



*THE*  
**GORBIK**  
*METHOD*

**Vladimir Gorbik's**  
**51 Rules**  
**for Surviving and Thriving**  
**as an Orthodox Christian Choir Director**

Dear Choir director,

So, you seriously think that your main job as a new choir director is to:

- *forgive singers everything for the sake of maintaining peace and friendship in the choir loft*
- *trample on your conducting knowledge and skills, which you acquired over the years at a considerable expense – just to appease your choir*
- *and sacrifice your expertise in the fire of your singers' preferences and passions?*

If you seriously think that, then it's better for you to never work with singers at all, so as not to *ruin* your parish choir!

A conductor in the choir loft is a warrior fighting for the truth, not a lackey at the entrance to an expensive restaurant or hotel.

Too many choir directors assume that directing is simply about giving the correct pitch and helping the choir start singing together. Others have no idea that there are several inseparable components in the work of a church choir director: ***professional technique***, their own ***spiritual efforts***, as well as ***knowing how to communicate with people***.

While the *Choir Directing Compendium* doesn't deal directly with professional conducting technique (we have *The Gorbik Method* course for that) or spiritual efforts (please consult your spiritual father), it was prepared as a short reference for (mostly) new choir directors specifically in Western countries who often face very distinct culturally-based issues that can potentially destroy choirs and even parishes.

I hope that the *Choir Directing Compendium* will help you understand several areas of a choir director's work that will make your church choir sound truly appropriate for divine services, whether you have a background in conducting and choir singing or not.

Yours,

Vladimir Gorbik

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## *Choir Directing Compendium*

### **1. Being a choir director is primarily a *vocation*, not a *job***

If you're in it for the money, or to show off your talent (or lack thereof), it would be much better for you to get a different job.

### **2. Your first job is to *listen to your priest***

The choir director who doesn't listen and obey the priest harms his own soul, the priest, the choir, and the whole congregation.

### **3. Pray before services**

No matter how professional you are, you *need* God's help.

### **4. Make sure you have the support of your priest**

Remember that Orthodox choral singing is based on *obedience*. If you want your singers to obey you, you – in turn – must obey the priest.

Discuss repertoire choices, his preferences, and services with him. Tell him about your problematic singers. Build a good relationship with him. *Solve problems together.*

### **5. Avoid last-minute additions to your choir**

Anybody who wants to sing **MUST** get a blessing from the priest. Otherwise they *do not have the right* to invite themselves to the choir. Singing in the choir is an honor, a privilege, and a service. Instilling this attitude solves an incredible amount of problems and weeds out prideful and arrogant singers who can potentially destroy your choir. Don't think it will never happen to you. It has happened to many great directors already.

## **6. Regularly check in with your priest to make sure he's OK with how you're doing**

Your job is to help the priest and the congregation to pray. If your priest is really bothered by that one Cherubic Hymn you're singing, you need to know about it and fix it.

## **7. Agree with your priest that when in doubt, you will send people to him**

The priest has the most authority. When in doubt, appeal to him.

## **8. Educate yourself**

If you're the parish choir director but you do not invest into at least the most basic choral directing skills, you're usurping the role and harming your soul.

## **9. A good conductor never stops learning**

Even if you've got a Ph.D. in Music, there are still things you might not know. Be open and curious about what else you can find out to benefit your parish choir.

## **10. The must-have qualities of a good conductor:**

- *Flexibility*
- *Strong skills*
- *A sense of humor*
- *The ability to admit when you're wrong (even to yourself)*
- *An open mind and a willingness to keep learning*

## **11. Be the leader**

Remember: you're the one who has the blessing to do this job. You carry the burden of this responsibility before God. Think for a moment: when you stand at the Last Judgment, will you be asked about whether you were "nice" or whether you were *doing your job well?*

Being a good leader is not about being nice or liked. It's about being consistent in fulfilling your blessing. **You cannot be nice at the expense of your obedience.**

**12. A more varied repertoire doesn't mean better quality singing**

It's better to sing simple pieces well than lots of different hymns badly.

