

## Tips for Getting Students to Sing at Mass

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I don't have all the answers, of course, so any tips and ideas that have worked with your students are so welcome. But here are some practices that have improved singing at school liturgies over my last 23 years in Omaha Catholic Schools.

### Background:

We have 5th-8th grade Mass on Tuesdays, K-4th grade Mass on Wednesdays, and All-School Mass every Friday and Holy Day.

### **Tip 1: Song choice**

For us, Mass singing improves as the Mass proceeds, so to strengthen the Friday Opening song, we sing it as the last (strongest) song at the Tuesday Mass.

### **Tip 2: Song choice**

Due to getting out of pew, walking, not having a music book in hand and receiving the Host during Holy Communion, only some students are able to sing at any one point. To strengthen the Friday Holy Communion song, we sing it as the Offertory at the Tuesday Mass.

### **Tip 3: Song choice**

Because the choruses are usually memorized, the longer the chorus of the Holy Communion song, the more students will be able to sing when they are walking up without books.

### **Tip 4: Responsorial Psalm**

We use the responsorial psalm for the approaching Sunday all week from the Respond and Acclaim book. After singing it twice during the school Masses, they are more confident singing it on the weekend, thereby strengthening singing at Parish Masses.

### **Tip 5: Training**

I open every class with a prayer routine, but after that, the first thing I do with every kindergarten class is “Chart Work.” I write one song from Catholic Mass repertoire on a chart and teach it, emphasizing that Mass is the most important thing we do so we always do it first. After about 5 minutes, if they need more practice, I put a dot in their class’s column, and we’ll work on it the next day. When we as a class feel it’s strong enough and ready to be sung at a Mass, I put a sticker (over the dot). The class who reaches the bottom of the chart celebrates with a little musical movie and popcorn in May. It’s a gentle competition; they are highly motivated to not fall behind the other class. However, they want the other class to finish as well, then they have the party together.

### **Tip 6: Chorus/ verse**

When we do “Chart Work,” we are just learning the choruses without books. We “pop” or “toast” the song after learning it. This means that I sing the verse while they sit and listen, then when the chorus comes around, they pop up like popcorn or like poptarts out of the toaster and sing strong. At Mass, we don’t pop up, but they just sing on the choruses.

This process causes them to listen to the verses closely and the piano accompaniment so they can pop up at just the right point (not too early) and they’re hearing the verses’ words and melody repeatedly. The physical act of jumping up quickly causes them to sing with more energy, more breathing. Congregational singing with adults is weakest when most are not confident about the song. This practice in kindergarten causes students (even for years later) to be okay if they don’t know, say, the alternate notes in the 3rd verse. Maybe they sing quietly or drop out for a bit, but once that chorus comes around, they’re in the habit of jumping right back into strong singing.

### **Tip 7: Delayed gratification and positive spin**

Background: We use Rise Up and Sing books, first edition, at our K-4 Masses. It has easier level, age-appropriate Mass songs, but also many that are in the Breaking Bread and Music Issue Mass song books.

The kindergarteners “get to” help sing on the choruses (no books). The first graders, if they’re working hard on their reading skills in their homerooms, “get to” use books after Christmas break after I train them on finding pages, tracking the songs, repeat signs, etc. The second graders, since they’re older and will receive two sacraments that year, “get to” use books all year, as do third graders. The fourth graders, the oldest students at the Wednesday Mass, “get to” sing at the microphones/ be songleaders by the piano at Wednesday Masses. The fifth graders are old enough now to “get to” switch from Wednesday Mass to Tuesday Mass/ switch from the Rise Up books to the Breaking Bread (grown up books). Fifth through eighth graders “get to” rotate in small groups to sing at the microphones/ be songleaders by the piano for Tuesday Masses AND on All-School Masses.

### **Tip 8: Singing at the microphones/ being “songleaders”**

The fourth graders spend the first two days of music class being trained for this. On day one, we discuss what to do and what they’ve noticed the older kids doing in the past. On day two, we go into the sanctuary and work with the microphones, the space and the procedures.

No one HAS TO sing at the mics. It’s always “get to.” I always make clear they can join and drop out if it’s not for them OR they can wait and see if they want to do it later, to talk to me anytime. I estimate 95%+ volunteer.

I do the same process with 5th-8th grader volunteer singers, replacing training with a quick review with 5th and 6th.

Background: we have two microphones that pick up 2-3 singers well.

### **Tip 9: Songleader grouping and scheduling**

I put students in groups of 5-7, mainly based on balancing louder singing, bold singers with softer singing and shy ones. I name each group after a saint, a prayer or a Marian apparition. Often they ask to choose their own.

Then I post a calendar/ schedule in the music room and give one to each 4th-8th grade homeroom teacher to post anywhere in their room, and the

students are responsible for keeping track of the schedule and meeting me in church a few minutes earlier than their class as the altar servers do. No one reminds the students, unless there is something special we have to rehearse beforehand.

If they don't show up, I don't run around looking for them. I won't wave to them from across the church which looks disorganized and last minute. I just move one microphone to the piano for me and leave the other one for the student who reads the introduction. Following the Love and Logic discipline model, the real-life consequence for forgetting an appointment is that you have to wait around for a new time, which could be as long as a month away.

### **Tip 10: Acclamations**

I use a new set of acclamations for every liturgical season, referring to a pie chart of the liturgical year. I use class time a few days before each new season to sing through the Holy, the Memorial Acclamation, the Great Amen and the Lamb of God for review. If they sing it through strongly the first time, we can move on. Otherwise we sing it through one more time only, then come back to it at the start of the next music class if that doesn't accomplish it. Knowing this and that I absolutely stick to it, they sing well the first time. Be careful though to never use singing as a punishment. You're just going through it again for more practice. If I am introducing a new set of acclamations, I will start earlier, always at the start of class time, one song per day.

### **Tip 11: Seasonal song list**

I keep a list of songs for each liturgical season. Some songs are obvious to, say, Lent, but I include some general use songs and sort of save them for that season. This just helps them identify more fully which liturgical season we're experiencing.

(I will include lists at a later date.)

### **Tip 12: Repertoire size**

Students knew 10-12 Mass songs and each student attends school Mass at least twice a week. Not enough. Obviously we needed many more songs. The struggle is to balance enough songs that they don't get boring but not so many that they won't remember or be confident.

I run this process the same as new or review of acclamations in Tip 10. (I use class time to introduce a new Mass song. If they sing it through strongly the first time, we can move on. Otherwise we sing it through one more time only, then come back to it at the start of the next music class if that doesn't accomplish it. Knowing this and that I absolutely stick to it, they sing well the first time. Be careful though to never use singing as a punishment. You're just going through it again for more practice.)

( [Include K-8 Catholic Repertoire List here](#) )

### **Tip 13: Expanding your repertoire**

I started with a chart for myself of songs I wanted to add to our repertoire originally to keep track of which classes had which songs ready to sing at Masses. But students noticed it, wanted to get the check marks before other classes. I ended up making it look a little nicer and posting it in the room.

I hope this helps you and your students make a more joyful (and noisier) noise to the Lord! And I look forward to hearing your tips at [sfanciullo@stbernadetteschool.net](mailto:sfanciullo@stbernadetteschool.net)