

You want Mädchen in a Knabenchor?

A semantic or an existential crisis?

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Abstract

Although it is common to find young female singers in English cathedrals where once there were only boys, change in this direction has been slower across mainland Europe. The word “Knabenchor”, often used in Germany, denotes a specific gender, whereas in England it has been assumed that cathedral choir means boys’ choir. The gender-neutral terms “youth choir” or “Jugendchor” avoid difficulties. Youth choirs often provide age-appropriate boys’, girls’ and mixed sections to prepare young singers as future performers. However, leading ecclesiastical choirs both in the UK and mainland Europe are likely to see the performance of the music as a higher priority. This has led to difficulty as the age of puberty reduces in boys. In Germany, where older adolescents sing lower parts, imbalances have been reported where boys as young as thirteen have become tenors or basses. A younger average age for sopranos and altos also means less maturity in these parts. This difficulty is felt less in England where girls are readily available, but the exclusion of adolescent changed voices risks a future shortage of tenors and basses. It is mainly ecclesiastical choirs, hidebound by tradition, that face these perceived challenges. Secular choirs are freer to adapt to changing circumstances.

Introduction

In 2015, I gave a lecture at a conference organised by the Staats-und Domchor at the Universität der Künste in Berlin. It was entitled “*The impact of American research upon choral work with boys in England*”. It drew attention, amongst other things, to the not inconsiderable differences between chorister singing in the UK and Germany. It made the point that practice in the US had tended to base itself upon the English tradition, but increasingly diverged from it over the years, becoming more akin to practice in Germany and indeed most of the European mainland. The English tradition had seen boys dismissed from choirs at “voice break” on account of a preference for mature adult singers. Leading researchers in the US had expressed dismay at this “infamous English voice break” on two counts. It was no way to treat young adolescents and it risked boys singing “too high for too long”. A realignment with what, at risk of failing to acknowledge other fine European choirs we might call the Germanic tradition, normalised the practice of unchanged voices on soprano and alto parts with older adolescent singers on tenor and bass parts.

Now it seems that a more recent phenomenon has come to trouble European choirs who might even be looking to England for a lead. A tendency for voices to change earlier, often exaggerated but real nonetheless, is rendering well-balanced four-part choirs with

unchanged soprano and alto voices harder to achieve. Harder to achieve, that is, if it is insisted that the sopranos and altos must be boys. The problem, it must be said, is confined largely to ecclesiastical choirs or choirs with roots in the belief that women must keep silence in the churches¹. The English, it seems, no longer have a problem with this but the Germans have been more inclined to the view that a Knabenchor is, well, a Knabenchor. That, at least, was the response I received when I enquired in Berlin in 2015 about whether there were any plans to admit girls to the Staats- und Domchor. I gained the impression they thought the English a little mad and were bemused by the question. Mädchen in a Knabenchor is surely a contradiction in terms.

The situation in Germany may now be set to change. Challenges have started to come via the courts, litigants even citing English practice, but there is still some distance to travel. Not everything is right or secure in England and it remains the case that a spirit of European cooperation in which the UK plays a full part and there is mutual learning by all is the better way. Superficially, the English have less of a problem with semantics because their cathedral choirs have never called themselves boys' choirs. Behind this, however, might be found a patriarchal hegemony in which it has always been assumed that "cathedral choir equals men and boys' choir". Though women's ministry has advanced considerably, anomalies such as this remain. Nevertheless, much of the heat has gone from the "boys versus girls" argument that once aroused such passion. Things have moved on now to the extent that English cathedrals without girls' voices are becoming unthinkable. Efforts by a reactionary campaign to assert the uniqueness of boys' voices have proved generally counter-productive as air time was given to researchers and scholars who were able to demonstrate many flaws in their traditionalist arguments.²

The existential question: what are choirs for?

History records the year 597 as that in which some kind of chanting by boy oblates in Canterbury was first recognised. Imaginative historians are wont to imply that this was the founding moment of the English chorister. What is perhaps less often considered is that these early practices first defined a somewhat different purpose for the singing boy. They were a means of inducting youth into the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Only as composers developed in skill and daring did it become increasingly apparent that there was a growing need to induct youth into the skill of music. This latter need remains today, whilst the former has all but disappeared. The magnitude, profundity and implications of this fundamental shift are seldom fully appreciated. I have written about them in various ways before. I have used the terms "pedagogical choir" and "performance choir" (Ashley, 2014a). I have asked the question "when should boys' choral education begin?" (Ashley, 2014b).

¹ Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but *they are commanded* to be under obedience, as also saith the law. (1 Corinthians 14:34, King James version)

² See, for example, *Cultural History and a Singing Style: "The English Cathedral Tradition"* by Timothy Day in the Oxford Handbook of Singing.

An answer to the latter question that is all but sanctified by antiquity is something like the age of eight years. History records the instruction of singing boys as beginning at age seven during the fifteenth century. Though perhaps a little younger than most invitations to voice trial today, it is not radically different from them. This practice can be justified by the undoubtedly considerable achievements of many boys by the age of thirteen, though the implied philosophical argument of “because they can, they should” might not be entirely watertight. Traditionalists will surely point out how many fine, capable and distinguished musicians today began their careers as boys aged eight or nine, but the flaw in any such argument is that it does not demonstrate that those musicians could equally have begun their careers at age eleven, the most common age in England for teaching by subject specialists to begin. Interestingly, scholarly support is available from sources such as Gordon (1999) on musical aptitude or Titze (1992) on larynx and tract development, but sources such as these are seldom cited or discussed.

