

# *More than just a Musician*

*The challenge of choir  
leadership*



*By John Riley*

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# Introduction

Anybody who has served as a choir leader or worked under one will be all too aware that good musical skills are only one of many practical and personal qualities required to get the best out of a choir, or indeed any group of musicians.

This guide takes the form of a story in which almost any church musician will recognise something of themselves, or things that they have seen and experienced. It also has to be admitted that mixed among these pages and the situations described lies something of my own steep learning curve in this area!

The churches and situations mentioned are fictional and are not intended to represent or infer judgement on any particular church or denomination. Nevertheless, you might just find elements that seem to be strangely familiar!

All churches are different, and nowhere more so than in the style and quality of their music. Some appear to be naturally endowed, whilst others seem destined to struggle. Yet within this, some surprisingly high standards are often found in the least likely of places, whilst elsewhere a tradition of excellence experiences a marked decline. The same could be told of businesses, schools, sports teams, and most areas of life, yet there is surely a common factor.

It is hoped that these pages will offer some insights as to how to enable the musicians in your church to realise their potential. Many a choir leader or member will identify with many of the issues and situations described and hopefully gain comfort from the knowledge that they are not alone!

## **PART 1 -**

### **‘Quires and places where they sing’**

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George was a professional singer and music teacher who moved into a large town, and wanted to join a church where he could use his musical skills and become involved in the wider life of the church.

George first visited All Souls’ church, well known in the town for its choral tradition and high standard of music. There was a paid choir made up of professional and professional level singers and a fine Victorian organ. There was a regular choirmaster and an organist, both of whom were excellent musicians. Much of the church’s energies and financial resources went into the music and replacing musicians who were temporarily absent or who had left was never a problem. Indeed, All Soul’s was the musical hub and main performance outlet for singers and instrumentalists in the area.

George was impressed by their sound, but it soon became evident that they had very little connection and interest in the congregation and wider life of the church. There was also an ingrained conservatism and defensiveness that made them resistant to any suggestions of change or being more open and enterprising in terms of new repertoire or musical interaction with the congregation. The clergy congregation seemed to have very little influence and also seemed reluctant to challenge the choir for fear of losing them.

There was always a subtle undercurrent of rivalry and one-upmanship among the choir members. Underlying professional jealousies, petty disputes and prejudices would sometimes come to the fore in ways that George found to be particularly saddening.

Although a skilled conductor and vocal trainer, the choirmaster seemed to lack essential ‘people skills’. Any problems with relationships were not faced up to, and all too often met with a burst of temperament or inelegant removal. George concluded that, for all the fine music-making, better leadership was required for things to move forward.

Canal Street Baptist Church could not have been more different. There was a long standing and loyal choir made up almost entirely of elderly and untrained singers. Their role and repertoire were restricted to singing hymns in harmony and simple unison or two part anthems, though with organ accompaniment they could eventually manage a piece of the level of Tye’s ‘O Come Ye Servants of the Lord’. They required a great deal of rehearsal time and help with all but the most basic of material, and in all of this it was clear that much patience and forbearance was required of both choir mistress and singers.

The choir mistress and organist was not a trained musician but knew the repertoire that she taught inside out, and was able to anticipate every likely difficulty and provide the strategies to overcome them. She had a deep understanding of the choir and their capabilities, so that even significant challenges never turned into an obstacle, or a vehicle of potential discouragement. She also had a wonderful and all too rare gift for conveying information and her intentions in a clear and non-intimidating way.

She clearly had all aspects of her role sorted out in advance, and was able to fully devote her attentions and energies to the needs of the choir. There was a clear mutual bond of respect and affection among the musicians, and everyone looked out for everybody else. Most had some official role, such as looking after the robes or laying out the music books, and there was an active social dimension. Even the less able singers were afforded respect because they brought other practical and personal gifts to the running of the choir.

The music was obviously well planned in advance. Everybody knew what was meant to happen, and both the singing and general demeanour indicated that the choir felt assured and at ease with itself.

George reflected that in some ways this church had imparted things through its music that All Souls', for all its high musical standards, had failed to do, and that the role of music went beyond the purity of the notes, very important as this was.

