

CHOOSING MUSIC FOR YOUR SPECIAL DAY

by Sue Taylor, The Cheshire Consort



Music is an indispensable part of your wedding day. The music you choose for the marriage ceremony will set the mood, express your feelings, and provide your guests with wonderful memories that will last long after the day itself. Live music can set the tone for the reception and create the atmosphere, whether it's a string quartet, jazz band or vocal group. So it's important that you give as much attention to the music as you will to the dress, the cake, the flowers and the other myriad details that will go to make up a perfect day.

The basics

If you are getting married in a church talk to the vicar about the type of music they will or will not allow, discuss the order of service and the number and placement of any musical items during the service.

Check the musical forces available in the church. Is there a resident choir, what does the organ sound like, is the organist qualified? Go to a Sunday service so you can judge if you would be happy to have them sing at your wedding, and listen to the quality of the organ and the proficiency of the organist. If you think the musical resources are not of the standard you would like, ask the vicar if there would be any objection to you bringing in your own musicians.

There are many places during the ceremony where music can add beauty and enhance the mood: organ music or choral works whilst the guests are assembling, on the bride's entrance, after the welcome address, between readings, during the signing of the register, after the blessing, and as the couple leave, a celebratory organ piece – usually *The Wedding March*.

Type of music

Next, decide on the type of music you want to hear at the ceremony. Classical? Sacred or secular music? Instrumental or vocal? Favourite songs? Something out of the ordinary? Whatever you choose, it is important that the music has meaning for both of you, and that it fits the theme of your wedding. Remember also that the bride and groom may not be present in the church at all times (at the beginning, during the register signing) so if you want to hear your favourite work, schedule it at a time you can hear it.

Don't forget the hymns! Getting your guests to sing some well-known and rousing hymns is a good way to involve them in what will be one of the most significant events of your life.

The musicians

If you decide to bring in outside musicians, think about the atmosphere you are trying to create. Solo voices can be beautiful: the sound of a single soprano voice has brought many a tear to the eyes of the guests (and the happy couple!). Similarly, small instrumental ensembles provide elegance and sophistication.

However, the sound of a choir, voices blending in beautiful harmony, enhances the significance of the event, and brings back wonderful memories for the guests:

- Whilst the guests assemble, the choir or organist can entertain and set the mood for the coming event with some quiet and unobtrusive items. If your guests have travelled a long way, ten minutes spent listening to music is a great way to relax and prepare for the ceremony, whilst relatives and friends who haven't seen each other for a long time will be able to greet each other against a background of lovely sound.
- The choir will lead the hymns and encourage your guests to sing out and participate in the ceremony

- During the ceremony you may wish to have music between the readings (an anthem or psalm perhaps), or after the exchange of vows or prayers in order to emphasise a particular element of the service
- While the bride and groom leave the scene to sign the register, there is often an awkward hiatus. The choir can entertain your guests until you and the wedding party are ready to return, and can add considerably to the impact and mood of the service.

Finding a choir

The best way of finding a good choir is by asking for recommendations from friends. Alternatively, the vicar and organist may know of local vocal groups, or you can approach one of the many local choirs to see if they can provide a number of singers.

However, a much better approach is to find an experienced choir that regularly sings at weddings, as they will have an extensive repertoire of appropriate music already prepared, and (importantly) will provide a professional conductor to direct the musical forces on the day. They should also be able to provide you with a contract to ensure you are not let down on the day, and the choir organiser will maintain good communication with you throughout the run-up to the big day and assist and advise on music choice and planning.

The size of the choir will depend on the music to be performed, the size of the venue, and the balance of voices required. Typically, a choir of between 16-20 voices will be sufficient for most church ceremonies, with a larger group necessary for more complex services such as Nuptial Mass. Choirs will often also provide an organist if required.

You can find choirs listed on wedding websites or in magazines, or by looking at the choral website www.makingmusic.org.uk, on which local choirs will publicise their wedding activities. Alternatively, visit the websites of some of your local choirs and see which offer wedding services.

