



MEE 2.0: ICLT2022
International Virtual Colloquium on Multi-Disciplinary Research Impact (3rd Series)
International Conference of Logistics and Transportation
Best Western i-City Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia, 05-06 Oct2022



Musical and Non-Musical Responsibilities of Choir Conductors in Malaysia

Maryann Magdalena Linnis, Md Jais Ismail, Sharifah Faizah Syed Mohammed, Juwairiyah Zakaria

Conservatory of Music, College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

mmagdalena@uitm.edu.my, mdjais@uitm.edu.my, sharifahaizah@uitm.edu.my, juwairiyah@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to describe how choir conductors perceive their musical and non-musical roles and responsibilities, to list the necessary knowledge and skill required of the choir conductor, and to identify the challenges faced by the choir conductor in leading the choir group. The subject selected for this study is five qualified and experienced choir conductors from UiTM Chamber Choir, two conductors from Young Choral Academy, one from BAVE Chamber Choir, and Johor Chamber Choir. The five conductors were selected based on their qualifications in choral conducting certificates and experiences spent more than 5 years in choir conducting and the criteria were to ensure that the data collected from these subjects would be valid and reliable. Data collections were done via semi-structured interviewing sessions with the choir conductor alone by audio recording the interview session. All the data was organized transcribe, analyzed, and documented. The results of this study have shown that the choir conductor has very important roles and responsibilities for the outcome performance of the choir group.

Keywords: Musical, Non-Musical, Choir Conductor, Leadership, Musicianship

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2022. The Authors. Published for AMER ABRA cE-Bs by E-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open-access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behavior Researchers), ABRA (Association of Behavioral Researchers on Asians), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behavior Studies), Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7iS19.3944>

1.0 Introduction

Choir conductors have a very important role as leaders and directors of the choir group. According to Sandt (2013), the choir conductor is a musician, a leader, a teacher, an interpreter, a counselor, and a manager of his or her choir group. Choir conductors should not only understand the music but be able to inspire and teach each of their singers the meaning of music to help them be more musical in their performance. Piper (2008) stated that "a choir especially an amateur choir must first learn the notes and rhythms before being fully capable of bringing a piece of music to life and in the early stages, giving strict beat patterns by a conductor may be more appropriate" (p.97).

Compared to our neighboring countries like Singapore and Indonesia however, Malaysia's awareness of choir education still needs some encouragement (Susanna, 2011). To the public, the term 'choir' merely refers to another form of entertainment. In schools, singing in a choir is only an extracurricular activity and is usually the first to be eliminated when exams are approaching, or if students face any academic difficulty. There is still much to be done to bring the choir up to International standards (Susanna, 2011). In order to improve music awareness and raise the standard of music in Malaysia, good music teachers are a necessity.

In Malaysia, there are very limited people who have a certificate in Choral Conducting. Therefore, in this study, only five choir conductors in Malaysia who have choral conducting certificates and experiences spent in handling choir groups for more than 5 years have been approached to describe how choir conductors perceive their roles and responsibilities toward the choral group, to list the

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2022. The Authors. Published for AMER ABRA cE-Bs by E-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open-access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behavior Researchers), ABRA (Association of Behavioral Researchers on Asians), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behavior Studies), Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7iS19.3944>

necessary knowledge and skills required of the choir conductor, and to identify the challenges faced by the choir conductor in leading the choir group.

2.0 Choir Conducting as a Profession

Choir conductors often manage various aspects of the vocal, and sometimes instrumental, performances of musical groups. Some of their responsibilities may include composing music, leading performances, and administrative duties. Especially if the choir is a professional group, the choir conductor has the responsibility of assuring good organization and consistency (DeMasi, 2003). The choir conductor automatically assumes the role of a teacher who is responsible for educating his or her choir members and also as a leader in the group (Phillips, 2013). Choir conductors are responsible for achieving the best results of performance and to encourage the choir members' aesthetic and personal growth through increasing musical awareness and skills.