George then had a look at St. Edward's church, but was not tempted to stay. The attitude from the clergy down seemed to be one of apathy and resignation, a tone echoed in the sound of the choir. Not only did they not expect anything of themselves, but it also became quite clear from even George's brief conversations with them that nothing would ever change. They complained constantly about everything, including the people in the church and one another, yet any hint of questioning or criticism would be met by a loyal and united front. They appeared to have no real love of music, nor any interest in serving others, but were merely bonded by a deep negativity and anger at the world. Whether something had made them all like that, or St. Edward's was the sort of place that attracted those of such outlook, George was not quite sure.

The choirmaster was a very competent and experienced musician, but somewhat arrogant and habitually self-seeking. He offered no positive leadership, cared little, and did the absolute minimum of work or preparation. Every so often he would, with seeming relish, throw his weight around over some matter, usually with the only people who were demonstrating some effort or care about what was happening. It was probably quite understandable that nobody should see the point in making an effort for somebody who was not going to do the same for them.

The choir clearly had cathedral pretensions, with all the pomp and trappings, but none of the grace. Everything that they did invited comparison, all of it unfavourable. Not one thing was done well, and their regular musical interjections extinguished any spark of life that might have been embryonic in the rest of the service. It was not even as if they displayed unrealistic musical ambitions, just a particularly sad form of vanity and power.

Music in the church was an available means of expression, on the same level as the amateur dramatic society or the golf club. Perhaps the right type of leadership could have done something both humanly and musically with this wounded group of individuals. But George saw little chance of that happening.

## **PART 2 -**

### **Surveying the situation**

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In the end, George settled at Holy Trinity church, which he was able to observe in greater detail. This church was very different again, with an evangelical ministry and a large congregation that included many students and young professionals. Music was provided by a dual tradition of worships bands and choir and organ, which in itself added a certain complexity in terms of the focus of liturgy and resources.

The role of choir director and organist had fallen to Malcolm who was a trained musician, an excellent keyboard player, but not a singer or instinctive conductor. The choir had regularly fluctuated in numerical and musical strength for a variety of reasons and, unlike Canal St. Baptist, was made up mainly of busy professionals, often with very demanding lives within and outside the church.

Midweek rehearsals started officially at 7:30, though this was in effect the time when Malcolm would rush in and start photocopying music, put the lights on, and set up the electronic keyboard. At this point the first choir members would arrive. Since they were usually hazy about exactly what was going to be sung at the rehearsal and on Sunday, there was little that they could do but chat and wait for something to happen. The rehearsal was frequently interrupted with questions. Further distractions were created as late arrivals were issued with new music, or music which they had not brought with them. Work and family commitments, other interests and weekends away meant that very often there were few members in common between a particular rehearsal and a service, and even after several weeks of working at a piece some people might still be seeing it for the first time. It would often emerge, usually at the last minute, that a complete vocal section



would be missing for a service, and a piece would have to be abandoned with nothing readily available to take its place. This was obviously very frustrating for Malcolm, who often induced the same feeling in the choir, in effect punishing those present for the absence of those who were not.

The choir relied completely on Malcolm to teach them their parts. Occasionally some members would persuade him to go through their parts individually at home. Attempts to get the choir to do some personal preparation met with little effective response.

Malcolm often seemed to be learning his part on the spot, or had prepared hurriedly, missing details that would be important to the singers, this resulting in further interruptions and uncertainty. To survive this situation, Malcolm instinctively tried to please everybody by being democratic rather than leading with a plan, which merely led to the stronger personalities taking over with no clear direction or result.

Malcolm was clearly learning his conducting skills on the job and George often felt that his gestures reacted to rather than shaped what the choir was doing. Where a piece was clearly not well learnt, either through insufficient practice time or being far too ambitious, Malcolm's gestures became emphatic and anxious with little positive effect.

He was an excellent organist and was able to draw some impressive sounds from his large instrument. Unfortunately, he often seemed to try to disguise and compensate for the lack of confidence of the singing by a substantial organ accompaniment, and wallowed in the wash of sound, oblivious to what was really going on in the choir stalls some distance away.

The only other accompaniment instrument was a good quality electronic keyboard, but Malcolm felt strongly that it was a stylistically inappropriate instrument to accompany even the lighter textured 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>- century works.

The half-hour rehearsal before the services also seemed to be characterised by a sense of strain and anxiety. The unsettled demeanour and a steady flow of questions, explanations and movement must have betrayed this to some early arrivals in the congregation. However, the congregation as a whole always seemed impressed by the choir, which could sound quite professional on a good day.

Nevertheless, George concluded that things could be done a lot better.