Choosing the music

There are three main types of musical repertoire you will need to consider for a traditional church wedding. Note that if you are having a civil ceremony, you will not be allowed to have any music with a religious theme.

Processional/recessional: this is the music that will accompany the bride as she arrives and the departure of the couple at the end. There are plenty of stirring and joyous pieces to choose from (you don't have to have *Here comes the bride!*), and the choir organiser should be able to provide you with suggestions.

Hymns: it is usual for up to three hymns to be sung during the wedding service: after the bride's arrival, between readings, and after the exchange of vows or prayers. It's a good idea to choose something your guests will be familiar with so the entire congregation can join in some rousing singing. Their singing abilities don't matter – the choir will immeasurably improve the overall sound! – but what is important is involving everyone in the ceremony. Note that some hymns have been set to different tunes over the years, so make sure your choir and organist know which tune you want. If there are lots of verses, or some which are less appropriate for a wedding, you might want to choose just specific verses. Your choir organiser should be able to give you help and guidance with this. Different hymn books sometimes also have slight variations in words, so it's a good idea to print the exact words you want in the order of service.

Anthems: these are choral pieces, sung either unaccompanied or with organ, and usually sung during the signing of the register. There is a great variety of anthems and psalms suitable for weddings, and your choir organiser should be able to give advice on appropriate selections.

Music scores

Most wedding choirs will already have the scores of popular wedding music. If you request something out of the ordinary, you will have to provide and pay for any additional music scores as well as additional rehearsal time. Photocopying music that is still in copyright is illegal, so you need to discuss this with your musicians well in advance.

Choir dress

All choirs have their own 'uniform', which may or may not fit the theme of your wedding. The Cheshire Consort for example usually wears all black, sometimes with red silk scarves for the women. This allows the choir to merge into the background, retaining the focus of attention on the bride and groom. If you have specific preferences (eg you may wish the choir to look more like ordinary wedding guests, or you may have a specific colour or theme in mind) this needs to be agreed with the choir organiser at the time of booking.

Costs

The cost will depend on the size of the choir, and the music chosen. Typically you should expect to pay between £300 and £600 for a good choir, including rehearsal time, travel and other expenses. The conductor's and organist's fees will be in addition as they will almost always be professional musicians. A non refundable deposit will usually be required in advance to reserve the date with the balance due a few weeks before the wedding.

Videos

If you are having the ceremony videoed, in addition to asking permission of the church you will have to obtain the agreement of all the musicians. There will probably be an additional charge involved, depending on whether the music is still in copyright and the nature of any contract the organist may have with the church.

On the day

The choir will come to the wedding fully prepared to perform all the music. However, they will need a rehearsal on the day of the wedding itself. The choir organiser will undertake a site visit to check the acoustics of the building, decide on seating plans, run through the order of service with the organist, and make last minute decisions about musical matters. This is often an opportunity for a face to face meeting with the bride to arrange any last minute details. The organiser should arrange for the musicians to get access to the church at least an hour before the ceremony itself. If this is not possible (and some churches have many weddings in a day), then a rehearsal on an earlier day may be required.

Car parking will need to be provided for the choir/organist. Light refreshments for the musicians between rehearsal and wedding, or after the wedding will be appreciated as some singers will have travelled a significant distance. The choir organiser will check that there is an available room for the choir to get changed.

And finally, relax and enjoy the music you have so carefully chosen. Be uplifted by its beauty and join in with your family and friends in celebrating this most special day.

The Cheshire Consort is available for church and civil ceremonies throughout the Cheshire, Greater Manchester and North Wales area. The Consort is drawn from members of St George's Singers, one of the most highly respected choirs in the North of England, and a registered charity. All monies raised by The Cheshire Consort are used to fund St George's Singers' future concerts, workshops and other choral music events. For information, tel 01663 766991, email setaylor9@btinternet.com, or visit us online at www.st-georges-singers.org.uk/weddingchoir.