3.0 Methodology

The subjects selected for this study are five qualified experienced choir conductors from UiTM Chamber Choir, two conductors from Young Choral Academy, one from BAVE Chamber Choir, and one from the Johor Chamber Choir. The five conductors were selected based on their qualifications and experiences in choir conducting and the criteria were to ensure that the data collected from these subjects would be valid and reliable. To gain an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the choir conductor, a qualitative approach was chosen because it is an appropriate methodological fit in order to address the research questions. Hill (2012) stated that qualitative research is an inductive method of examining attitudes and inner experiences using open-ended questions. It is also useful for studying a limited number of cases in depth. Some of the qualitative methods used for this research include the use of interviews and audio recordings.

3.1 Materials

Semi-structured interviews with a set of core questions were prepared in sections. This instrument contained 20 questions that were divided into four different sections. Each section explained each focus in the study. Section A consisted of the demographic information about each individual conductor from UiTM Faculty of Music, BAVE Community Choir, Johor Bahru Chamber Choir, and Young Choral Academy. This includes achievements, the highest level of education, and choral conducting experience (years). In sections B and C the questions focus on the musical and non-musical roles and responsibilities of the choir conductor. Section D investigates the necessary knowledge and skills of the choir conductor. The last section addresses challenges faced by the choir conductors throughout their careers as choir conductors.

4.0 Findings

The choir conductor has a very important role and responsibility as the performance of the choir group is based on how much the conductor had studied and understood the music score. Beginner conductors that do not have a background in conducting a choir often neglect this aspect. Creating a perfect choral sound is also one of the choir conductor's musical roles. Choir conductors have to make sure that the sound and harmony is clear, the rhythm is found as written in the score, the text is pronounced correctly, and all the breathing techniques are applied. The choir conductor is also responsible to make sure every member understands all that is being taught (Conductor A). According to Conductor B, the choir conductor has to work on all the flaws of the choir and develop a beautiful harmonize tone and that takes hard work, persistence, and dedication to get a good result or performance from the choir members. Therefore, to get the perfect choral sound, all the choir members have to know their parts, sing in tune, develop their intonation, develop their voice, and their understanding of music, resulting to be a better singers.

Musical responsibility is the music knowledge and the ability of the choir conductor to deliver what they understand and learn. The understanding of choral music is very important for the choir conductor because it will help conductors to identify which tone color they want to be used in the choral piece. For example, choir singing in the early period and then slowly moving up to more contemporary subsequently the choir conductor has to understand the difference between the early period music and the Romantic period repertoire. Choir conductors will guide the choir members to identify the better choir sound-like and explain the choir conductors' own choices. So according to Conductor D, the choir conductor explains tone colors depending on the repertoire and the choir conductors' perceptions. Conductor C mentioned getting more references into listening to various groups singing the same song to look into which groups are doing well or which groups are not. Listen to various styles of choir performances a lot.

Conductor C point out that they always need to give direction to the choir members because leading without direction the choirs usually will get bored and find themselves questioning why they are joining the choir group. One of the ways is by

sharing the choir conductors' planning for the whole year or in 3 years long. Conductor D also mentioned that the choir conductor can guide the choir members to have a good characteristics by guiding them on how to communicate with people. In singing it happens because there are many people in the choir group and when they go out for concert or competition overseas, the choir members will meet a lot of new people so, the choir conductor should encourage them to make friends.

