

Benchmark Study of Community Singing Leadership

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Executive Summary

In early 2025, Tapestry Singers of Maine determined to do some strategic planning. In simplest terms, the project was to help answer the hypothetical: “What would we do if space aliens abducted our Artistic Director?” While definitely tongue in cheek, it did strike at the heart of the issue: are we prepared for the unforeseen. The answer was a resounding “no”, and so the Board of Directors, with guidance from our Artistic Director, developed a plan to address this.

Of all the uncertainties we could face, the most pressing was how would we, and how could we replace our Artistic Director (AD) if we suddenly had to? Given that the supply of available ADs is very small at any given moment, we needed to know how competitive we are compared to our peers.

To accomplish this, with the help of our AD, we compiled a list of eleven community choral groups in southern Maine. Then we developed a survey to measure the following critical elements of compensation:

Contextual Factors

- Group size
- Group location

- Bar for member admission

Professional Attributes

- AD experience

- AD education level
- AD tenure

Key Target

- AD salary plus add-ons

Contextual Factors: The first three items were to identify the context relevant to analysis. We expected there would be correlations to be found between AD salary as compared with group size and/or whether the group is auditioned or not. We also suspected there would be an inverse correlation between AD salary and distance “north” (calculated as driving distance from Boston). We thought the farther north, the lower the pay, all other things being equal.

Professional Attributes: The next three were to qualify the individual AD’s professional attributes, also for context. We fully expected the personal qualifications of the individual for the role of AD will have a direct impact on the salary level. In general, we expected the experience and education level of the individual to be directly correlated with salary. To a lesser extent, we expected the time in position (tenure) to have a similar impact.

Key Target: AD Salary. The last is, of course, the target piece of information we wanted to identify.

Analysis: It might seem difficult to draw conclusions from a study with only seven participants. However, this is not a statistical study trying to draw inferences from this small sample to some larger, unknown population. Community choral groups of any size in southern Maine number less than fifteen. The eleven we solicited information from represented the groups in southern Maine that have a fairly common set of characteristics, making whatever results we obtained more relevant than random. With seven out of those eleven responding, that represents a greater than 75% response rate, allowing us to paint a more confident picture of the costs of leadership for these groups.

Therefore, we are confident in saying our findings are descriptive of prevailing practices in southern Maine community choirs, based on a strong response rate from a well-defined universe.

The downside with a group this small is that outliers have a proportionately larger impact on results than in a study with more participants. So, as you’ll see with the simple metric of “average” salary, there is one outlier that so skews the average that the resulting “mean” is essentially descriptive of nothing in real life. If there are 10 people in a room and half are 6 feet tall and half are 4 feet tall, the average size of people in that room is 5 feet tall. However, there is no one in that room 5 feet tall.

So we have tried to temper our conclusions and use alternative metrics in order to get results more descriptive of reality.

General Findings

Our overall finding is that there is very mixed support for our assumptions about the connections between contextual factors, professional attributes and AD salary.

This result was unexpected and puzzling. But hindsight suggests that AD salaries are negotiated individually, between the AD and the board, neither of which has access to any benchmarking or external data. When salaries are determined by negotiation rather than by context and professional attributes, results are likely to be more disparate being more the product of good negotiations and negotiators rather than any objective criteria.

The mean salary of ADs in southern Maine is \$10,700. However, as noted, there was one outlier that has skewed this mean significantly. So, in this lone case we have used the “median” instead of the “mean.” The median of a group of values is the one value that half the data is greater than that number and the other half is less than that number. So, in the case, the median value for salary is \$6,625.

In all other cases using “averages”, we are using the arithmetic mean.

All ADs are considered “part time” and the annual salary is the largest component of their annual compensation from the choruses they lead. Some choral groups provide small, additional elements of compensation, but none of any significant size. See “Additional Findings” for a list.

All of the responding choral groups had two concerts per year. A “concert” was considered all the performances of the same music in a single “semester”. So if a group held two performances in the fall, that was considered a single “concert” for the purposes of this survey.

Table 1 presents the key results for the critical elements of the survey.