**13. Help your singers grow by challenging them**

If you want your choir to sound good, help your singers avoid the "same old same old" trap. When you sing the same pieces over and over for years, choir members tune out and stop paying attention to how they perform the music. If they mentally check out, so does the congregation.

If on the other hand you periodically challenge your choir to learn new things or – at least – improve the pieces they already know, you will breathe new life into your choir and maybe even – parish prayer life.

**14. The biggest challenge for a choir conductor is usually not even about the musical aspect but about working with people**

This means that aside from musical knowledge you need to know how to communicate well.

**15. Be a leader, not a follower**

Don't let singers' strong opinions sway you. Your job is to follow the priest, not the choir. However, you can be open to their suggestions. It's not about *autocracy*, it's about *communication*.

**16. Have a great relationship with your choir**

Spend time together at parish feast days, have choir parties, sing together outside of services.

**17. Don't have *too good* of a relationship with your choir**

Know when to draw the line. You should be friendly but not allow familiarity. Otherwise it can backfire in the choir loft. People will think the choir suddenly became a democracy. Avoid at all costs.

**18. Always be on the lookout for ways to inspire your choir to do a better job**

Talk to your singers about the big WHY of what they're doing. The mission of the Orthodox choir, the responsibility before God and parish, the wisdom of ancient church hymns and how to channel it to the congregation through their singing.

**19. As one priest said: get on fire for Christ and invite others to watch you burn**

Be on fire for your vocation. Keep learning, get inspired and motivate your choir. A lukewarm choir director produces lukewarm singers, which in turn produces lukewarm prayers.

Get on fire with the love of serving God through singing on the kliros, and let others hear you burn and get inspired themselves.

**20. Connect with your singers**

You are working on something beautiful — together. You are serving God — together. You should be doing it with love and understanding, working *together* not *against* each other.

**21. Know how to give tough love**

Everyone occasionally needs to hear that they've messed up. Otherwise it's all too easy to start thinking that you're perfect. Once we think we are perfect, we start degrading. And so does our mission.

Kindly but firmly remind choir members that they are singing because – hopefully – they want to serve the Lord by offering Him their talents. This puts them under certain obligations: we must offer Him of our *best* efforts, not leftovers.

You can even warn them that you will use the term “leftovers” during service when you feel that they are sliding into autopilot. They will know what you mean, smile when you say it, and strive to do better.

## **22. Learn how to be assertive**

This is a promise: you *will* have difficult singers one day. So be prepared to deal with them *in the moment*. Remember that **you** are in charge (even if they don’t like it) and **you** have the authority of the priest behind you. Anyone trying to “back-seat conduct” is not “striving lawfully” (2 Tim. 2:5).

## **23. Never waste a good crisis**

Use change of any kind in the parish: new priest, new choir director (you!), new people coming in to sing, COVID, etc. to your choir’s advantage. Use anything and *everything* to introduce the change you wish to see happen.

Introduce:

- *Weekly rehearsals*
- *Musical tests*
- *Competitions*
- *A different choir layout (arrange singers in several quartets as opposed to by part), etc.*

## **24. Make a plan with your priest – ahead of time – on your choral policy, and stick to it**

The policy should cover who is allowed to come to sing and who isn’t. At what point in the service it’s OK to join the choir and at what point it’s way too late.

Agree that anyone wishing to sing must get the priest’s blessing first. When a troublemaker appears in your choir right as you’re about to sing the first “Amen” at Liturgy, you will be ready to deal with them by sending them away kindly.

## **25. Be more American**

**Always** blame the policy. Make it a policy (call it a tradition) that a new singer *cannot sing without asking for a blessing first*. If new singers come often, put a sign at the entrance to your choir.

## **26. Recruit ~~bodyguards~~ choir guards**

Hopefully your relationship with your choir is such that you have a few good supporters among the singers. If new people suddenly appear during a service – this is disrespectful and should not be tolerated! – when you’re too busy to deal with the newcomer, make sure you have someone who can turn to the newcomer and kindly say:

“I’m sorry, but you have to get Father’s blessing if you want to sing.” Have them look the newcomer in the eye steadily and smile, and hold their eye until they look away. Otherwise the more sneaky ones will still find a way to blend into the group — and potentially spoil the service. And you will have to take responsibility for the failure.

