



# The barriers to joining a choral society

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## Introduction and background

Many choral societies report challenges in attracting new members. While this is definitely not the case for all choral societies, Making Music undertook some research to identify the barriers to new members joining choral societies.

In 2019 we ran an online survey. A total of **1,341** individuals completed this survey. Of this, **783** were members of a choral society, **438** were in another type of music group but not a choral society, and **120** were not in any kind of music group at all.

Participants were presented with a number of potential barriers for joining choral societies, and asked to rate how important they thought each one to be. They were also given the opportunity to include other barriers in a free text response. From the responses to the survey, we were able to compare the barriers as perceived by choral societies, with the actual barriers given by individuals who were not in choral societies. In a number of cases, there was agreement between these groups, but there were also some interesting differences of opinion, highlighting perceived barriers that perhaps don't always exist in practice.

## Main research findings

### 1. Not wanting to audition is the top reason for not joining choral societies

Reason: Don't want to audition	
	Ranking (out of 14)
People in choral societies	1
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	1
Not in any music group	1

There was unanimous agreement between all 3 groups that this was the top barrier to people joining choral societies.

If you are a choral society that holds auditions, that's perfectly ok, but it's useful to think about how you can make the process feel as unthreatening as possible for auditionees. If you're a non-auditioned choral society, make sure this is really clear in all your marketing, because people may assume that you do have to audition to join, and may be put off.

## 2. The perception of choral societies as 'stuffy' could be an issue

Reason: The idea of a choral society may seem 'stuffy'	
	Ranking (out of 14)
People in choral societies	4
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	1
Not in any music group	4

It does seem that there may be a challenge here for choral societies to overcome.

There are no quick and easy solutions to changing the public perception of 'choral societies'. However, there are a couple of angles you could address this from.

Firstly: internally. Look at your group culture. Is your group friendly and welcoming to newcomers? Are there cliques in the group? Do people always sit in the same places or does the group mix up? Do you have group socials? Do you all let your hair down and have a laugh, either in the pub or in the break or after a concert? If you can work on your group dynamics and make your group feel friendly and inclusive and welcoming, then people will begin to speak about it as such, and this is a good starting point to challenging the perception that your group is 'stuffy'.

Secondly: externally. How does your group come across on your website, or on your social media? If you are a friendly, sociable group, is this portrayed? What kind of photos and videos do you share - are these all 'formal' from your concerts, or do you have images of people socialising, or a 'meet some of our members' section on your website where you can portray the human side of the group? Are your social media posts all promoting your next concert, or is there a mix of posts including funny music related memes or jokes?

## 3. Not having enough time to attend regularly is a bigger issue than choral societies realise

Reason: Haven't got the time	
	Ranking (out of 14)
People in choral societies	9
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	3
Not in any music group	3

This finding echoes the top finding of our youth engagement research in 2015, and once again highlights that having a lack of time is a key barrier faced by people. Working out how to accommodate people with busy lifestyles is an important challenge for all music groups to consider, not just choral societies.

The reason why people can't attend regularly is often misunderstood (perceived as 'lack of commitment' as opposed to, 'this person is a midwife and doesn't always know when their shifts will be, and sometimes they over-run'). Sometimes, this misperception can be off-putting in itself - if you are working as a critical care worker in a hospital, or raising a family, or caring for relatives, or juggling 3 part-time jobs, you probably don't want your music group thinking of you as uncommitted when the reality is actually that you are very committed but have competing priorities to commit to.

What can your music group do to include people who find it difficult to attend on a regular basis? Could you have learning tracks, so people can catch up in their own time? Could members pay per term instead of for a whole year?

#### 4. Possible joiners thinking that they have nothing in common with the group, or that there will be no one their age is less of a factor than choral societies think

Reason: Don't think there'll be anyone my age there	
	Ranking (out of 14)
People in choral societies	6
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	14
Not in any music group	11

Reason: Don't think I'll have anything in common with people in a choral society	
	Ranking (out of 14)
People in choral societies	7
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	13
Not in any music group	13

While a lot of people from choral societies ranked not having anything in common fairly high, everyone who was *not* in a choral society ranked this as the second least important barrier to joining. Similarly, people in choral societies tended to think that people would be put off by the thought that there would be no-one their age there, whereas in reality this was the least important factor for people in other types of music groups, and similarly ranked very low for people not in a music group at all.