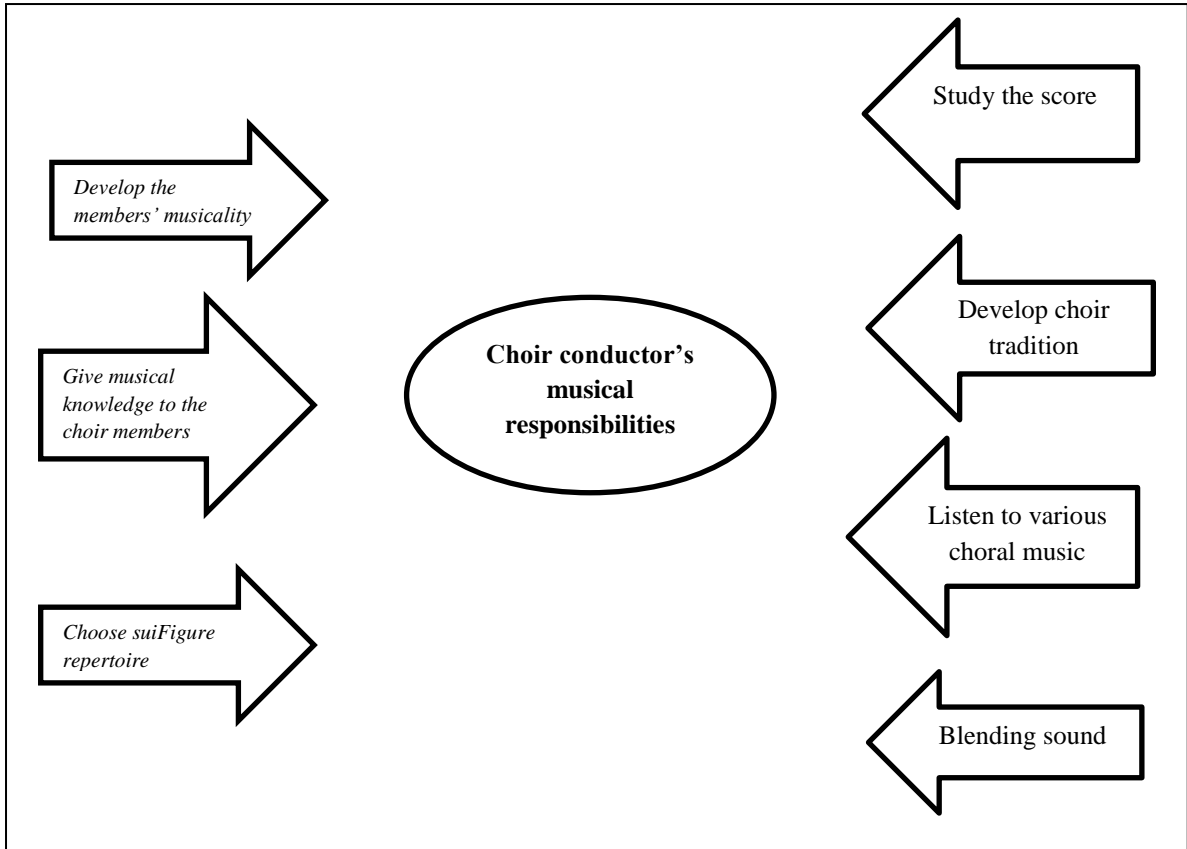


Figure 1 : Research Question 1. What are the musical roles and responsibilities of the choir conductor?

