

Winter 2020

JAMES HAWKINS MUSIC

**Guidance for choir leaders and teachers:
How to make better remote recordings of your
choir members**

<https://jameshawkinsmusic.com>

Introduction

- This guide is for **choir directors, leaders and teachers** who are planning to produce quality audio recordings of their choir or vocal group, for upcoming virtual performances and online concerts, or other digital release.
- I want to make sure you get the best result possible from your singers who will be recording themselves remotely. Following this guide will enable you to get your recordings professionally edited and mixed, so they sound great!

Introduction

A few small things can make a big difference to the end result. Let's get started!

The basic requirements to make a decent home recording:

- Each choir member will need **headphones** and **two devices** - one for playback of an accompaniment or vocal guide - and another to record them singing. Or you can encourage using an app like TopLine (see slide 16).
- It's essential that the accompaniment playback and live vocal performance are isolated. **Our aim is to only record the voice.**

Preparation

Preparation of accompaniment

Singers will need to know when and what to sing. There are various scenarios to consider.

1. Do you have a pre-recorded instrumental accompaniment?

(This could be an MP3/WAV backing track downloaded from the Internet, it could be generated by a MIDI synthesizer from within a DAW, or it could be a home acoustic recording.*)

- You'll need to supply this to your singers as an audio file that they can easily download and play on a smart device or computer. Ideally it would include a pre-recorded guide vocal which they can sing along and synchronise with for each harmony part.
- If you are able to create a simple piano accompaniment as MIDI file, please get in touch as I have very high-end sample libraries, which can elevate your accompaniment fantastically.

* I'd advise not to attempt making home acoustic recordings if you aren't using studio grade equipment and proper recording techniques, as the sound quality will be compromised. Please get in touch if you're thinking of doing this, as I can either help guide you remotely, or you could perhaps visit my studio to make a better recording.

Preparation of accompaniment

2. Is your arrangement a Capella?

- **To record an a Capella arrangement**, you'll need to provide a pitch reference, tempo reference and pre-count before the first vocal entry. You'll also need to provide a 'tutti' mix of pre-recorded guide vocals, with individual harmony parts made louder in each mix, to help singers synchronise in tuning and timing. For clarity, if you have a four-part arrangement, for example, this means preparing four 'tutti' mixes, each with a different harmony part made louder than the others.
- Again you would need to supply your singers with the audio files so that they can easily download and play them from a smart device or computer.
- If you need help preparing the guide audio files, please get in touch and I can help you.

Preparation of file transfers

Set up a clear protocol for file and folder naming to avoid confusion

You will need to transfer potentially multiple audio files to your choir members and they will need to submit their recordings back to you.

- Start by setting up a folder in the cloud that you can share with your choir. Dropbox, Google Drive, OneDrive etc. all work. Name your folder explicitly. E.g. **START HERE TO DOWNLOAD CHOIR RECORDING TRACKS**
- Name your audio files in a way that is self-explanatory and upload into this folder. E.g. **SOPRANO-christmas-song-accompaniment.mp3**. You can create a few song-name sub-folders if you're recording more than one song.
- Prepare instructions for your choir members to embark on their recording. Happily, you can use ours given over the next pages :)
- Either **collect the recordings yourself to edit and mix**, or engage an engineer / producer, like me, to synchronize and balance your recordings into a pro track.

Instructions for your choir members

Instructions to choir members

Singers, you will need:

- **Headphones** with a fairly long lead so you don't feel restricted. Bluetooth headphones are fine as well.
- **An audio playback device** e.g. a computer, tablet or phone with speaker, and headphone jack
- **A second device with microphone and recording app / software** - you can use video camera or voice recorder apps, it doesn't really matter! (Video camera footage is discarded, it's just the audio that will be used).
- **Some time and a quiet room.** Mute notifications on your phone or computer and ask your family members to stay out ;-)

Some extra tips for good results

Good practice to help create better recordings

1. Prepare your space

- **Record in a room with soft furnishings.**

Better recordings are made in non-echoey rooms, e.g. a bedroom, giving us a 'dry' sound. A helpful tip is to record with your back directly in front of an open wardrobe filled with clothes. Shut all windows to eliminate outside noises e.g. traffic rumble, sirens, birds etc. Bathrooms are a no-go as the room acoustic is too prominent and cannot be edited out.