This is great news for choral societies! You don't need to overhaul your age profile or demographic to get new people to join.

### 5. It's not as simple as saying it's about the style of music

Reason: It's not my style of music	
	Ranking (out of 14)
People in choral societies	2
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	4
Not in any music group	6

Obviously there were lots of respondents who were members of other types of music groups, and so rated the style of music as a more important factor, which is perfectly understandable. However, for people who weren't in any music group at all, this was only ranked as 6th out of 14, so of middle importance, rather than the top importance that choral societies rated it as.

For people not in a music group, reasons including 'not wanting to audition' (1/14), 'can't read music' (5/14) and 'can't sing well enough' (2/14) were all ranked as more important. This is positive, as it suggests that there are people who would very happily enjoy singing choral music if some of these other barriers could be removed.

### 6. Not thinking you can sing well enough, or not being able to read music, is a barrier in some cases, especially for people not in a music group

Reason: Can't read music	
	Ranking (out of 14)
People in choral societies	3
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	9
Not in any music group	5

Reason: Can't sing well enough	
	Ranking (out of 14)
People in choral societies	5
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	5
Not in any music group	2

For people who aren't in any type of music group, feeling that you can't sing well enough is the 2nd most important barrier to joining a choral society, and not being able to read music also features fairly high.

In some cases it may be true that someone's vocal skills might not be of the standard required by some choral societies. However, people are often a poor judge of their own vocal skills and may be lacking in confidence. They may have been told at school by a teacher to stand at the back and mime and may not have had the opportunity to develop their vocal skills, therefore thinking they can't sing.

Similarly, knowing you can't read music could be off-putting, and some might consider this to be an absolute barrier to joining a choral society.

However, many choral societies are open access, and don't need members to be able to read music when they join. You may also be able to signpost potential members in the direction of a singing teacher, or your MD or a voice rep might provide some additional support to help the musical development of less experienced members. Brass bands often use a 'training band' model - is this something choral societies could learn from and adopt, in order to provide additional support for less experienced singers who want to join?

## 7. In some cases, cost is a barrier

<b>Reason: Cost is a problem</b>	
	<b>Ranking (out of 14)</b>
People in choral societies	11
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	6
Not in any music group	9

Cost is more likely to be a barrier for people already in other types of music groups. This is perhaps unsurprising - if you are already paying subs for one music group, this has perhaps used up your allocated budget for music activities.

While this is not one of the top-ranked barriers, it may be worth reviewing whether your subs are affordable. For example, do you have concession rates available, and are people able to spread payments throughout the year, rather than pay for a year up front? It's also a good idea to be open about your subs and payment options on your website and joining information - this may be a factor that people want to consider when deciding whether to join your group, but may not feel comfortable contacting you directly to ask about.

## 8. Not knowing anyone there could be a barrier for some

Reason: Not knowing anyone there	
	Ranking (out of 14)
People in choral societies	10
People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	7
Not in any music group	7

Although this isn't one of the highest ranking barriers overall, it is perhaps a bit more important than acknowledged by some choral societies. Many people can be anxious about meeting a new group of people and being accepted. Thinking about how to welcome new members and helping them to feel at home within the group is something that all music groups should consider carefully.

## 9. Factors that are of low importance

There were a number of factors that everyone agreed were of low importance:

	People in choral societies	People in other types of music group, but NOT in a choral society	Not in any music group
No choral society nearby	14	11	10
No choral societies of a high enough standard nearby	13	10	14
Having to buy your own music	12	12	12

## Summary of recommendations

1. If you hold auditions, think about how to make the process as transparent and un intimidating as possible. If you don't hold auditions, be explicit about this in your marketing.
2. Think about what you can do to make your group more inclusive, friendly and welcoming, to break down perceptions of stuffiness. Make sure this is reflected on your website and social media.
3. Think about what you can do to include people who find it difficult to attend on a regular basis.
4. Look at putting support in place to help less experienced singers to develop both their vocal and music reading skills.
5. Make sure your subs are affordable.

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