# HOW TO USE VOICE for LIFE

**A comprehensive guide to the Voice for Life scheme for choir trainers and teachers**

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HOW TO USE
VOICE FOR LIFE

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Voice for Life was developed by Leah Perona-Wright in consultation with experienced practitioners from across the UK and beyond. These include:
We are grateful for their contributions.

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Introduction

Singing is a very special human attribute, and singing with others is a wonderful human experience. Singing has been cherished for thousands of years, and nurtured by Christians since the earliest days of the Church. Choral singing is a social activity: it links individuals to the group and builds community. It is an important part of the way in which many Christian communities express their worship of God. It is a metaphor for heaven itself.

The RSCM encourages, equips and resources singers in many different ways. It gathers them together for training and inspiration, and provides sung music to fit with the spoken parts of worship. From the 1960s it has promoted dedicated schemes for training singers. Voice for Life, the third of these, is an all-age scheme: it recognizes that singing is an activity for the whole span of life. It can be used in church, in schools and colleges, or in the wider community – in small singing groups or larger choirs. While most musical instruction separates individual tuition from collective music-making, Voice for Life develops individuals within the choral group. It enables each individual to develop within the context of the choir, and of the wider worshipping community.

Every choir needs a leader to inspire, train and direct it. That person must make use of all kinds of musical and social skills. To enable singers to use their voices well, he or she needs an understanding of basic vocal technique as well as of choral training. It is important too for the choir’s director to help singers improve their sight-reading and aural skills, appreciate musical repertoire, and understand the context of the choir’s singing. The five modules of the Voice for Life scheme articulate these features.

This book, How to Use Voice for Life, is the essential resource for choir trainers as they deliver the scheme. It supports all the modules and provides invaluable help and advice for training, assessing and developing singers as they progress through their Voice for Life workbooks. In addition, there are many other Voice for Life publications and resources to supplement the scheme: see pages 10–11 for a complete list.

Voice for Life is challenging and demands commitment. But it is rewarding and through it both individuals and the whole singing group or choir can greatly develop their talents. They will grow in confidence and skill, give pleasure and enrichment to those who hear them, and help to inspire the worship of the gathered community.

Andrew Reid,
Director, RSCM
About Voice for Life

*Voice for Life* is the RSCM's acclaimed choral education scheme. It is for choirs and singers of all ages, and for the people who train them. A vast resource, it provides a clear framework to encourage and develop singing within communities, whatever they may be – schools, churches or wider organisations. It is delivered by means of a range of teaching and learning materials (print and online), specially created graded repertoire, recordings, accessories and motivational items, and training courses.

This book is the key source of information and advice for choir trainers about using *Voice for Life* with a choir or group of singers. There are many other resources available to help you train, assess, and motivate singers. These include further publications for choir trainers, workbooks for singers, graded repertoire collections, and medals, badges, and wallcharts. For more information see pages 10-11, or visit [www.rscmshop.com/voice-for-life.html](http://www.rscmshop.com/voice-for-life.html) for full details.

Training a choir is both a challenge and a joy. The *Voice for Life* scheme contains a wealth of teaching materials and plenty of useful advice on the practicalities of running a choir. *Voice for Life* is systematic but not rigid – used well, it will enable you to train your choir or group more effectively, and to help singers grow as people as well as musicians. Most of the training and assessment arises naturally within the flow of the scheme, as part of music-making.

*Voice for Life* involves you as choir trainer or teacher, and every member of your choir or group. Each singer is involved both as part of a team and as an individual. The balance between training the group and training the individual is an essential feature of *Voice for Life* because it enables you to give individuals confidence and training even while you are working with the whole group. Importantly, this simultaneously strengthens individuals’ commitment and contribution to the group.

Establishing and running a *Voice for Life* scheme requires musical and organizational skills, and a level of work and engagement. If you are reading this introduction, clearly you are prepared to consider investing the necessary time and effort. This book aims to help you to navigate the scheme smoothly and effectively so that you and your singers get the maximum results and enjoyment from *Voice for Life*.