- **Organise your music - please don't rustle paper.**

Ideally memorise your harmony part, but if you need to see your score then prepare a stand for your music to rest on.

Some extra tips for good results

Good practice to help create better recordings

2. Prepare yourself

- **Make sure you are well-hydrated** throughout your recording session, so prepare a bottle / glass of water nearby.
- **Warm up your voice** before you begin.
- **Stand up and support your voice.** You wouldn't dream of performing a concert sitting down, so make sure you're doing all you can to achieve your best performance.

Some extra tips for good results

Good practice to help create better recordings

- **Do it in three takes!** Don't reach the point of diminishing return.







If you don't get it right in three takes, stop and come back later and try again. This will save you hours and be a much more enjoyable process. If you need more than three takes it means you are not prepared enough. Maybe time would be better spent practising than recording. **Trust me on this one!**

- **Don't worry if you think your performance sounds awful to you!** No matter how you feel about your recording or performance, just send it!

I promise you that most singers hate hearing their own voice, but when we put the recordings together as a choir they will sound wonderful. The magic of a choir is in the collective sound of human voices, not the individual.

Instructions to choir members

The 6 steps to success

- 1.**  Download audio file to a computer/ device with a headphone port
- 2.**  Plug in your headphones and check the audio plays at your preferred volume
- 3.**  On the 2nd device open the video or audio/voice recorder
- 4.**  Place this recording device approx 30cm in front of your nose and press record
- 5.**  Press play on the 1st device audio file
- 6.**  Start singing! At the end stay silent for 10 seconds and then stop the recording.

Other questions

Other questions

We've been asked these things by various teachers and choir leaders before...

- **Can I lead a recording session via Zoom, where members make their home recordings together?** The answer is yes, with some limitations. This approach may suit younger singers who are being taught on Zoom. The instruction will be to listen to the Zoom session on headphones and ask singers to press record on a separate smartphone as they sing along to the session. It's rather experimental, but could work!

The benefits would be they feel like they're doing it with you and as a group. However, recording to music transmitted via Zoom over the Internet is unreliable - we have all been on Zoom calls that slow down and speed up when the Internet connection is patchy. This would diminish the quality of recordings.

Moreover, you risk limiting singers who may not feel that a single Zoom session produced their best performance (especially if they're sitting down /tied to their computer). And some may even fail to record successfully during the Zoom call. In summary, you can try this and see how it goes, but don't rely on this as your main approach.

Other questions

We've been asked these things by various teachers and choir leaders before...

- **Can I record with just one device?** We have had singers who only have access to a computer or a smartphone, but not both. It's a good idea to sound out anybody in your membership who falls into this category beforehand.

You can record with just one device, but importantly **not using bluetooth headphones**.

I recommend a free app made by Abbey Road Studios called [TopLine](#). This app enables you to playback the accompaniment audio and record at the same time. It's extremely easy to use,

There are two known limitations: you can only record up to five minutes of music, and secondly Android devices only enable you to record one vocal layer (not three which you can do with an Apple device).

Other questions

We've been asked these things by various teachers and choir leaders before...

- **Can I get my members to record to a YouTube track?**

Yes you can. This is almost the same as having an audio file for them to playback themselves, except this will be a link. Doing this is reliant on a stable internet connection and singers may have to do it in front of their computer, which may restrict their movement and choice of room in which they record.

What next?

What next?



Organise how you want to collect your audio recordings.

I recommend collecting recordings into a Dropbox folder which will be for your choir / group only. It's important to note that people can only upload into this folder, they will not be able to view / share / download any contents from there. Use Dropbox File Request to create such a folder: [Receive Files With a Dropbox File Request | Dropbox](#)

You can set a deadline to make sure there is an impetus to send recordings on time.

[**For affordable pro audio mixing of your choir recordings visit my website here.**](#)

Need any help?

Please get in touch: jim@jameshawkinsmusic.com