Table 1. Key Survey Descriptors

	Mean	Low	High
Group size	50 + or -	< 30	> 50
Group Location (miles from Boston)	140 miles	70 miles	190 miles
Audition Requirements	None (4)	Vocal Range Only (1)	Vocal Range, Prepared Piece, Sight Reading (2)
AD Previous Experience	Yes	Yes	Yes
AD Education	Masters	Masters	Doctoral
AD Current Tenure	5+ Years	< 2 Years	5+ Years
AD Current Salary	\$6,625 (median)	\$4,830	\$28,000

Correlational Findings

The simple mean is only part of the story and can often be misleading. It is necessary to look at the interactions between contextual elements and AD salaries.

Table 2. Group Size Versus AD Salary

	Size	AD Salary
Choral 1	< 30	\$6,600
Choral 2	40 - 49	\$4,830
Choral 3	40 - 49	\$6,300
Choral 4	50+	Not Reported
Choral 5	50+	\$6,650
Choral 6	50+	\$12,000
Choral 7	50+	\$28,000

There does seem to be a loose correlation between group size and AD salary although the data does tentatively suggest there is a floor between \$5,000 and \$6,000 in annual salary regardless of the group size.

Table 3. Group Location Versus AD Salary

	Miles from BOS	AD Salary
Choral 1	160	\$6,600
Choral 2	140	\$4,830
Choral 3	160	\$6,300
Choral 4	130	Not Reported
Choral 5	120	\$6,650
Choral 6	70	\$12,000
Choral 7	190	\$28,000

Honestly, we thought this would be a robust correlation. There are so many other non-choral examples we are aware of, we thought it would hold true. Again, there does seem to be a small correlation, but that is offset by the fact the southern most group pays the second highest salary, and a mid-coast group pays the lowest.

**Table 4. Group Admission Requirements Versus
AD Salary**

	Audition	AD Salary
Choral 1	Vocal Range, Prepared Piece, Sight Reading	\$6,600
Choral 2	None	\$4,830
Choral 3	Vocal Range	\$6,300
Choral 4	Vocal Range, Prepared Piece, Sight Reading	Not Reported
Choral 5	None	\$6,650
Choral 6	None	\$12,000
Choral 7	None	\$28,000

The only comment here is that there just is no correlation at all.

Table 5. Combined Context Versus AD Salary

	Size	Miles from BOS	Audition	AD Salary
Choral 1	< 30	160	Vocal Range, Prepared Piece, Sight Reading	\$6,600
Choral 2	40 - 49	140	None	\$4,830
Choral 3	40 - 49	160	Vocal Range	\$6,300
Choral 4	50+	130	Vocal Range, Prepared Piece, Sight Reading	Not Reported
Choral 5	50+	120	None	\$6,650
Choral 6	50+	70	None	\$12,000
Choral 7	50+	190	None	\$28,000

Looking at all three contextual elements combined, instead of clearing things up, it seems to muddy the water a bit further. Clearly, from this data, contextual factors play a minimal role in salary determination.

Table 6. AD Previous Experience Versus AD Salary

	Previous Experience?	AD Salary
Choral 1	Yes	\$6,600
Choral 2	Yes	\$4,830
Choral 3	Yes	\$6,300
Choral 4	Yes	Not Reported
Choral 5	Yes	\$6,650
Choral 6	Yes	\$12,000
Choral 7	Yes	\$28,000

Since all the choral groups reported hiring experienced directors, there is no meaningful correlation to be found.

Table 7. AD Education Level Versus AD Salary

	Education Level	AD Salary
Choral 1	Masters	\$6,600
Choral 2	Masters	\$4,830
Choral 3	Masters	\$6,300
Choral 4	Doctoral	Not Reported
Choral 5	Masters	\$6,650
Choral 6	Masters	\$12,000
Choral 7	Masters	\$28,000

Again, with only one divergent, there is no meaningful correlation to be found.