On the following pages, you will find answers to some of the questions that choir trainers ask most frequently about *Voice for Life*. Read these first – they provide a useful introduction to all aspects of the scheme.

Use the workbooks!

Just as this book is the choir trainer’s essential guide to *Voice for Life*, so singers have vital publications of their own: the five workbooks, one for each level (see opposite). You are strongly advised to ensure that singers use them, as they form the main focus of their engagement with the scheme. You should also become very familiar with the workbooks yourself as they are the backbone of the resource.

The workbooks address each topic of *Voice for Life* systematically, in terms that users will easily understand. They include a range of advice, support and activities for singers to use outside rehearsals in their own time. Some of the material from them is reproduced in this volume, but it is advisable to own your own copies too and know your way around them. This book is full of references to the workbooks, shown by the icon on the left; be sure to follow these.
Frequently asked questions

How is Voice for Life structured?

There are five levels in Voice for Life, providing training for singers of all levels from beginner to advanced. The levels are designed for use by singers of any age; all singers will work through exactly the same levels (although in some cases it may not be necessary for experienced singers to start the scheme at the very beginning).

The Voice for Life levels are as follows:

- White
- Light Blue
- Dark Blue
- Red
- Yellow

Voice for Life is also divided into five modules, each of which explores a particular aspect of choral singing. There is material for each module at each level, so that throughout the scheme singers work on all modules, developing a range of skills simultaneously. The modules are as follows:

- **Module A: Using the voice well** addresses good vocal technique. At lower levels, singers learn the physical sensations of good posture and breathing; at higher levels, singers study the physiology of voice production. Throughout, practical exercises are used to develop tone, range, diction, and choral and performing skills. Module A materials begin on page 13 of this book.

- **Module B: Musical skills and understanding** develops knowledge of music notation and theory, and encourages singers to demonstrate this through sight-reading and aural skills. Practical exercises help singers to understand the music they see, hear and sing. Module B materials begin on page 91 of this book.

- **Module C: Repertoire** helps singers to understand the musical and historical contexts of the music they sing. A range of music analysis tasks draw on the theoretical understanding gained in Module B, while research activities and projects encourage singers to gather, understand and present information about what they are singing. Module C materials begin on page 161 of this book.

- **Module D: Belonging to the choir** explores what it means to be part of a choir, addressing issues such as commitment, punctuality and responsibility. Module D materials begin on page 187 of this book.

- **Module E: Choir in context** explores how the choir interacts with its surroundings. A choir does not exist in isolation. Although it is a community in its own right, it is also part of a wider community. In this module, projects and discussions help singers to explore the wider context of their choir’s existence: Why do they sing in that particular choir? Why does the choir exist? For whom does it sing? How does the choir benefit its members and those outside the choir? Module E materials begin on page 195 of this book.
Frequently asked questions

How do I use Voice for Life with my choir?

Voice for Life is flexible; it fits around your choir’s schedule. Much of the training will become part of your normal rehearsal time; for example, the vocal exercises can be incorporated as warm-ups at the beginning of choir practice, or to break up the rehearsal. As a choir trainer, you probably already undertake specific training on posture, breathing, diction, and so on – but Voice for Life provides a robust structure and measurable targets which make this training much more effective.

Voice for Life doesn’t demand to be used in a particular way – it allows you (and your singers) to work with the materials in a fashion that is suitable to you. Because the targets cover the full range of activities in all the modules, at any given time it is easy to steer individual singers to parts of the scheme that they need to focus on – while still using choral rehearsals to develop your choir as a group. In practice you will find that singers start to drive this process as they explore the workbook activities.

You may find it helpful to take some training sessions with small groups (or you could ask senior members of the choir to do this). While this may eat into the choir’s general schedule, it will be repaid by the progress your singers make. Some choir trainers find that if they set aside 20 minutes or so at the start of rehearsals for workbook activities, this gives singers – especially young ones – the opportunity to calm down and focus before singing practice starts.

