

## **Practical Guidelines for Choral Singing in the Elderly**

Nutthan Inkhong

Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Thailand

e-mail: dreamusica@yahoo.com

### **Abstract**

Choral singing involves the performance of two or more vocal parts. This article summarizes the synthetic results of practical guidance for choral singing among a senior group, including three vocal parts: soprano, alto, and tenor. This practical guidance derived from the synthesized analysis of the melodic characteristics of the song "Let's Play with Me". This song was especially composed for the elderly. The composer categorized the characteristics of harmonic melody into four types: (1) identical lyrics and rhythms at different pitches; (2) identical lyrics at different times and pitches; (3) distinct lyrics and melodies occurring simultaneously; and (4) disparate melodies that engage with one another. Choral singing poses challenges for novice groups, particularly for senior individuals without prior experience in this discipline. Consequently, the conductor had to identify various approaches to enhance the vocal skills of senior singers. During the choral singing practice of elderly singers from January to July 2023, it was determined that practical guidelines may be categorized into five concerns grounded in music theory and practice, including (1) rehearsing melodies using the solfeggio technique, (2) learning rhythmic accuracy, (3) studying lyric pronunciation, (4) practicing singing in two- and three-part harmonies, and (5) training auditory capacity while singing. These guidelines function as an approach for seniors and beginners to improve essential choral singing skills, establishing a basis for advanced skills enhancement.

*Keywords:* choral singing, practical guideline of choral singing, elderly, characteristics of choral singing

### **Introduction**

A choir is a group of two or more singers who perform together, with or without accompaniment (McMahon, 2023). Although the standard choir has four vocal parts, which are determined by the individual's capacity to generate high or low pitches: Soprano for women's high voice, Alto for women's low voice, Tenor for men's high voice, and Bass for men's low voice (Wave, 2017, p.2). The choir may include three vocal parts based on the characteristics of the singing group, such as SAB (Soprano, Alto, Bass), STB (Soprano, Tenor, Bass), SSA (Soprano, Soprano, Alto), among others. The categorization of choirs is determined by variables such as location, style, proportion, and harmony arrangement (The Rev. J. Troutbeck, n.d.,

p.1). Examples of choir kinds include community choir, church choir, university choir, and others (Rustling.Org: Resources for Singing Together, n.d.).

Moreover, senior choirs have been established in several locations globally for personal benefit, social or artistic benefit, as well as to elevate the quality of life (Community music center, 2023). The predominant characteristics of members include being aged 55 and older, serving as volunteers, possessing a longstanding passion for singing, and joining the choir both via auditions and without testing (Bell, 2008, pp.229 - 241). Upon first participation in the choir, most elderly members want to engage in the activity for enjoyment and to swiftly harmonize with their peers. Consequently, several senior choirs engage in vocal preparation via auditory observation and reliance on repetition, a method known as learning by absorption (Wave, 2017). This approach enables senior singers to rapidly learn and perform choral pieces together, although it may result in issues related to choral singing. For example, the challenge of shifting to high notes for basses and the tiredness associated with singing high notes for altos. Such issues adversely influence self-perceptions of voice classification and singing experiences (Coelho et al., 2013). Moreover, senior alto singers have throat dryness when singing, and insufficient hydration exacerbates the quality of their vocal performance (Moura et al., 2022). Consequently, the conductor endeavors to provide diverse practice tasks that connect fundamental music theory with choral singing proficiency.

## Methodology

This result represents the synthetic data integral to the qualitative study grounded on the principles of musicology and music education. The research objective is to investigate the correlation between music theory and choral singing among the elderly. Two questions of the article are, "What are the characteristics of harmony in compositions intended for the elderly?" What are the practical guidelines for choral singing among the elderly? This research has been approved by the Human Ethics Committee of Metharath University, certificate number 014/2566. The research gathered data from 34 people who rehearsed the song "Let's Play with Me" between January and July 2023. The research instrument used was participant observation conducted by the author, who served as both composer and conductor. After signing the informed consent, the author evaluated the vocal proficiency of the senior vocalists to create the composition "Let's Play with Me." The composer thereafter practiced the song with the senior vocalists in the choir. During rehearsals, the author had multiple problems with their choral performance. Consequently, the author devised many practice techniques and used them with senior vocalists, documenting their evolving singing progress. Finally, the author distills insights from practical training that enhance the skill development of senior choir members, offering guidance for both elderly and novice choir practitioners.