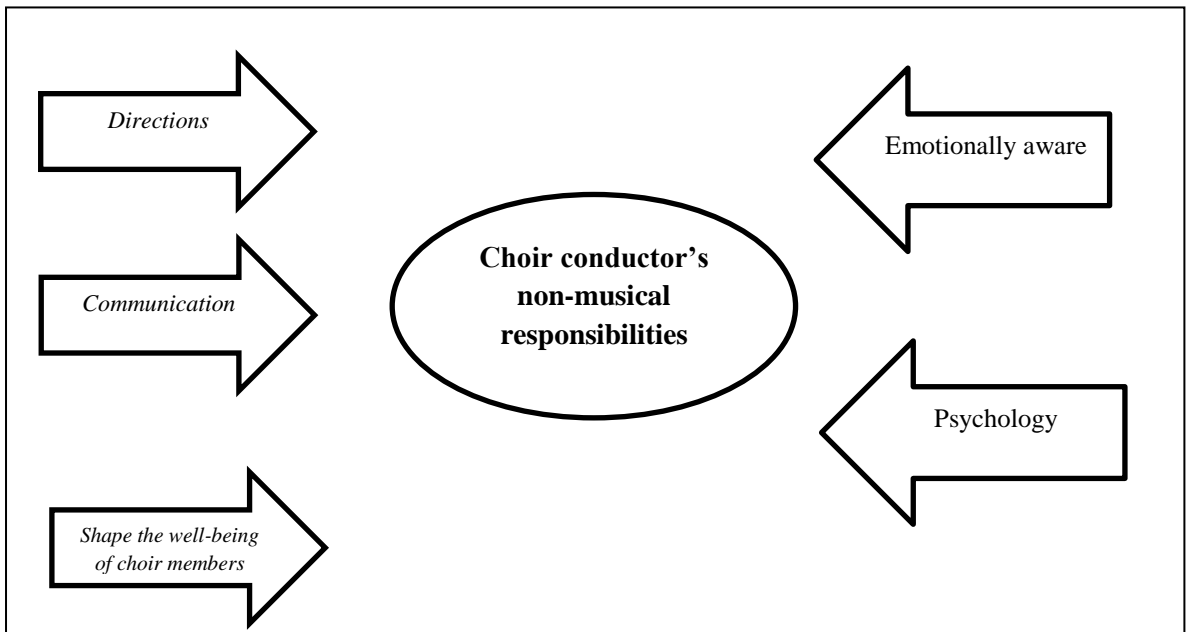


Figure 2 : Research Question 2. What are the non- musical responsibilities of the choir conductor?

The conductor's behavior is important in establishing the choir group atmosphere in which the conductor should accept and supports the feelings and ideas of their members, and praise and encourages the choir members. The choir conductor is the educator of the choir members so they should teach and give the right experience to the choir members. Conductor A stated that he always asked and remind the choir members to be on time, arranged Figures after rehearsal altogether, do sectionals, and developed organization. In this way, the choir members will learn manners as a human, responsibility, and then what behavior in participating in the choir group. Conductor D has the most similar point of view about a choir conductor acts also as an educator. According to conductor D, the choir conductor is also like a model character to the choir members, which choir conductor need to listen to the interest and the needs of the members. Choir

conductors as an educator nurture the choir members and guide them towards what they want to achieve so it's like a character-building society.

Conductor D mentioned that the choir conductor should guide the choir members to have a good attitude. Conductor D added, that when the choir group performs, they have to be disciplined and punctual and how they relate to each other. It is important to be humble, friendly, and helpful. Most importantly, choir members should not be arrogant and superior. Because sometimes the choir achievements can make the choir members proud which it is not wrong to be proud, but they should not feel arrogant by thinking that they are the only better choir. It is the choir conductor's responsibility to teach them how to have a good mindset or perception of being part of a choir group.