It can also be useful to allow a little time before or after each rehearsal for assessments or evaluation, or just talking to singers about their progress and which activities they should undertake next. This could be as little as 10 to 15 minutes a week, depending on the assessment tasks involved. Even a relatively short amount of time will allow you to check the progress of your singers and try some practical tests with them.

As you become familiar with the structure of Voice for Life and its resources, you will find that the scheme adapts itself to your schedule and practice rather than the other way around.

Do all my singers have to participate in Voice for Life?

In theory, no. If some choir members choose not to follow the scheme formally, it will not matter. But in practice, if you are using Voice for Life as your choir-training resource, all choir members will be taking part in most of the activities anyway. Singers gain a sense of inclusion and motivation from participating – as well as a sound musical education with measurable outcomes.

Some choir trainers make participation in the scheme a condition of choir membership; others are more flexible. This is your choice. It may be unwise to exclude keen singers simply because they don’t want to follow the workbooks; but the sense of cohesion the scheme creates is a valuable asset to the choir.

Can I have different singers at different Voice for Life levels?

Yes. In fact it is unlikely that all your singers will be at the same level at any one time. You should attend to each individual at each level but this need not be too time-consuming if you are well organized. Use the workbooks and, perhaps, delegate senior choir members to help you. Some choir trainers organize occasional brief sessions to monitor and motivate groups of singers who are all at a similar level.
Frequently asked questions

How do singers progress through the levels?
At each level of Voice for Life, there are targets for each module. These are listed at the back of each workbook with boxes for you to sign and date, and are also listed in this book at the start of each module. Familiarizing yourself with the targets will help you train singers effectively, as you will know what is required at any given time.

The targets require singers to do a range of things as appropriate for their level and the module:

- fill in sections of the workbook (self-assessment, commentary, puzzles, research)
- demonstrate in rehearsals and performances that they have understood the contents of a particular module or section
- show practical performance and musicianship skills
- display theoretical and historical understanding (assessed by means of puzzles, activities and projects in the workbooks, or through discussion with other singers or the choir trainer)
- be reliable, helpful members of the choir

Some targets need to be tested by you (or by senior choir members) on occasions you specify when you think an individual singer is ready. Others need to be undertaken over a period of time. Still others assess evolving skills that will become evident from a singer’s performance or behaviour within the choir. You, the choir trainer, should check that singers successfully complete each target. Make sure you sign and date each one, as this provides both a progress record and a source of motivation.

When all the targets in all the modules are completed and signed, the singer has finished the level. You should sign the declaration at the very back of the workbook. Additionally, depending on your choir’s custom, you can award a certificate, badge, ribbon and medal. (See pages 10–11 for a list of these items.) The singer then moves on to the next level, to a new set of challenges, targets and achievements.

How do I pace my singers as they work through Voice for Life?
Choral musicianship is a durable asset that takes years to acquire, so let singers take their time. Different competences will develop at different stages, and no two singers are alike. The workbooks are constructed so that singers will make steady progress: if you work methodically through the targets, the ideas will really sink in. Encourage singers to approach Voice for Life in a spirit of discovery, not competition.

While it is normal to want to see rapid progress, try to resist pressure (from parents, or from singers themselves) to finish the ‘tests’ and get to the next badge or medal as quickly as possible. If you push singers too fast, or award the next level simply because they have been in the choir for a certain length of time, their development will not be durable. They may flounder at the higher level and drop out as a result. To avoid this, be sure that your singers are really ready to move up.

Make it clear from the outset that Voice for Life is about developing as a musician – not about passing tests, or even length of membership of the choir.
Frequently asked questions

What special skills do I need to deliver *Voice for Life*?
These can be divided roughly into five groups:

- **Musicianship skills**: you will need to understand how music works and be comfortable teaching this to others. If your knowledge of music theory is limited, you can learn it along with your singers from the *Voice for Life* resources; or delegate theory training to someone in your choir with the necessary skills.