## Results and Discussion

This article contains the analyzed data from a transcript of a choir rehearsal for the song "Let's Play with Me." This composition was created for the senior choir known as YES Chorus (Young Elderly Singers Chorus) in Thailand. This song was sung in the World Choir Games 2023 in Gangnam, South Korea, from July 9 to 13, 2023. Standard choral singing involves performing the main melody with the matching choral harmonies in accordance with the pitch (Rustling.Org: Resources for Singing Together, n.d.). In some instances, it involves performing the same tune, referred to as unison singing (The Rev. J. Troutbeck, n.d., p.2). The characteristics of harmonic melody in the composition "Let's Play with Me" were divided into four types, as follows:

**1. Identical lyrics and rhythms at different pitches** indicate that vocalists in distinct voice sections perform the same lyrics and rhythms in equivalent note proportions. However, they vocalize each word of the lyrics at different pitches. This kind of singing generates harmony in every word. Because ensembles of vocalists in each voice category produce higher or lower pitches simultaneously (Wave, 2017, p.5).

The figure shows a musical score for three voices: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), and Tenor (T.). The lyrics are identical for all three parts: "Reùxng lèā mā ka ti kâ khūx s̄xn p̄hā xæb wī k̄hāng h̄lạng mị h̄i pheùxn r̄ủ tạw". The score is divided into three parts: A1, A2, B1, A3, B2, and B3. The Soprano part starts with a '9' and the Tenor part starts with an '8'. The dynamics are marked 'mf'.

Figure 1. Example of Identical lyrics and rhythms at different pitches

Figure 1 presents the characteristics of singing in identical lyrics and rhythms at different pitches. The harmonic quality can be observed while examining the sounds vertically, categorized into two kinds: (1) Intervals, for instance, A1 and A3 represent the perfect fifth or perfect fourth; A2 = the major third or minor sixth; etc., and (2) Chords, for instance, B1 corresponds to Am; B2 to Bdim7; B3 to Fmaj7.

**2. Identical lyrics at different times and pitches** indicate that vocalists in each voice part perform the same lyrics with differing rhythms, note durations, and/or pitches for each syllable of the text. This style of singing employs the principle of variation, a technique for evolving lyrical phrases while preserving the original

essence. Variable elements include pitch, rhythm, harmony, timbre, and others. The variations are categorized into (1) minor variations, characterized by immediate melodic repetitions maintaining identical rhythm and note proportions while altering the pitch of each syllable of the lyrics without a specific trajectory; and (2) major variations, which involve immediate melodic repetitions featuring new pitch and note proportions (Pancharoen, 2010, p.102).

The musical score for measures 37-42 shows three vocal parts: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), and Tenor (T.).

- Measure 37:** Soprano (S.) and Alto (A.) enter with the lyrics "Hlàng xeā wī hī dī". Tenor (T.) enters with "Hlàng".
- Measure 38:** Soprano (S.) and Alto (A.) continue with "Cul ture of rice is a life of". Tenor (T.) continues with "Cul ture of rice is a life of".
- Measure 39:** Soprano (S.) continues with "Cul ture of rice is a life of Thai". Alto (A.) continues with "Thai". Tenor (T.) continues with "Thai".
- Measure 40:** Soprano (S.) continues with "Cul ture of rice is a life of Thai". Alto (A.) continues with "Reīyng fxy reūxng rāw". Tenor (T.) continues with "Reīyng fxy reūxng rāw".
- Measure 41:** Soprano (S.) continues with "Cul ture of rice is a life of Thai". Alto (A.) continues with "thā thāng lēā khān". Tenor (T.) continues with "thā thāng lēā khān".
- Measure 42:** Soprano (S.) continues with "Cul ture of rice is a life of Thai". Alto (A.) continues with "Cul". Tenor (T.) continues with "Cul".