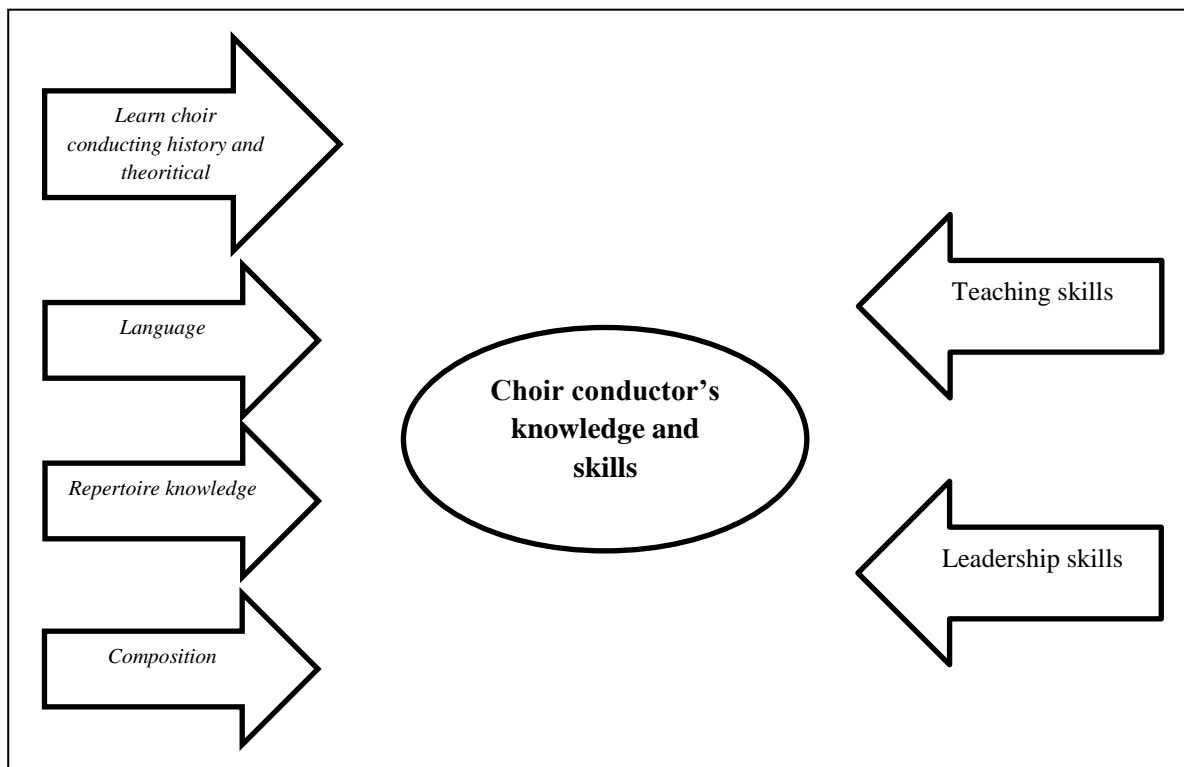


Figure 3 : Research Question 3. What are the necessary knowledge and skills of the choir conductor?

There are many pieces of knowledge and skills that are required as a choir conductor in order to start a choir group. They have to study and understand it very well. A conductor has the responsibility to develop their musical skills such as vocal techniques, conducting gestures, theoretical knowledge, and choir literature and history. The choir conductor needs to think about the eras such as the medieval, renaissance, and develop the music. Choir conductors also must know how the choral music develops compared to the renaissance, baroque what is different as a conductor you have to explain. Conductor A highlighted that if a person who wanted to be a conductor or does not know any choral development, that person should not teach or start a choir. It is their responsibility to know before forming a choir. Other than that, Conductor A also mentioned that if you have a good knowledge repertoire, you can be successful.

Conductor B stated that the choir conductor who wants to form a choir group, the person should have a grounded knowledge of music in general. Deep understanding of the style of music, especially the music that they are going to perform needs to be planned well. The choir conductor also has to know the rehearsal technique acquainted with basic conducting (the least). A choir conductor should be enthusiastic and packed with determination, and motivation, the best timekeeper, punctual at all times, and a well-disciplined leader.

With that, the choir conductor is able to detect if the choir member is singing correctly. Another important thing to have is good listening skills, to identify pitch problems. Actually, the choir conductor is the most difficult job because the choir conductor needs people to sing for the conductor and follow the conductor's interpretations. The hearing training is hearing the piano and takes the experience to develop. One or two experience is not enough. The choir conductor must be a choir member before becoming a conductor at least the choir conductor know what is difficult for a singer.

Conductor B stated that the challenge he faced was the discipline of the choir members. The spirit and motivation can only be seen at the beginning of the rehearsal or year. In leading a choir, the conductor really has to maintain and keep the motivation in the choir. Also stated that in a school setting, singers come and go every year. Choir conductor always has to start from zero each year. Plus, conductors have to keep up with other school-related activities. Often, rehearsals are postponed or canceled due to the clash of time with other activities. Conductors need to adapt to the problems that arise and they do not always have a good choir performance in the earlier stages. It takes a lot of work and time. Being a choir conductor, you have to be everything. According to Conductor B, choir events in Malaysia is still developing so many people do not know about choir tradition problems or challenges which includes vocal issues or personal issues and, emotional issues because that is crucial especially when your choir members are adults group. When conductors work with teenagers it is different, the problems are not that heavy while problems in the adult group sometimes affect their working mood.