Malcolm was clearly a very conscientious musician and was trying very hard, but he was personally over stretched in his life within and outside the church. He frequently moaned about the situation, but felt powerless to shape it, and was cynical about any suggestion that things could be made to work better. He confessed to feeling very depressed, isolated, and unappreciated by clergy, choir, and congregation. Thoughts of resigning his role were never far away, yet he could not see himself living without it.

As George talked to individual choir members, it became evident that many found themselves in demanding and chaotic situations at work or home where they felt powerless and exhausted. In many ways they were looking to the choir to provide some uplift, but just encountered more of the same. Nevertheless, George also sensed a great fondness for one another and for Malcolm in particular, and a genuine wish to express their faith through the music. He also detected a sense of openness, honesty, and trust, which contrasted markedly with the situation at All Souls’.

There was a certain dogged determination and long-suffering quality about many of the members, though George reflected that but for their patience, the quality of organisation would have been forced to improve a long time ago. The clergy seemed very complementary, but George felt that they tended to view music as a helpful background whose content and place could be moved around at will, rather than seeing it as an integral and participatory form of worship. There also seemed to be a notion that the most spiritually inspired and attuned thoughts and activities were invariably last minute and informally presented ones.

George wrote to a friend about his experiences in these various churches and remarked: “They were all very different in their traditions and resources, but what struck me most were the ways in which they managed and optimised these resources. Although the standard of singing at the Baptist church was nothing like good as at All Souls’ and Holy Trinity, it was the quality of leadership there which I found most impressive.”

George had, over the years, supplemented his professional singing work with supply teaching in schools, not just in music but also to cover other subject areas. He observed that he had seen “...all the extremes in pupil ability, motivation, behaviour, social background and attitudes, not to mention that of the quality of school buildings, equipment and resources; ...but all of what I counted as ‘good schools’ had one thing in common; leadership. Here, the teachers and Headmaster set by example, defined the ethos and tone with the result that everybody from the staff down knew what was expected, and were much more likely to give of their best and take a pride in what they did. I remember schools in deprived urban estates with poor leaky buildings and few resources, but which had an inspirational and dedicated management, resulting in a purposeful and happy atmosphere for staff and pupils alike.

The academic results might never have been wonderful, but the enthusiasm and quality in the music making could be quite stunning. I equally remember some schools in affluent residential areas where the children often possessed sufficient motivation and personal organisation to achieve highly, despite the obvious complacency and lack of care and direction from the teachers. They would always have good music and academic results, but it could have been so much better. Many of my colleagues surprised themselves at where they ended up preferring to work.

Strangely enough, I was seeing these very same things when going round the various churches. It is not a case of wanting to win prizes or trying to turn church choirs into a bunch of professionals for its own sake. Surely, enabling people to give of their best is a form of service and spiritual discipline, and that allows them to enable the congregation in other ways...”

George’s friend replied: “You clearly have a sense of calling in your new church, and a newcomer of your experience would have a lot to offer. Why not write to Malcolm with some constructive suggestions and encouragement based on what you have seen?”

## PART 3 -

### Enabling the leadership

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#### *Delegate and plan....*

George's letter tried to get to the heart of the problem: "First of all, delegate and plan; create routine and expectation. Delegating tasks eases pressure on you and allows your mind to settle and focus on your prime task, i.e. leading and directing the rehearsal. Make the choir members become part of its organisation, rather than being unsatisfied and helpless consumers. Identify and cultivate other gifts within your choir. Not everybody might be a strong singer, but even the weakest member may have abilities that would be very useful to the choir. This is psychologically important for both you and the choir. You cannot expect things of yourself if you do not expect things of them. You must be open with them over what you feel is acceptable and unacceptable and try to define the situation. Do not wait for things to boil over before saying something. Paradoxically, it is perhaps this very lack of leadership, which is making them wanting to rely on you even more, and creating a downward spiral that makes everyone unhappy. In planning your music programme, do it with the aid of a small committee. This will help you to anticipate technical and other practical problems with the pieces or their general suitability before they occur.

## ***Have something up your sleeve***

Ensure that there is a solid back up repertoire that everybody is secure with, just in case a new piece has to be dropped at the last minute, and include some that do not require a full choir, for example plainsong and two- or three-part anthems. Identify potential solos from your choir members. This will give them an added feeling of belonging and provide a useful back up. Why not plan a few simple items just for the fun of it, even something like a madrigal that is unlikely to be sung at a service? Never allow a situation to arise where the choir has turned up and there is nothing suitable to sing. When things do not go to plan, do not make them share your discomfort and annoyance. Reward the people who have come and who might have made a considerable effort and sacrifice to be there. Give them a joy and a sense of having gained something for themselves, not just having fulfilled a necessary duty.