Table 8. AD Tenure Versus AD Salary

	Tenure (yrs)	AD Salary
Choral 1	5 or more	\$6,600
Choral 2	5 or more	\$4,830
Choral 3	5 or more	\$6,300
Choral 4	2 or less	Not Reported
Choral 5	2 or less	\$6,650
Choral 6	5 or more	\$12,000
Choral 7	5 or more	\$28,000

There is a mild correlation here between length of time in the job and salary level. However, without more detailed salary information (starting salary, actual tenure, number of salary changes if any) the correlation is interesting but not necessarily robust.

Table 9. Professional Attributes Versus AD Salary

	Previous Experience?	Education Level	Tenure (yrs)	AD Salary
Choral 1	Yes	Masters	5 or more	\$6,600
Choral 2	Yes	Masters	5 or more	\$4,830
Choral 3	Yes	Masters	5 or more	\$6,300
Choral 4	Yes	Doctoral	2 or less	Not Reported
Choral 5	Yes	Masters	2 or less	\$6,650
Choral 6	Yes	Masters	5 or more	\$12,000
Choral 7	Yes	Masters	5 or more	\$28,000

Even combining all the professional attributes does not seem to yield any greater correlations.

Additional AD Related Findings

Additional income

There was no uniformity here. Several groups stated there was no additional income.

Many of the groups indicated that at the end of at least one concert season per year, the members would chip in to provide a cash stipend for the AD and usually the accompanist. Some do it at the end of each concert season. We hesitate to consider that as part of salary.

One group indicated they had been paying cash bonuses at the end of each season, but had recently increased the salary amounts and had discontinued the bonuses.

One group provided a \$300 stipend for professional dues so that the AD could maintain membership in professional organizations, or to be used to offset some of the expenses of attendance at professional conferences.

Additional duties

There was a varied list of additional duties among the responding choral groups. ADs were variously required to do some or all of the following:

Music Librarian

Publicity

Program Creation

Hiring Instrumentalists

Score creation for instrumentalists

Ordering music

Practice Track creation

Fund raising (grants, contributions, sponsorships, donor relations)

Attend Board meetings

Type of employment – salaried, part time

All choral groups considered their AD as part time. All but one had salaried pay arrangements (as opposed to hourly or gig arrangements). The lone exception paid their AD by rehearsal and choral presentation.

Additional Findings – Non-AD Paid Staff

Paid accompanist

All groups surveyed had paid accompanists. All but one were salaried, the remaining one was a gig arrangement.

Table 10. Accompanist Salary

	Arrangement	AD Salary
Choral 1	Paid, salaried	\$5,280
Choral 2	Paid, salaried	\$4,200*
Choral 3	Paid, salaried	\$4,200
Choral 4	Paid, salaried	Not Reported
Choral 5	Paid, salaried	\$5,500
Choral 6	Paid, salaried	\$14,000
Choral 7	Paid, salaried	\$4,200

*plus \$740 for practice tracks

The median salary for accompanists is \$4,740 per year.

Additional Accompanist Duties

Almost all choral groups had additional duties for their accompanist beyond simply accompanying rehearsals and performances. The were:

- Practice Track Creation and Distribution
- Website design & maintenance
- Supplemental Music Composition or Arranging
- Finding Alternative/Additional Musicians for Concerts
- Purchasing/borrowing music

Other Paid Staff

One choral group reported that there were several additional paid positions for volunteers whose responsibilities were “above and beyond” what should be expected for a volunteer. These included a bookkeeper, advertising director, web master, and technical support. The average stipend was \$500 per year.

Another had a paid Assistant Conductor and Choir Manager. A third had an Executive Director. And another paid board members \$400 per year.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, our overall finding is that there is mixed support for our assumptions about the connections between contextual factors, professional attributes and AD salary.

This result was unexpected and puzzling. But hindsight suggests that AD salaries are negotiated individually, between the AD and the board, neither of which has access to any benchmarking or external data. When salaries are determined by negotiation rather than by context and professional attributes, results are likely to be more disparate being more the product of good negotiations and negotiators rather than any objective criteria.

The Editors and Tapestry Singers of Maine are incredibly grateful for the contributions of time, energy, and information the respondents to this survey made. They have our sincere thanks and we acknowledge a debt of gratitude for their openness.

Questions or comments about this survey can be directed to either bethpreston1955@gmail.com or skipsimonds@mac.com.

Respectfully,



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