## **27. Deal with disobedience - decisively**

When someone sneaks into the choir at the wrong time, despite warnings that a blessing needs to be received first, etc. you will have to deal with this promptly. Talk to them seriously about such behavior being *unacceptable*. And since this is extremely difficult for those who are introverts/compliant/kind choir directors...

## **28. Have a script ready for those conversations when new people come**

Do not believe what newcomers say about their ability to sing. We live in an age of delusion. They may tell you they are a choir director/soprano/bass/Pavarotti himself. Always *test* before letting them sing! Say thank you and invite them to come to your next choir practice. Speaking of which,

## **29. You do have regular practices, don’t you?**

Not only are they necessary to:

- a. Learn new music
- b. Correct mistakes
- c. Stretch your singers' skills and abilities

They also provide a great testing ground for newcomers who may not turn out to be anything close to Pavarotti at all.

**30. Plan what you will say in case a new person shows up to choir practice and it turns out they can't sing at all**

After practice, kindly but firmly say that unfortunately, it doesn't seem like they would fit into your choir. That if they take lessons (with you or a teacher of their choosing), you can check in with them in a couple of months to see if there has been any progress.

You're not being mean. You are guarding your choir and setting the standards high. It's part of your (very difficult) job.

**31. Plan what you will say in case a new person shows up to choir practice and it turns out they can sing only *a little bit***

If you feel that there's hope, allow them to sing only the *litanies*. Put them next to a strong singer and have the singer listen to the newcomer to see if they're doing well. **Have an official trial period for every new singer.**

**32. Be prepared for the day when someone tries to gaslight you into believing you promised something that never happened, such as:**

- *You agreed that you would take them into the choir if they take one single voice lesson*
- *You promised to give them a solo*
- *You told them you were abdicating in their favor*

Calmly say: "I'm afraid it's not how that happened."

If you have an inkling that this singer could be a potential problem, write down the gist of every significant conversation as soon as possible to review when the problem arises. ***And then implement Rule #4.***

### **33. Learn to delegate**

You can't and shouldn't do everything yourself. Ask your singers for help with making copies, setting up music, finding and collecting bookmarks, making liturgy/vigil folders, dealing with problematic people, etc.

### **34. Do not take on additional *obediences* in the parish**

Make sure you're doing your main obedience well. So well that you are inspiring others. Someone else can heat the water for the coffee hour. You have a lot of work already. *This rule should apply to singers as well.*

### **35. Elevate your singers' thinking**

Remind them constantly *why they are here*. They are not here to:

- Show off their voices
- Have a good time
- Feel superior to other parishioners/singers

A singer's job is to ***serve***. Serving comes with labor and responsibilities. Their main responsibility is to *sing well enough for God Himself*. Widespread popular opinion that parish choirs are just supposed to make a "joyful noise" is an excuse to settle for a mediocre service.

### **36. Don't make your singers feel bad**

If you need to give singers some bad news, or tell them they're not as cool as they think they are, *try to do it calmly and with love*. Your message will be more effective. Also, if you continually make your singers feel bad, they will be more likely to quit.

### **37. Remind your singers why they are singing**

Are they here to make money? To give back to the community? To make themselves feel good? To feel important? Or are they there to serve God? Often, it's a combination. Regularly remind them of their responsibility before the parish, before themselves, before you, your priest, and the Lord Himself.

### **38. Avoid showing weakness**

Don't be sullen, rattled, or upset with your choir. Part of your job as a professional is to be your choir's **leader**. People are people: if they see weakness, they may want to exploit it.

### **39. Play to your strengths: repertoire**

Don't be the proverbial director who chooses pieces that don't fit their choir. The result is painful to the ear and distracting from prayer.

If you have 17 basses but only two sopranos, you should think about choosing hymns that let the basses lead while sopranos take on a supporting role.

If your women singers sound better than your men singers, choose arrangements that allow the women to take the lead while the men play a supporting role and vice versa.