## ***Being free to serve others***

Be ready for your choir at the start of rehearsal. It sends a much more positive signal if your mind is freed to greet them as they arrive, than if your head is buried in sorting your own problems out. Be able to quickly share the things of their day if necessary. Start the rehearsal promptly and positively, for example with a light-hearted warm up. If you set the right tone from the outset, other things will follow.

Identify a chunk of time when you are not under pressure, both to plan and learn the material. In this way much will already be in place by the time you come to rehearse it. After a tiring day your mind is much freer and more settled to deal with more immediate issues and distractions, and the needs of others.

Leadership is about being one step ahead and seeing that little bit further. Pre-empt and anticipate any problems that people are likely to have or wish to raise. This is achieved not only by good planning and knowing your score, but by attuning your ear and overall senses to what is happening in the choir stalls. The fact that choir members constantly need to interrupt and alert you to a particular problem is a sure sign that this is not being achieved.

### ***The wider role***

Choirs communicate to the congregation by more than merely the notes. Confidence, corporate discipline, ease, dignity and joy should go hand in hand with the singing in encouraging worship. This is equally true of informal and formal styles of worship.

Their attitude to you and one another says a lot to the rest of the congregation, and if the choir is unhappy, riven with internal strife, or generally under constant stress, everybody loses out.

It is not a form of showmanship or elitism to encourage an orderly procession into the church, or at least a settled appearance in the choir seats and co-ordination in rising and sitting down. Congregations are notorious for being restless and talkative. It is part of the choir's role to help focus and still the hearts and minds of the congregation and a short time of prayer and committal can be very valuable.

## ***Build from the foundations upwards***

Spend plenty of time on the basics such as how to breathe and enunciate and project the words. Even seemingly peripheral details and simple tasks such as sitting, standing, holding music, and general demeanour and appearance contribute immeasurably to the overall feel and ethos to a choir. Success in these areas is far more likely to engender pride and commitment than a constant diet of challenges and hurdles to overcome.

It is an old truism that it is better to sing a simple piece well, than a difficult one badly. Most congregations will not turn the noses up to a short simple piece, but would find anything sung badly both wearing and a damper to worship. Be also aware that what may be a masterpiece of contrapuntal ingenuity to you, might be indecipherable cacophony to somebody else. Moreover, they will respond much more to confident singing than an ‘authentic’ or impressive accompaniment. In failing to compromise or be pragmatic you are likely to sacrifice more than you gain. There is a big difference between giving your choir challenges and fresh ideas, with a few calculated risks now and again, and submitting them to constant unease and stress through over ambitious repertoire and lack of organisation.

Ensure that the music is properly stored and filed and that there are no little piles or corners that gather dirt and dust. Even though you have the appropriate license, do not rely too much on photocopies. They can be messy to handle and store. A small number of well- chosen anthem books issued to everybody are well worth the investment. They are much more flexible and enable a piece to be started straight away. They also represent a corpus of repertoire that can be readily seen and identified with.



Retaining and attracting new members is an essential priority. Do not rely on appeals from the front of the church or notices. Approach individuals directly. Losing members for whatever reason makes things more difficult for those remaining, and it is also very demoralising and lonely to be in a large building with hardly anybody there. Choir members come for a variety of good (and sometimes not so worthy) reasons, including the opportunity to meet and work together with a variety of other people. Only hardened and conscientious professionals are there just for a musical challenge. Do not neglect this social dimension.

Society as a whole is geared towards making consumer choices from a carousel of competing products and services. Whether we like it or not, this exercising of choices spills over into the church. People have a finite amount of time and energy to spare; the choices that they make with their free time is determined in part at least by what appears most attractive and relevant to their needs and interests. Of course, it is hoped that any choir is pervaded by a spirit of self giving, loyalty and sacrifice, but a choir must also be attractive to belong to if it is to rank high in people's priorities.

The ideal is obviously for each choir member to come to every rehearsal and service, but that might not be possible in the immediate term at least. If you are not properly organised and there is anxiety and bad feeling in the choir, a new member is less likely to want to come again.

Try to ensure too that those who have domestic or work schedules that unavoidably preclude full attendance can participate wherever possible. For these people, the choir may well be their precious weekly moment of sanity, escape and refreshment!

