

Festival of Praise

Organizing Guide

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Introduction

Every year, one of the west division choirs is expected to organize and host the **Festival of Praise**, held either the last Saturday in April or the first Saturday in May. This is a major undertaking, requiring a large investment of time, and not without its dangers. This guide was written to aid the host choir in organizing this event, especially the afternoon practice and the evening concert. It is based on years of organizing and participating in Festivals, and is updated yearly. It should prove useful in outlining the full extent of festival organizing, from a year before the concert to the wrap-up meeting after the concert.

Even though some details of the concert are decided by committee and beyond the control of the host choir, there are still many other things to be considered like venue, ticket prices and guest musicians. Most of these are explained throughout this document. All the points under each heading are of equal importance, don't treat any point with lesser importance.

Currently the West division rotation is in a circle as follows:

- Clinton Men of Note
- Woodstock Men of Praise
- Chatham-Kent Male Choir
- Sarnia Sursum Corda
- Mt Brydges Crescendo Male Choir

Critical Details, One Year before the Concert

It is important to get a rough count of the total members of all the participating choirs. The mass choir total does change from year to year, and it is best to be liberal with the total so things are not crowded on stage. A suitable venue must be found which is capable of holding the combined choir (could be 150 men) on stage, possibly with the instruments on stage and with room to spare. The venue selection should be done at least a year before the festival. There must be enough practice rooms for each choir, enough audience seating preferably with some overflow capability, a large foyer, ample parking, etc. Be sure to obtain the venue operating and rental rules and communicate these to the other choirs and guests. Failure to adhere to these rules, especially smoking on or near the

premises, will likely mean an inability to secure the venue in the future and give all the choirs a bad reputation.

Create an organizing committee to oversee all aspects of the festival. This will not be a small endeavour so utilize as many people and choir members as possible. A suggested breakdown into areas of responsibility is as follows, in no particular order:

- Booking of the venue: arrange contract & obtain rules, audio person, custodian, computer person for overhead screens, etc.
- Music selection & program layout: obtain mass pieces & names, composers and arrangers of the individual choir numbers, select congregational hymns and involvement, set rehearsal times, select the MC for the evening, music prelude, and design & print program
- Organ and/or piano rental
- Tickets & ushering: design & print tickets, distribute some tickets to choirs, find ushers (one for each single door)
- Advertising & sponsors: design & distribute posters, newspaper ads, bulletin announcements, media coverage of concert, get photographer and/or videographer, distribute map to venue
- Choir room assignments
- Refreshments: coffee, juice/water, fruit, donuts, etc.
- Dinner at venue
- CD sales tables and location
- Stage decoration & layout: arrange for risers, decorations, mirror for organ or piano
- Parking lot staff
- Convener for afternoon rehearsal
- Live recording for an audio CD and/or a DVD video
- Insurance coverage for venue, overflow parking and rented instruments
- Mass choir liaison: provides the contact between all choirs
- Crew in place for venue cleanup after the concert

An acoustic piano (not an electronic keyboard or synthesizer, preferably a grand piano), and an organ with a minimum of two manuals and an AGO-compliant pedal board (minimum of two octaves) are required. If the organ is a digital model, it must also have an adequate sound system and speakers for the venue. The piano is the most used instrument by the choirs but an organ is used by a few and is also good for accompanying audience singing & mass songs. If the venue needs either instrument start looking now. If you already have a venue with both instruments, consider yourself blessed! Pianos are easy to rent, but organs are difficult to obtain and expensive to rent, insure, and transport.

If the venue is capable, it is strongly encouraged to host an on-site dinner for the choirs. It provides a good time for fellowship and relaxing after a long afternoon. Be sure to establish a maximum seat number based on how many the venue can seat. The per-plate ticket cost is determined by the catering group, and can vary greatly depending on

what is served. The optimum time for the meal is 5:00 to 5:30 PM depending on when the concert starts and the afternoon layout. An earlier concert start means an earlier dinner so there's time for everyone to get ready afterwards. It would still be prudent to make a list of local restaurants available for choir members that want to eat out. A list of local hotels would also be helpful to those members that wish to stay for the weekend or overnight after the concert.

Find a Master of Ceremonies (MC) for the evening. It doesn't have to be a choir member or board member, but must be someone who is articulate, and that the audience can relate to.

It is the host choir that sets the concert ticket price, and this typically ranges from \$10 to \$15. The price should be determined by the overall cost of the day including but not limited to venue rental, soloist/guest/MC gratuities, instrument rentals, advertising & programs, etc. Setting the price too low means you will likely just cover your costs and break even. Set it too high and you won't get a big audience. The host choir may also decide to give free tickets to all choir members spouses. This can be a costly choice but the decision is yours. You may want to consider different prices for children (free?), students, adults and seniors.