### **40. Play to your strengths: when allowing singers into your choir**

If you're a non-confrontational person who's uncomfortable with conflict, don't let known troublemakers into your choir. Decide on a course of action/policy (See rule #17) you will always implement with new singers and have a script ready so you always know what to say.

### **41. Play to your strengths: choosing your key**

Just because a piece is written in A major doesn't mean you are **obligated** to sing it in A major. Perhaps it's winter and your whole choir

is struggling with a cold and they can't handle their usual high notes.  
Solution: pitch it down.

If - on the other hand - a beautiful piece is too low for your choir,  
feel free to experiment with pitching it up.

Remember **Rules #10** and **48**: be flexible.

**42. Diction: Pay attention to the way your choir pronounces words.**

Most people bring in their regional peculiarities into their singing.  
This can be a big problem for choirs that sing in English.

**43. Diction: Southern Singers:**

**Watch out for:** Vowels that *move*

**Common habits:**

- "Ah" → *ah-uh* (*God* → *gah-uhd*)
- "Eh" → *eh-ih* (*bed* → *bay-id*)
- Long vowels glide instead of staying steady

**Fix:** Freeze the vowel. Sing the **first** sound only.

**44. Diction: The Midwest: Flat, Spread, and Smiley**

**Watch out for:** Wide vowels

**Common habits:**

- "Ee" is spread and tense
- "Eh" drifts toward "ay"
- "Ah" is flat (*Amen* → *Eh-men*)

**Fix:** Less smile, more vertical space. Think **tall vowels**, not wide ones.

**45. Diction: East Coast (Especially Northeast): Tight or Modified**

**Watch out for:** Tension and over-darkening

**Common habits:**

- “Ah” → “aw” or “uh”
- Short vowels are tight
- Final consonants steal vowel time

**Fix:** Release jaw and tongue. Keep the vowel long *before* the consonant.

**46. Diction: Everyone: The “Uh” Habit**

**Watch out for:** Neutral vowels (schwa)

**Common habits:**

- *Glory* → *gluh-ree*
- *Alleluia* loses clarity
- Inner syllables disappear

**Fix:** Every vowel matters—even the small ones. Clear ≠ loud

**47. Diction: Consonants!**

Some regions tend to swallow consonants, while others tend to overpronounce.

Be careful so that *Lord* doesn’t become *lore* (changes the meaning, doesn’t it?)

*God* doesn't become *Guh*  
*This* doesn't turn into *thi*

*Sing* can become *sssssssing*  
*Mercy* in *Lord, have mercy* can become *meRRRRRcy* or *merssssssy*

Examples of popping consonants: *P-praise, T-ruth, K-king*

American choirs don't usually sing the wrong consonants—they sing them at the wrong time, with the wrong weight.

#### **48. Develop flexibility**

Things will rarely – if ever – be perfect. Be prepared for any eventuality at all times, so you're always ready to serve the Lord – whether you're directing a 20-person choir, a 4-person ensemble, or a duet.

Make sure you have the right repertoire, know how to adapt a piece to a small or large group, how to pitch in a more comfortable key, who will take on the additional duties of reading, etc.

If it's winter and half of your singers have a bad cold and the other half couldn't come because of dangerous road conditions, will you still be able to sing that Cherubic Hymn with the soprano and alto solos? Definitely not.

Always have (and sing regularly!) simpler pieces to practice for the time when *everything* goes wrong.

#### **49. Be the right type of intermediary**

The choir director is the *intermediary* between the faithful and the composer, and moreover, the most dangerous kind of intermediary.

If the choir conductor misunderstands the composer's piece, if he doesn't understand the *meaning* of the hymns he will be conducting, there

is no way that the faithful will be able to understand the *theology* or the *beauty* of the piece. Think of the responsibility this puts on you as choir director.

**50. Grow spiritually alongside musical skill**

Directing Orthodox music should shape the soul as much as the ear, forming attentiveness, discipline, and reverence. Don't forget to use **Rules #3 and 6.**

**51. Remember that the devil enters the church through the choir loft.**

Be on your guard, pray, and explain to your choir that they, too, will inevitably experience temptations.

*The End and Glory To God.*