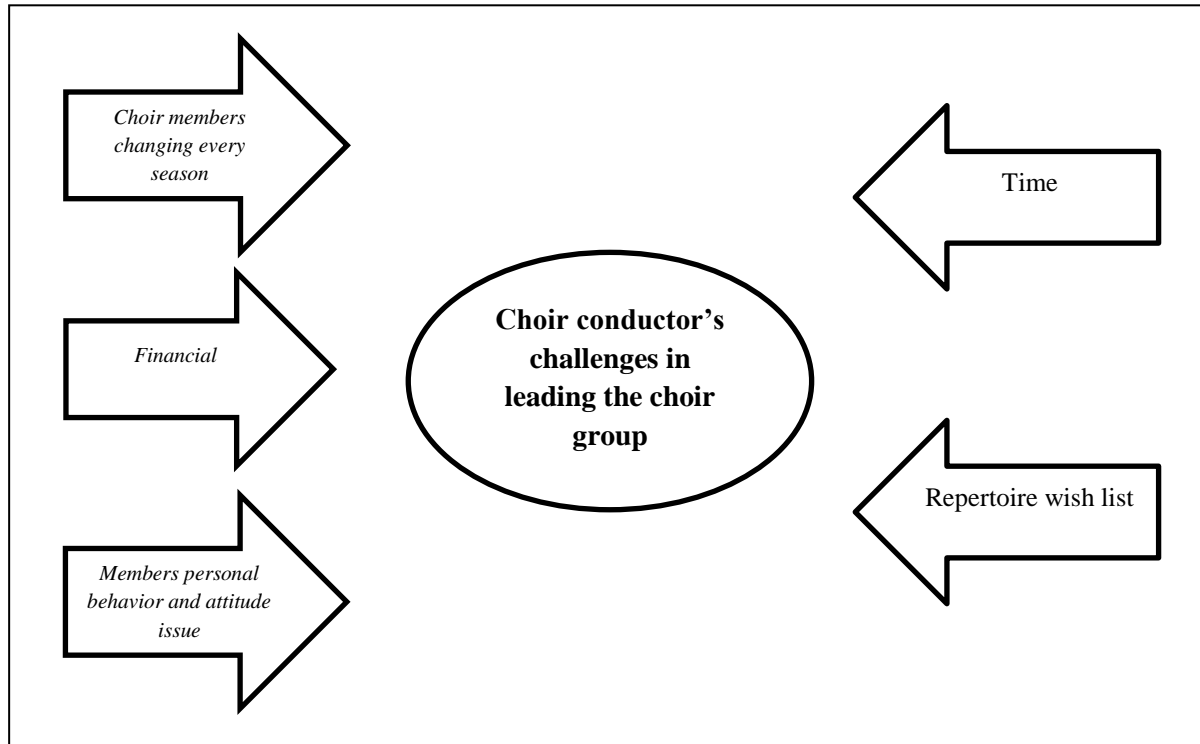


Figure 3 : Research Question 4. What are the challenges faced by the choir conductor in leading the group?

In Malaysia, audience expects the choir to perform songs that they know, for example, pop songs. According to Conductor D, it is hard to find choir repertoire for pop songs. Another matter is the financial part but for some choir groups, that is not a challenge if the choir performs well, they are able to get sponsorship easily when they have good achievements. If the choir does not have enough funds then they have to raise their own funds. And if that is not possible, they will have to discontinue. But Conductor E stated that insufficient fund is always the problem. Conductor E also mentioned that if the conductor is not able to find sponsors then the conductor has to help the choir group to improve their skills and standards so that sponsors will be more willing to give.

5.0 Discussion

From the data collected, the researcher found that a person who wanted to form a choir group should be aware of the choir conductor's musical and non-musical roles and responsibilities, practice the necessary knowledge and skills that are required for a choir conductor and know how to deal with the challenges that the choir conductor faced in leading the choir group. Musical roles and responsibilities of the choir Conductor is categorized in studying the score, develop the choir tradition, know how to help the choir members produce blending sound, listen to various choral music style, give musical knowledge to the choir members, choose suitable repertoire for the choir group, develop the members' musicality and having strong understanding on the theoretical knowledge and the history of choir singing or conducting. Choir conductors could give something new to the choir members that they never experienced before, such as in Malaysia we do not bring Baroque choral music but the choir conductor could give the experience to the singer by trying the Baroque score in the rehearsal. In this case, at least the choir member knows how western music is implemented especially in choir singing.