Sometime in September send out an information letter to the other choirs detailing the following:

- Concert location, date, and start time
- How many mass pieces they are to submit. The committee established deadline for submissions is Nov 1. Make this early in the season, such as September to October, so the host choir has time to sort out issues. This also gives the choirs plenty of time to learn them and could possibly implement the songs into their own season.
- The time length for the individual choir time slot, and if there is a limit on the number of songs in this time slot. Right now the limit is set for 15 minutes from when the first choir member walks on stage to when the last member walks off stage, with ~12 minutes for singing.
- When the details (titles, composers and arrangers) of the individual choir pieces should be submitted for inclusion in the program. This submission date does not have to be as early as the mass pieces, usually January to February. Right now the agreed cut-off date is set for Feb 1 of the year of the concert, but this date is flexible and depends in the program printing date.
- Venue rules (esp. no smoking on site, food/drink not allowed in certain areas like the sanctuary)

Long-Term Details, Many Months before the Concert

- The mass choir liaison must obtain mass numbers from the other choirs. Sort through them, deal with any conflicts, and redistribute the songs to other choirs. Lately a good method of distribution is via PDF through email, but hard copy through the post office works as well. The song selection rules are as follows:
 - The host choir and the previous year's host choir pick two songs each, one new and one chosen from the previous two festival years
 - The remaining choirs pick one song each, new or previously used
 - With 5 choirs this totals 7 song submissions, with a maximum of 5 new songs
 - Song selections are limited to sacred and English language only
 - Songs are submitted to the host choir before Nov 1 of the year previous to the festival concert
- Choose a concert start time.
- Choose a time for the choirs to arrive for the afternoon practices. A good start time is 1:00 to 1:30 PM.
- Canvas individuals and businesses for sponsorship to donate money, food, time, etc. and help offset the costs of the day.
- Start designing an advertising poster. If you want, used a picture of the previous mass choir for the advertising poster and/or program cover.
- Start designing the evening program. Look back over past programs for guidance and ideas. See the upcoming section called *Concert Program Layout and Afternoon Practice Layout* for more ideas on this.
- If you want soloists or special musicians to participate in the concert, get them now. Many different things have been used over the years: choirs, soloists, flutists, pianists, organists, harpists, etc.
- Get a photographer. An updated mass choir picture is a good thing to have every year, especially for the next choir that has to host. If you find that you are designing posters, advertising or programs with an outdated picture, please consider getting a new one done for future festivals. The picture should be done during the evening mass concert as everyone is dressed appropriately.
- Get a videographer if you can afford it or if someone is willing to do the job. A recording of the evening is always nice.
- If needed, check into overflow parking. This may require purchasing insurance coverage for the extra parking area.

Medium-Term Details, A Few Months or Weeks before the Concert

- Design the concert program. Get short biographies of the choirs and guests. Include hymn lyrics if needed, and song composers & arrangers. If you know you have use of an overhead screen then you can use that for displaying hymn/song lyrics and don't include them in the program. This can reduce the size and cost of the programs and makes the design simpler.
- Find a printer that can handle the job, and establish when to get the programs printed. Program printing does not have to be done until a week or two before the Festival, so you have time to get the program details together. Establish a cut-off date for changes and additions to be submitted for the program. This cut-off date will be dictated by whoever is designing and/or printing the programs.
- Don't print too many programs as each individual person doesn't need one. A general rule-of-thumb would be to print 66-75% of your intended audience count, so if you expect 600 then print 400-450.
- Design and print concert posters, the number needed depends on how many churches and locations you intend to have them. A good number is at least 100 spread over the various choirs. Contact the choirs to see how many programs they need/want.
- Design and print tickets, including entrance and meal tickets.
- On/around March 1, send an information packet out the choirs including the following:
 - Tickets for sale (entrance and meal)
 - Afternoon starting time & practice details
 - Preliminary program
 - Venue location map & rules (no smoking, no food/drink in sanctuary)
 - Concert start time
 - Etc.
- If you intend to use projector screens for multi-media or just for displaying song lyrics, you will need to book someone to run the display system.
- Do you want or need a musical prelude before the concert? Who will be playing it?
- Determine the choir seating during the concert. Do the choirs sit in the audience when they are not singing, or does this take too much seating away? Remember, you do not need to seat all the choirs as typically two choirs will be up, one on stage and one waiting in the wings.

- Do you want stage decorations, like flowers?
- Arrange for refreshments for the afternoon practice (coffee, juice/water, donuts, fruit, etc) and possibly the evening concert. **It is important that water be available for the choirs during the evening performance.**
- If possible or wanted, arrange with organists from the choirs on who plays with what mass songs. The organ adds an extra sound to mass singing, and helps the choir keep in tune and on beat.
- If you will be using both a piano and organ, have them tuned together. This should be done only when both instruments are there together and acclimatized, and as close to the day of the concert as possible so the tuning won't drift.