## ***Discipline through example***

Telling people what to do, where they are going wrong, and even the occasional (good-humoured) ticking off has its place. In general however, too much talk becomes ineffective, and can have the potential to fuel resentments and disagreements. At the end of a tiring day especially, people easily turn off and want to enjoy the physical act of singing, rather than processing and digesting yet more information and instruction. Very young children respond primarily by imitating physical example, whereas older people act far more upon verbal instruction and reasoning. Nevertheless, most people of any age respond to an attractive example that they want to emulate and achieve for themselves.

Before a rehearsal you must have a conception of each piece and what you are wanting from the choir. Shape rather than react to what the choir is doing. Impart confidence rather than uncertainty and anxiety. Remember that you are there to give what the choir does not already have, not to mirror, or even obstruct what is already there.

Once your singing programme has been agreed on stick to it as much as possible. That is not to say that you should not listen to suggestions or be open to adjustments where required. Allowing the choir to be run on the opinions of the moment is no way forward, and if the programme is well thought out people will not feel the need to constantly voice their opinions. All the great men of the bible were leaders of people with both vision and humility. After a hard day, people want to be led, but led well.

Start on time, even if there is only one person there. Reward them for their punctuality by going through their part and talking over any individual problems that they are having with the music. Knowing how to deal with supposedly mature and responsible adults who are constantly late for no good reason or forget their music is never easy, particularly when they are all volunteers. Nevertheless, lead by example and anticipate such eventualities so that they do not disrupt the flow of proceedings for everybody else.

Lazy and undisciplined habits of individuals are hard to root out when they pervade the whole culture of a choir. Conversely, the more members that exercise good choir discipline and routine, the more exposed and uncomfortable the rest will feel. They too will hopefully get the message that they can achieve better.

### ***Don't expect everybody to be mind readers***

Type up the programme with details of what is due to be sung and when. An attractive and informative programme is like a business card and should be given to anybody expressing even the most tentative of interest. The choir members do not have to constantly elicit these details from you and interrupt rehearsals with questions.

Institute an attendance chart for display so that you know who is due to be there at rehearsals and services, and how familiar they will be with the music when they arrive. This also helps to commit individuals to being there and you do not end up planning an ambitious piece for double choir when there are only due to be five people there!

## ***Gaining support from others***

I have outlined the responsibilities that you have to others, but others have also a responsibility to you. Ensure that you obtain the necessary guidelines and support from the clergy. Insist that the clergy plan with you as much as possible and encourage the use of music as an integral and structured part of worship. Part of the problem is that many choirs and organists have proved to be an obstructive and inflexible part of the church. You should take pains to obviate this fear, and display a willingness to be open and flexible in response to the needs of the service and wider life of the parish.

At present you are vacillating between thoughts of carrying on and putting up with it, or resigning and walking away completely. But there are other ways of building on the very many good things that are already in the choir and the church as a whole. Leadership is about improving things where you are, not recreating an imagined ideal somewhere else.

## ***Putting experience to positive effect***

When a problem occurs, for example a particularly fraught or unhappy rehearsal, or a performance collapsing completely, do not be drawn too much by the immediate symptoms. The roots of such things generally lie much further back, and with careful analysis and planning can often be anticipated and headed off. You might have seen the film 'Groundhog Day' where a TV reporter wakes up each morning to find the day repeating itself. Each day he modifies his attitude and response to a particular event, and by the end of the film, the character of the reporter and the events of his day are transformed. And so with leadership; do not resign yourself to the inevitability of events, but learn from them. You will always make misjudgements, and there will always be the unexpected, but if you are habitually one step ahead, others will be far more tolerant of the odd mistake.

## *Productive relationships*

There are certain situations when a phenomenally gifted musician can be a tyrannical bully with those equally dedicated to musical perfection above all else, and get away with it. Holy Trinity is not one of them. Many a brilliant musician has severely prejudiced their reputations and careers through an inability to maintain productive relationships with others. The choir may struggle with a piece that went so well on the previous rehearsal. Perhaps they have had a particularly wearing day, or some strong singers who they relied on are absent. Your instincts are at present to be puzzled and annoyed, but no amount of bullying and cajoling is going to enable them to bridge the gap between their reality and your expectation and sense of what 'should be'. You must sense immediately that there is a problem, and without making them even more uncomfortable, cheerfully go back to basic note learning until they regain confidence. Assuming that they are all trying their best, (and perhaps even if they are not), nothing is to be gained by being other than positive and encouraging.

