty Little Horses (Hushabye)  
A La Nanita Nana

## Musical Theatre:

Somewhere Over the Rainbow  
Try to Remember  
Doe, a Deer

## Patriotic:

America the Beautiful  
Star-Spangled Banner  
My Country 'tis of Thee

## Rounds/Canons:

Rise Up O Flame  
Jubilate Deo (Praetorius)  
Dona Nobis Pacem  
Music Alone Shall Live

## Spirituals:

Deep River  
Old Time Religion  
Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child  
This Little Light of Mine  
Wayfaring Stranger  
Wade in the Water  
Every Time I Feel the Spirit  
Jacob's Ladder  
Balm in Gilead  
Steal Away  
Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?  
Hush, Somebody's Callin' My Name  
Soon Ah Will Be Done  
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot  
Ezekiel Saw the Wheel

## Disney:

God Help the Outcasts  
Circle of Life  
Beauty and the Beast  
Colors of the Wind

# **Songleading Resources**

**TEDxAustin - Craig Hella Johnson - Conspirare Big Sing**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwgjGgzBKsA>

**Ysaye Barnwell - Community Sing Highlights 10/22/99**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKv2--mk6gM>

**Soweto Gospel Choir Community Sing**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bG-ITuYIKH8>

**Nick Page - The Mystic Chorale of Boston**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMpZFSrOOR4>

**Hymn SING with Alice Parker: Love Divine, All Loves Excelling**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iIUOGIZic>

**Christopher G Keene - Elem/MS/HS Combined Choirs & Audience**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n\]OUqqoln58](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n]OUqqoln58)