Non-musical roles and responsibilities categorized with the choir conductor's communication, planning, delivering clearer direction every time meeting the choir member, shape the well being of the choir members and have to understand the psychology so that the choir conductor could understand their choir members. Participating in choir group is not only about singing and producing a good sound. Choir conductors are dealing with people, which they need to learn each member's attitude and teach them to be a better person to produce a better sound. Choir conductors are also as the mentor who is responsible to find many solutions on the problem that the choir is facing. Choir members need to be united, understand each other and practice, rehearsal together because this is one of the ways to produce a good choir. If the choir conductor and choir members cannot work together, misunderstandings will happen and the group environment will not be healthy. This may lead to the choir conductor and choir members quitting the group. The choir conductor have to have self-awareness about their roles and responsibilities because if they do not have the awareness the conductor might not remain long and the choir group will not have someone to lead.

It was also found that every respondent describing their own challenges faced along their career as a choir conductor. Salary or sight income as a choir conductor is not worthy from all the hard work if the choir conductor do not have passion in choir because he experience one time when he just started as a choir conductor. There are a lot of work and responsibilities as a choir conductor. Being a choir conductor you need to be flexible as a leader which are you need to learn scores which it takes time, adapting the choir members' attitude, sacrifice

time for rehearsal and practices and need your energy to keep the practice session alive and not boring. That is why a choral conductor needs to be passionate in choir conducting.

6.0 Conclusion

To start a choir group especially in Malaysia, choir conductor needs a great plan, understanding and exploration. The choir conductor also needs to experience participating in choir singing to know the needs as a choir member. Therefore, choir conductor will need to have experiences in singing as a choir member before leading a choir group to understand more about participating in choir group.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, Malaysia, for the support and ReNeU UiTM, for the publication incentive provided through Program MEE 2.0.

References

- Bartle, J.A. (1995). *Lifeline for Children's Choir Directors*. Los Angeles: Alfred Publishing.
- Bauman J. (2013). *Procedure & Stewardship In The Choral Rehearsal*. Journal Sheets in the Choral rehearsal publishing.
- Corporon, E. and Jordan, J.M. (2009). *Evoking Sound: Fundamentals of Choral Conducting*. Chicago: GIA Publications. Coward, H. 2003. *Choral Technique and Interpretation*.
- Dehning, W. (2003). *Chorus Confidential: Decoding the Secrets of the Choral Art*. National Council for Choral Education, Pavanne Publishing.
- Fucci Amato, R. C.; Amato Neto, J. (2010) 'The role of the choir conductor in motivating his group: conceptual revision, suggestions, and a perspective of music undergraduate students'. Proceedings of the 19th. Annual Production and Operations Management Society (POMS) Conference. POMS, La Jolla, California, USA.
- Ferrell, M. A. (2010). *Perspectives on Choral and Solo Singing: Enhancing Communication Between Choral Conductors and Voice Teachers*. University of Miami, Florida.
- Garnett, L. (2009). *Choral conducting and the construction of meaning: gesture, voice, identity*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing. Garnett, L. 2012. *Choral Singing*
- Jansson, D. (2013). *Musical Leadership : The Choral Conductor as Sense maker and Liberator*. Norwegian Academy of Music, Oslo.
- Kemp, M. (2009). *The Choral Challenge : Partical Paths to Solving Problems*. GIA publications.
- Hopkins, V (2018) How to conduct effective choir auditions. Retrieved from <https://www.totalchoirresources.com/how-to-conduct-effective-choir-auditions/>
- LaMotte, K. (2014). *Overcoming challenges with strong choir management*.
- Piper, N. (2008). *Choral Conducting*. Retrived from <https://web.wpi.edu/Pubs/E-project/Available/E-project-042408>
- Phillips, K.H. (2004). *Directing the Choral Music Program*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Toney, J. H. (2000). *Expressive Ensemble Conducting and Performing: A Qualitative Case Study of One Conductor's Practice*. PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Willets, S. M. (2009). *The Other Side Of Sixty: The Choir And The Conductor*. Retrieved from http://www.acda.co.kr/acda/member/choral_journal/pdf/2009/Dec/OTV%20Willets.pdf
- Yarrington, J. (1990). *Building The Youth Choir : Training and Motivating Teenage Singers*. Augsburg Fortress.
- Sa'aid M. S., Maryann M. L. & Kishimoto M. (2022). *Preschool teachers' perspective on the influence of singing activity covering expression of children's emotion in Malaysia*. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 2022. <https://www.ijcc.net/index.php/ijcc-editions/2022/228-vol-16-iss-1>