As an organist, you are used to the notes and tone colours already being there, and that (assuming the instrument is in good condition) you alone are responsible for the success or failure in moulding this raw material into good music. It is therefore so easy to regard a choir as a musical machine that you would control like an organ. On the contrary, it is a partnership. An amateur choir of this kind is an imperfect medium of expression that must be responded to in a sensitive and pragmatic way.

Be very aware of the various sensitivities and insecurities that exist within any body of people. Once people start feeling the need to be defensive and start moving onto their strong ground, then all sorts of bogus issues crop up to cloud and obstruct progress. An ample supply of flexibility, humour, patience, and forgiveness is therefore essential. A choir is no different from any other group of people. There will inevitably be bouts of bad temper, difficult individuals, and subtle power struggles. But you must always stand back and avoid reacting negatively. A person who regularly experiences difficulty in learning their part, or someone who has caused you hurt and anger, could be the very one who comes to your rescue at a particular moment. Quality relationships are in some ways your biggest asset in supporting not only the role of the choir, but you personally. A church is hardly going to be attractive to outsiders, or present a credible message if dissent and bad feeling compromise a key section of its ministry. Choirs and organist have all too often demonstrated a genius for bringing down a whole church community.

The keys to good relationships between a choir leader and among choir members themselves are trust and good will. The absence of trust often breeds suspicion and individuals can easily feel threatened or less than compliant. Good will is created by going that extra mile, being that extra bit more patient and forgiving with difficult individuals or situations, and being generous in your regard and treatment of others.

Ample reserves of trust and goodwill are essential for those times when you or the choir are under particular pressure and you all need to go that extra mile with one another.

## *Can anyone join?*

I have left this until last since it is probably the single most difficult test of a choir leader's judgement and diplomatic skills. What does one do, for example, when somebody is keen to join the choir, yet is patently lacking in beauty of tone, general musical skills, or an understanding of rehearsal procedure and etiquette? Is it right that the inclusion of one or two less able individuals should be allowed to slow down the pace of rehearsal, restrict the levels of range of the music that can be performed, and markedly compromise the overall quality of sound? Are there not perhaps ways of rehearsing and performing with singers of greatly varying abilities. Would it be possible to make arrangements of the music to provide some differentiation of musical difficulty within the score, so that all can participate without hindering the progress of others?

Is that person who is desperate to join really that interested in music? Perhaps what they are actually wanting is something to which they can belong and where they can feel noticed or valued. Always take care not to abdicate responsibility by a point blank refusal, or by a half-hearted agreement when clearly it is not in the interests of that person or the choir. Try to be pro-active in finding them a way forward, perhaps through another role within the choir or, through the help of others in some other area of the church.

Hardest of all perhaps is knowing what to do with the choir member who has sung faithfully and well for many years, but who is conspicuously past their best and indeed perhaps now something of a liability.

There is no single right or wrong answer and obviously the response to these issues in a cathedral would be very different to that in a struggling village church. What has to be discerned is whether the value and uniqueness of the choir lies in the provision of beautiful music and an aural and visual lead to worship; or whether it is in the act of participation and creation of fellowship. It should of course be all of those things, but different situations may require different emphases and priorities. The same considerations should be given to the use of instruments in church, particularly if there is already an effective means of accompanying and leading worship.

Strangely enough, these do not appear to be issues that you are currently facing. Nevertheless, it is well worth remembering that a lot more than you may realise can depend on the wise and considered treatment of such situations as and when they occur.

In concluding, may I say that you have a great musical talent, and real commitment to what you are doing, but to this must be added other qualities and skills. That is your task”.

Some six months later, George wrote to his friend: “There is a real difference in the whole feel of the choir now. Malcolm followed up most of my suggestions and instituted some ideas of his own. Everything feels a lot more at ease with itself, new people have joined, and the choir has broken out of its unproductive spiral. Malcolm has also had to come to terms with his life as a whole. Like so many talented and conscientious musicians I come across, he was trying to develop too many musical interests and ambitions all at once. Moving on all fronts simultaneously usually means that few things are done really well, and everything is done under strain.



The choir will probably never be as good an ensemble as All Soul's, but they are now functioning far better as musicians and personalities, and isn't that the very thing that we are trying to achieve...?"

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### **John Riley**

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Further details and materials can be found on:

<http://www.johnrileyorganist.com>