- **Organizational skills**: you will need to manage your time and your choir’s time carefully. Keeping abreast of your singers’ needs as they progress through the scheme requires an ability to see both the overview and the detail. Delegation skills are useful too as you will need other senior choir members to help you.

- **Pastoral and interpersonal skills**: you will need to be diplomatic and persuasive to motivate and coax the best from your singers.

- **Singing and performing skills**: you will need at least some basic singing ability (see page 15 for more about this). Bear in mind that you can ask skilled singers in your choir to help train others.

- **Choir-training skills**: techniques specific to training a choir are covered in *The Voice for Life Guide to Choir Training*. Skills directly related to the *Voice for Life* modules are included in this book.

If you are not a trained singer yourself, consider having a few lessons in basic singing technique – specifically posture, breathing and tone production. While you can learn from books, you need to know how good singing feels, not just what to say. You could also arrange for a singing teacher to observe you training your choir and give feedback and guidance. You can also gain a lot by observing experienced choir trainers at work and attending relevant courses. *Church Music Skills*, a distance-learning course run by the RSCM, helps choir trainers of all standards to develop their skills.

How do I find my way around *How to Use Voice for Life*?
This book is divided into five main sections, one for each of the modules outlined on page 5. Each section has an introduction which gives advice on how to train singers for the module targets. Because the material in each module is different, each section is organized slightly differently. (For example, some of the material is organized level by level; some is more general.) This is explained in the introduction to each section.

Each section contains references to the workbooks so that you can see at a glance where singers have questions to consider, exercises to complete or support materials to read. Where relevant, the answers to the questions are included; in some cases you are advised to check an answer or discuss a topic with your singer. This will help you to assess each target.

At the end of the book you will find master copies of all the photocopiable pages from the workbooks, so that you will always have a source from which to make worksheets and write-in resources for singers. (In some cases, you might like to put the photocopied page on the choir-room wall for everyone to use.) Permission to photocopy is clearly indicated in the margin of each page.
The RSCM awards

The RSCM Bronze, Silver and Gold awards
Each level of Voice for Life is assessed informally by you, the choir trainer: you award singers their badge and/or ribbon and medal. In order to support you and affirm the Voice for Life levels achieved within the choir, the RSCM provides a parallel external system of awards assessed through formal examinations: the Bronze, Silver and Gold awards. Each of these has its own syllabus and regulations. These come with guidelines to prepare the candidate and the choir trainer fully for the examinations.

In recognition of their achievement, successful candidates are entitled to wear a prestigious medal cast in the appropriately coloured metal (bronze, silver or gold), worn on distinctive ribbons. Bronze awards are worn with a green ribbon, Silver awards with a purple ribbon and Gold awards with a dark red ribbon.

How do these awards relate to the Voice for Life levels?
The Voice for Life scheme and the Bronze, Silver and Gold awards fit together as shown below:

White
Light Blue
Dark Blue
Bronze
Red
Silver
Yellow
Gold

Voice for Life provides excellent training and preparation for the Bronze, Silver and Gold awards: a singer who has completed the targets in the Dark Blue workbook is well prepared for the Bronze award; the Red and Yellow levels provide the same support for Silver and Gold awards respectively. Similarly, the Bronze, Silver and Gold awards provide an externally validated affirmation of the Voice for Life ‘colour’ levels that have been awarded informally by the choir trainer.

You can find further details of the awards at

www.rscm.com/education/vfl/singingAwards.php

What if I have a singer who does not want to take the external awards?
This is not a problem. Voice for Life can be used on its own to provide training and motivation. There is no need to take the Bronze, Silver and Gold awards if your singer is unhappy about undertaking a formal assessment. You may find however that their opinion changes as they make progress and their skills develop.
Voice for Life resources

Here is a summary of Voice for Life resources that will help you to train and motivate singers through the scheme. A more detailed list is available at:

www.rscmshop.com/voice-for-life.html

Books for choir trainers
This book, How to Use Voice for Life, is your essential guide to delivering the scheme as it is presented to singers in the workbooks.