Figure 2. Example of identical lyrics at different times and pitches (the minor variations)

Figure 2 presents the character of singing in identical lyrics at different times and pitches. This is a phrase from the lyrics: “Culture of rice is a life of Thai” Altos and tenors first execute this phrase in unison, maintaining a consistent rhythmic pattern while differing their pitches. They begin singing on the anacrusis of the third beat in measure 37 with the Eighth Note, conclude the phrase at measure 40 with the Dotted Quarter Note. Then the sopranos start singing on the anacrusis of the first beat in measure 40 with the Eighth Note and conclude the phrase in of the second beat in measure 42 with the Dotted Quarter Note. Furthermore, the melody of each voice part varies in pitch with each sung syllable.

**3. Distinct lyrics and melodies occurring simultaneously** indicate that vocalists in every part perform different words and melodies. This type of singing aligns with the heterophonic texture. This texture is a method for harmonizing the main melody via variation, disregarding vertical harmonics. When all vocal parts sing

simultaneously, the harmony is experienced more horizontally (Pancharoen, 2010, p.67).

Figure 3 shows a musical score for three voices: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), and Tenor (T.). The score is in 2/4 time, with a tempo marking of 80. The lyrics are in Vietnamese. The Soprano part starts with a rest in measure 49, then enters in measure 50 with the lyrics "Kin nâ ḅx tḥṛy kin nâ ḅx ̣ok ỵy p̣i yok". The Alto part starts in measure 49 with the lyrics "Ṃe Ngũ Ṃe Ngũ Ṃe Ngũ Oei" and continues in measure 50 with "Ṃe Ngũ Ṃe Ngũ Ṃe Ngũ". The Tenor part starts in measure 49 with the lyrics "Ṃe Ngũ Ṃe kin nâ ḅx ḥin xey" and continues in measure 50 with "Ṃe ngũ ṃe ngũ ỵy p̣i yok". The score is marked with *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamics.

Figure 3. Example of distinct lyrics and melodies occurring simultaneously

Figure 3 presents the character of distinct lyrics and melodies occurring simultaneously. For instance, tenors and altos perform simultaneously, however their lyrics and melodies vary. The tenors begin the main melody with “Ṃe Ngũ Ṃe kin nâ ḅx ḥin xey” on the anacrusis of second beat in measure 49 with a Sixteenth Note, and conclude the phrase in the measure 51 with the Half Note. The altos perform the harmonic melody with “Ṃe Ngũ Ṃe Ngũ Ṃe Ngũ Oei” on the anacrusis of second beat in measure 49 with a Sixteenth Note, and conclude the phrase in the measure 51 with the Half Note. The score analysis revealed that although both syllables began on the first syllable and concluded on the final syllable at the same beat, they exhibited differing quantities of syllables and note proportions.

**4. Disparate melodies that engage with one another** indicate that one group of vocalists performs first, followed by another group. This type of singing may or may not produce harmony with each word pronounced. It relates to the context of a statement structured in a Question-Answer form. The Question-Answer form is dictated by the singer's vocal categorization, the lyrical content, and the structural composition of the song, concluding with a weak cadence in the Question and a

strong cadence in the Answer (Pancharoen, 2010, p.92)

49 ♩=80

S. *mf* Kin nâ b̄x thrāy kin nâ b̄x ̄sok yāy p̄i yok

A. *mf* M̄e Ngū M̄e Ngū M̄e Ngū Oei M̄e Ngū M̄e Ngū M̄e Ngū

T. *mf* M̄e Ngū M̄e kin nâ b̄x h̄in xey M̄e ngū m̄e ngū yāy p̄i yok

Figure 4. Example of disparate melodies that engage with one another

Figure 4 presents the character of disparate melodies that engage with one another by the different melodies. For instance, tenors and sopranos perform in measures 57-60. The tenors begin the main melody with “M̄e Ngū M̄e M̄e kin nâ b̄x h̄in xey” on the anacrusis of forth beat in measure 57 with a Sixteenth Note, and conclude the phrase in the first beat in measure 59 with a Half Note. Then sopranos begin the melody with “Kin nâ b̄x thrāy kin nâ b̄x ̄sok” on the anacrusis of first beat in measure 59 with a Sixteenth Note, and conclude the phrase in the first beat in measure 60 with a Half Note.