Concert Program Layout and Afternoon Practice Layout

- The layout of the program is solely up to the host choir. Just remember that the numbers of people going up and down for the mass choir are large, can take a lot of time, and must be dealt with. The following are suggestions:
 - Start with some mass, go to individual choirs and end with some mass again. This is the typical approach used for most of the Festival concerts. This gives two blocks of mass numbers bookending the concert. The problem with this method is you are moving many men up and down several times which takes several minutes each time and that time should be filled by someone.
 - Start with individual choirs, then all the mass songs at the end. This is the easiest layout because you only have to deal with organizing the men together once, but standing for the entire mass set and the closing is very long, likely too long for many men.
- You must consider what to do between the individual choirs going up and down, and when the mass choir is being organized. Do you have instrumental playing, congregational singing or will the MC announce the next choir and interact with the audience? Remember, the audience likes to sing so a balance between the two is good.
- Estimate the length of the evening concert. If the concert is estimated to exceed 2 hours, adding an intermission into the middle of the concert can be a useful break for the audience, and can help the choirs sell their CD's.
- Select the congregational hymns.

- Complete the layout of the evening program. Include the hymns and the list of sponsors. Have it independently checked for mistakes. The program must be finalized before the printer's cut-off date.
- Organize the entire festival day into time slots, from opening before the choirs arrive, to after the concert is over at ~9:30 PM and the clean-up begins.
- Organize the afternoon practice schedule for the individual choirs and mass choir. There should be refreshments for those members who arrive early. Practice start times should be about 1:30 PM. The individual choirs should practice first, with the closest choir first and furthest last. Give each choir about 30 minutes to run through their set. Putting the mass first is not a good idea as all members have to be there right away. Mass practice can start about 3:30-4:00 PM. All these times are dependent on when the concert starts.

The Morning of the Concert

- Pickup refreshments for the afternoon rehearsal and evening performance.
- Establish home rooms for each choir, and label them so the members know where to go when they arrive. Cover the choir room windows for privacy.
- Even though the choir members are all men, there are still women directors and accompanists, so set up a separate room for the women to change. Cover the windows for privacy.
- If needed, place direction signs on strategic street locations for how to get to the church.
- Leave handout in choir rooms detailing the layout of the day, local restaurants & hotels.
- Allocate space for tables in the foyer for choirs to sell their CD's, sell and take tickets, etc.
- Have a **Welcome** table in the foyer for choir members to fill in name tags with name and choir. One good option is to have different color name tags for each vocal group (tenor 1, tenor 2, bass 1 and bass 2) so that people standing in the wrong section in the mass choir can be identified. If this is done every year then the members will get used to it so let's keep this going.
- Have a ticket table for selling and taking tickets for the evening.
- Bring the directors platform and music stands

- Audio personnel must setup the microphones and the sound board. There needs to be a microphone for the afternoon convenor and the evening MC, the piano should be amplified through the sound system, and extra microphones placed for any soloists. Also having monitors for the choir (to hear the piano) and for the piano (to hear the choir) is invaluable.
- Check with the audio personnel if a live recording (audio and/or video) of the concert is possible.

After the Concert

Be sure to send thank-you's to your sponsors and extra participants. Anything else? Oh yeah, relax... it's over and done for several more years. You can now set the wrap-up meeting date, if you feel it's needed.

Wrap-up Meeting

If needed, there can be a follow-up meeting held a few weeks after the festival with the meeting time and location being set by the host choir. All aspects of the festival are discussed in depth, along with perceived problems of how it was organized and executed. Was the program too long? Was there too many mass pieces or too much extra participation? Things to discuss:

- Each choir comes as one group, and is allowed one vote at this meeting, regardless of how many representatives are at the meeting. Voting is only needed when important changes to the guidelines are required.
- Changes for the next festival concert.
- Present a financial report of the concert day.
- The proceeds from the concert. Typically it can be used by the host choir for whatever they decide.
- Establish the date for mass pieces to be submitted. Right now this is set for Nov 1.
- Select appropriate date (and backup date) for the next concert that can accommodate all choirs.

- Establish the number of mass songs to be sung. Typically, this is 2 for the host choir, 2 from the previous host choir and 1 from each of the other participating choirs. With 5 choirs this presents 7 mass songs (2 + 2 + 1 + 1 + 1).
- Establish the time length for the individual choir slots. Right now this is set at 15 minutes per choir, starting from when the first member walks on stage to when the last member walks off stage. The time length for singing is ~12 minutes, allowing for 3 minutes for getting on and off stage. Note that there is no limit to the number of songs that can be sung within this time restriction as long as you don't exceed the maximum onstage time of 15 minutes.
- The chain of communication is established for the next festival concert. Contact information like e-mail addresses, postal addresses and phone numbers are collected so all the choirs know who to contact. If any of these contacts will be gone for an extended period they must have a backup person. Send this contact list to all choirs.

Conclusion & Contact Information

If this document requires any corrections or additions, please make note of them and send them to Peter Schepers, Woodstock Men of Praise. Your contributions are always appreciated!

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