The Voice for Life Guide to Musicianship is a complete resource for choir trainers and the singers they work with. It contains detailed advice, exercises and activities to help prepare singers for the Module B musicianship targets – aural tests and sight-reading – at White, Light Blue, Dark Blue, Red and Yellow levels and for the tests in the RSCM Bronze, Silver and Gold awards.

The forthcoming Voice for Life Guide to Choir Training addresses other important topics for choir trainers relating to the practicalities of running and training a choir.

Books for singers
The Voice for Life Singer's Workbooks are the core of the scheme. They contain practical advice, training exercises, games, puzzles and activities and are also the main place for you to record and monitor the progress of each individual singer (via the target check list and declaration at the back of each one). Encourage every member of your choir to own – and use! – the appropriate book for their level.

- White level workbook
- Light Blue level workbook
- Dark Blue level workbook
- Red level workbook
- Yellow level workbook

The Voice for Life Chorister's Companion is a handy pocket-sized book that provides everything a chorister needs to know about the routines and practices of church choirs. It exists in two versions – paperback and cloth-bound hardback (the latter is often used by choirs for presentation purposes). Candidates for the RSCM awards will also find much to help them prepare for their exams.

Rewards: certificates, badges, medals and ribbons
The principal record of a singer's progress is the declaration you sign at the back of each workbook. But many choirs also mark singers' achievements in other ways. The RSCM offers a range of badges, medals, ribbons and certificates for all the 'colour' levels of the scheme and the Bronze, Silver and Gold awards too. For details of all available items see:

www.rscmshop.com/voice-for-life/vfl-certificates.html and
www.rscmshop.com/voice-for-life/vfl-medals-ribbons.html
Voice for Life resources

Registers and record-books
There are a number of items to help you monitor attendance, progress and standards across your choir. You can use these as a private record, though some choir trainers find that a chart on general display in the rehearsal room is a powerful motivator. Details of these, and of other useful ways to record and reward singers’ service in the choir, are available at:

www.rscmshop.com/voice-for-life/voice-for-life-resources.html

Repertoire
The RSCM publishes numerous collections which were specifically created as choral resources within Voice for Life. Other publications are suitable for use within the scheme and contain training notes to help you use them to maximum effect. This means that you always have access to carefully selected and graded choral (and solo) materials – repertoire and service books alike – for each ‘colour’ level and for the Bronze, Silver and Gold awards too. Details can be found at:

www.rscmshop.com/voice-for-life/voice-for-life-songbooks.html

www.rscmshop.com/voice-for-life/repertoire-for-vfl-awards.html

www.rscmshop.com/voice-for-life/vfl-festival-service-books.html

The catalogue of publications is always growing, so you are advised to return to the site often to remain up-to-date with the latest materials.

The Voice for Life pages of the RSCM website
For more information about the Voice for Life scheme, visit:

www.rscm.com/voiceforlife or www.rscm.com/vfl

Here you will find all manner of help, support and resources for the scheme.

What singers say

Over the years various Voice for Life practitioners have collected comments from members of the scheme. You will find these reproduced throughout this book.

‘In some ways, when I started using Voice for Life with the choir, things didn’t change much at first. I certainly didn’t have to revolutionize the way I worked. Then I realized that everything was just starting to ‘click’ somehow. The singers liked the workbooks; I was able to be more organized; everyone seemed to be moving in the same direction. And best of all – the singing got better.’

Margaret, organist and choir trainer

‘I had to change choirs when we moved house. I’d done Voice for Life in the old choir, and the new choir had it too. That made changing much easier as I knew what to expect.’

Kyle, 11