### Practical Guidelines for Choral Singing in the Elderly

During the rehearsal of “Let’s play with me” from January to July 2023, the author, serving as the conductor, identified significant issues within the senior choir, including melodic and rhythmic inaccuracies, improper and unclear lyric pronunciation, confusion regarding the verses assigned to each voice, and a lack of comprehension regarding the nature of the harmony produced during singing. Consequently, the author developed and evaluated a range of practical guidance that connected fundamental music theory comprehension with choral singing proficiency. The author subsequently derives insights from practical guidance that positively influence the skill development of senior choirs. The conclusion of the practical guidance for choral singing among the elderly is categorized into five distinct concerns, as follows:

**1. Rehearsing melodies using the solfeggio technique** involves vocalizing the names of musical notes, namely Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti, with each note corresponding to one syllable (Miller, 2005, p.7). In this practical guideline, senior vocalists articulate the names of musical notes using the Fixed-do Solfege System, which is prevalent in Europe and Russia (Hung, 2012, p.2). The singing technique in the fixed-do solfege system comprises (1) Natural notes: articulated as the note name; (2) Shape notes: altering the vowel sound of the note name to ‘i’ in place of

the original vowel. For instance, C# is pronounced 'di'; and (3) Flat notes: altering the vowel sound of the note name to 'e' in place of the original vowel. For example, Bb is pronounced 'te'. Utilizing the solfeggio technique when rehearsing melodies enhances precision in the articulation of each syllable inside the word, as shown in figure 5.

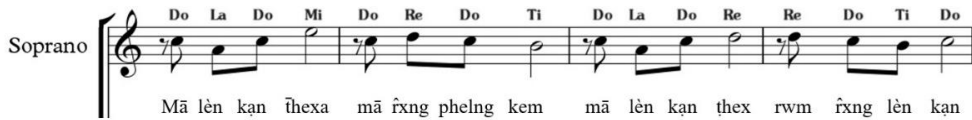


Figure 5. Example of rehearsing melodies using the solfeggio technique

**2. Learning rhythmic accuracy** is divided into two components: (a) learning in beat, representing the consistent rhythm within a musical composition, and (b) learning in rhythm, representing the melody formed by the syllables of the lyrics and the pauses induced by rests (Suhaimi, 2014, p.8). Both components of the rhythmic practice must consider the time signature, necessitating that vocalists comprehend the significance of the two numerals inside the time signature (Wave, 2017, pp.8-9). Because the two numbers indicate the number of beats per measure and the specific musical notes that constitute the fundamental beats (Miller, 2005, pp.67-71). For example, the time signature 4/4 consists of four beats per measure, with the Quarter Note serving as the fundamental unit of one beat; time signature 6/8 consists of two beats per measure, with the Dotted Quarter Note serving as the fundamental unit of one beat, and others. Consequently, rhythmic practice is a crucial component of choral singing. Vocalists must articulate the syllables of the words in synchrony with the designated musical notes to ensure harmony within the group and harmony among several vocal ensembles performing the tune at the varied time. This practical guidance starts with the exercise of clapping in synchrony with the rhythm of a song. Subsequently, practice articulating the syllables of the lyrics in each phrase of the song in accordance with the rhythm and proportion of the musical notes in the melody. See the example in figure 6.

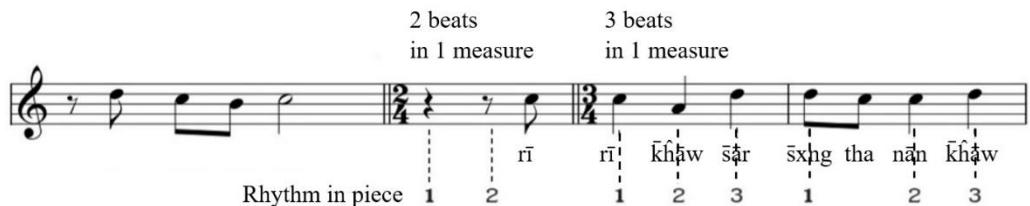


Figure 6. Example of Learning rhythmic accuracy

**3. Studying lyric pronunciation (Diction)** entails the accurate and distinct articulation of consonants and vowels, including tonal pronunciation for lyrics in tonal languages such as Thai, Chinese, and African, etc. (Inkhong et al. 2020, pp.648-649). Accurate pronunciation of songs must consider the significance of the

words to effectively convey the content's meaning and fulfill the intended goals. Furthermore, mastering pronunciation requires comprehension of the function of oral organs, including the lips, tongue, teeth, palate, and jaw, which facilitates accurate and distinct articulation (Suhaimi, 2014, pp.2-4). This practical guideline begins with an examination of the organs involved in vocalization. Subsequently, senior vocalists engage in several exercises and practice enunciating the song's lyrics, emphasizing pronunciation in accordance with grammatical conventions.

**4. Practicing singing in two- and three-part harmonies.** Because The senior choir's vocal composition has three sections: soprano, alto, and tenor. Thus, the two vocal parts provide the basis for executing separate melodies (Wave, 2017, p.5) and evolve into three vocal parts (Suhaimi, 2014, p.6). This practical guidance starts with vocalists in each voice part practicing their respective melodies accurately and precisely, focusing on lyrics, pitch, rhythm, and note durations. Subsequently, the soprano and alto, soprano and tenor, and alto and tenor vocal parts perform in harmony, followed by a trio of vocal parts singing together. The conductor begins rehearsing two- and three-part harmonies with short phrases, gradually developing them into a whole section, and ultimately performs the entire piece. At this point, vocalists must discern their own melodies from other voice tones. Consequently, choral singers must cultivate listening skills when singing as a vital skill.

**5. Training auditory capacity while singing.** The listening skill for choral singing is divided into two components: (1) listening to the singing inside the same group to ensure that all members sing accurately and harmoniously with their own voices; and (2) listening to the singing across groups. To enable individuals to sing varying pitches, so producing harmony via intervals or chords. Also, singers can sing different words, melodies, and timing between groups. The ability to listen while singing is a fundamental talent recognized in the competencies of singers and musicians by music education institutes. For instance, the NAEP (National Center for Education Statistics) serves as the national benchmark for music education in the United States, defining listening as a fundamental auditory perception and interpretation skill that allows the ear to identify music (Niessen et al., 2020); The Humanberuflichen Schulen is a music education consortium in Vienna, Austria, which characterizes listening as a competency in musical practice. Vocalists and instrumentalists must attentively listen to one another during performances to regulate the overall quality of their sound (Knaus et al., 2020). Consequently, the auditory skill training for singing include melody, rhythm, pitch, and harmony training, including intervals and chords. Consistent practice of this auditory skills is essential for maintaining the listening system in excellent condition at all times (Amatyakul, 2003, p.105). Consequently, listening is a crucial skill in choral singing. The vocalists must simultaneously attend to the music, their own vocalizations, the performances of their fellow group members, and the renditions of various other members in diverse manners.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Choral singing in the piece “Let’s Play with Me” for the senior choir is categorized into four types, (1) Identical lyrics and rhythms at different pitches, (2) Identical lyrics at different times and pitches, (3) Distinct lyrics and melodies occurring simultaneously, and (4) Disparate melodies that engage with one another. Choral singing provides challenges for novice vocalists, particularly for senior singers who have greater vocal difficulties than younger singers. Consequently, the teacher must identify and use several training methodologies and refine them until the instruction results in a discernible enhancement of the relevant skills. Practical Guidelines for Choral Singing are categorized into five issues, including (1) Rehearsing melodies using the solfeggio technique, (2) Learning rhythmic accuracy, (3) Studying lyric pronunciation, (4) Practicing singing in two- and three-part harmonies, and (5) Training auditory capacity while singing. Consequently, when a certain exercise is identified as advantageous for choral singing skills, senior singers should engage in repetitive practice until they attain proficiency and cultivate commendable skills, ultimately enabling them to perform in a choir at an acceptable quality.

Furthermore, vocalists must not only possess a proficient voice for harmonious singing but also comprehend music theory and use it to cultivate the ability of choral performance, particularly the relationship between musical notes and words. This is because each syllable of a song is marked with at least one pitch note, and that note indicates the length of the pronunciation of that syllable. Therefore, singers must have basic knowledge and understanding of music theory and note reading along with practicing choral singing for good quality pronunciation.

## References

- Amatyakul, D. (2003). *Choral singing*. Bangkok: Active Print.
- Bell, C. L. (2008). Toward a definition of a community choir. *International Journal of Community Music*, 1(2), 229–241. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.1.2.229\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.1.2.229_1)
- Choir Trainer’s Guide. (2009). *Voice for life: White level*. Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/4458391/White\\_Level\\_Choir\\_Trainer\\_s\\_Guide\\_Choir\\_Trainer\\_s\\_Guide](https://www.academia.edu/4458391/White_Level_Choir_Trainer_s_Guide_Choir_Trainer_s_Guide)
- Coelho, A. C. de C., Daroz, I. F., Silvério, K. C. A., & Brasolotto, A. G. (2013). Amateur choir singers: Self-image, difficulties and symptoms of the singing voice. *CEFAC*, 15(2), 436–444. <https://www.scielo.br/j/rcefac/a/Q36WyC6TPWZWcTdgDtWcWRp/?format=pdf&lang=en>
- Community Music Center. (2023). *Older adult choir program*. Retrieved from <https://sfcmc.org/adults/older-adult-choir-program/>
- Hung, J. (2012). An investigation of the influence of fixed-do and movable-do solfège systems on sight-singing pitch accuracy for various levels of diatonic and chromatic complexity [Doctoral dissertation, The University of San Francisco].
- Inkhong, N., Amatyakul, P., & Pidorajt, N. (2020). Neumatic singing in Thai popular singing, 1925–1967. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 28(1), 647–659.

- Knaus, H., Peschl, W., Rehorska, W., & Winter, C. (2013). Musik Erziehung Spezial. *AGMOE*, 66(3). Retrieved from [https://www.agmoe.at/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/AGMOE\\_MA\\_Spezial\\_2013\\_3.pdf](https://www.agmoe.at/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/AGMOE_MA_Spezial_2013_3.pdf)
- McMahon, M. (2023). What is a choir? Retrieved from <https://www.musicaexpert.org/what-is-a-choir.htm>
- Miller, M. (2005). *The complete idiot's guide to music theory* (2nd ed.). USA: Penguin Group.
- Moura, W. E. R., Gadenz, C. D., Lemos, I. de O., Bós, Â. J. G., & Cassol, M. (2022). Analysis of the singing voice handicap index for elderly choristers. *CoDAS*, 34(1). <https://doi.org/10.1590/2317-1782/20212020302>
- Niessen, A., Lehmann-Wermser, A., Knigge, J., & Lehmann, C. (2020). Entwurf eines Kompetenzmodells, Musik wahrnehmen und kontextualisieren. Retrieved from <https://www.zfkm.org/sonder08-niessenetal.pdf>
- Pancharoen, N. (2010). *Form and analysis* (5th ed.). Bangkok: Tana Press.
- Rustling.Org. (n.d.). Understanding different types of choirs. Retrieved from <https://www.rustling.org/2014/12/understanding-different-types-of-choirs.html>
- Suhaimi, N. (2014). Vocal and choral techniques. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/doc/202747683/Vocal-and-Choral-Techniques#>
- The Rev. J. Troutbeck, D.D. (n.d.). *Church choir training*. London & New York: Novello, Ewer, and Co.
- Wave, M. (2017). *Reading choir music for beginners*. Retrieved from <https://merseywavemusic.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Music-theory-for-choirs.pdf>

### Biography

**Dr. Nutthan Inkhong** is a lecturer at Shinawatra University, Thailand. She interests in fields of musicology and Psychomusicology, especially choir singing for the elderly. She has over 20 years of experience in teaching singing in the elderly and continues to do related research. She is currently the founder of a senior choir in Thailand. The choir's objectives are to study the development of the elderly in relation to music and to improve the quality of life of the elderly through music.