Perhaps this is at least partly because if the traditionalist position is valid, then it is vulnerable to a serious charge of discrimination. Might there be fewer distinguished women composers and performers precisely because it has been denied to girls for centuries to begin a choral education at the age of eight? This is where the distinction between a pedagogical choir and a performance choir assumes considerable importance. All choirs with child and teenage members inevitably need to fulfil the twin purpose of teaching music and performing it. To a degree, these two functions are complementary, but when pushed to the ultimate limit, only one can be the priority. Is the choir a pedagogical choir or a performance choir? (Ashley 2014a: 18 – 21). If it is a performance choir, then what ought to matter most is that its young singers can reliably perform demanding music to a high standard. Whether they are boys, girls, or a mixture of both is a secondary consideration and the spurious arguments about gendered timbre largely a distraction. If, on the other hand, it is a pedagogical choir, then it matters hugely that it is offering high quality choral education equally to boys and girls. If it is failing because it produces significantly more female than male graduates, then it is not fulfilling its pedagogical duty which should at least be to confront any prejudice amongst boys against singing.

The pedagogy/performance conundrum assumes different relevance according to the context of the choir. If the choir is a vehicle for religious confession and worship, is it acceptable that the worship world of women and girls should in any way differ fundamentally from that of men and boys? Only a small and diminishing minority of English choral institutions, by their deeds and actions, give the answer yes. The numbers are such that these institutions have now assumed the identity of an aberrant minority that must surely eventually be brought into line, by litigation or legislation if not by the force of moral argument. If, on the other hand, the choir is a school one (surely the most pedagogical of possible choirs) then the schools inspectorate (OFSTED) will grade it poorly and criticise its management if it is failing to engage boys. For example, in a school where the music was in other respects good:

Students were performing songs from notated scores with good attention being paid to improving diction and tone quality. Of the 25 students present, just two were boys and these were from Years 7 and 8. The girls were from all year groups, including the sixth form. (OFSTED 2012)

Finally, it is no small achievement that it might justifiably be argued that the leading youth choirs of the UK achieve high standards of both pedagogy and performance for boys and girls that will bear comparison with best practice anywhere. In the next section, I examine some case studies that lend some support to the possibility that knowledge of gender equity might flow from the UK to mainland Europe. The caveat and the reservation are those of “work in progress”. As the case studies will demonstrate, the UK does not have all the answers, but it may at least be up amongst the leading nations in asking the questions.

Some case studies

Manchester Cathedral choir in England has led the way in mixed gender top lines and illustrates difficulties along the journey that imitators may need to avoid. Manchester opted for a single mixed gender choir in 1995. The decision was made jointly by the then director of music, Stuart Beer, and Mike Brewer, formerly director of the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain and at that time Head of Chetham’s, the specialist music school the choristers attend. Manchester is often cited in social media discussions as an example of how it is perfectly possible to introduce girls without losing the boys. The Manchester choir was visited for research in 2008. At that time, the number of boys and girls was indeed approximately equal. Its director stressed that the experiment of mixing boys and girls had been entirely satisfactory from a musical point of view but expressed another reservation.

Musically it works. It’s a good choir. It works musically and it works socially. But I’m seriously worried about the consequences it will have on the future supply of lay clerks and this is compounded by the example it may be setting to other cathedrals. If more and more boys and girls are combined for economic reasons, there’s going to be a real shortage of lay clerks. (Stokes quoted in Ashley, 2008: 45)

The author was invited to visit again in 2020 because difficulties were being encountered in the recruitment of boys. On this occasion, two days before an important BBC broadcast, the choir was found to have 3 boys and 9 girls - rather more a case of “knaben in a mädchenchor” than “mädchen in a knabenchor”. The musical result was not in doubt. The girls sang some difficult music superbly, with presumably some contribution by the three boys. The director expressed himself satisfied with the result stating that “without the girls, we’d have no choir”. He reiterated his point of 2008 that the most important thing was *the music and its performance*. Nevertheless, performing choirs such as Manchester do not and cannot work in isolation from the wider community, both of school music and more generally. The director of the Manchester choir was insistent that once boys had committed to the choir, they had no problems singing alongside the girls. Shortage of boys was due more, he thought, to a “Manchester attitude” problem. “Boys just didn’t sing in Manchester”. It was not so much that they would not, but that few people ever encouraged them or suggested that they should. This is an interesting comment in that Manchester had a strong project in the early days of the Sing Up initiative. A comprehensive “Singing School” programme was run jointly by the city council and music service (Walsh et al, 2004).

This situation may not be universal. To the best of the present author's knowledge the long-established mixed choir at St Mary's Cathedral Edinburgh has had fewer difficulties, though this institution has not been visited for research. The frequency with which girls outnumber boys in school choirs, however, should sound a cautionary note against any possible naivety in other choirs, newly following the Manchester model in the hope or expectation that they will maintain approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. Three points might be made about this. First, there is enough evidence to suggest that changing from single sex to mixed gender choirs carries a demonstrable risk that boys will be lost or reduce in relative numbers. The task of research is to quantify this risk, and this will require ready access to reliable statistical returns. A second risk arises from the advance in the timing of puberty. Though this is often popularly exaggerated, it is nevertheless real enough to impact on the work of choirs at a critical time. A study of seven English cathedral choirs published by the present author in 2013 confirmed what many suspect – that the “top year” for a boy's treble line is Y7 of the National Curriculum (aged 11 – 12). A year later, only 15% of Y8 (aged 12 – 13) showed no signs of puberty whilst 48% had reached Cooksey's stage 3 with a possibility of reaching stage 4 or even 5 by the end of the year (Ashley, 2013). This means effectively that the contribution of 12 to 13-year-old boys cannot be relied upon. Williams (2020) appositely conceptualizes this difficulty as a question of risk. For choirs faced with high profile broadcasts, is the risk of unavailability or even catastrophic failure of an older boy's voice worth taking when there is an alternative?

Finally, it may be legitimate to ask the question, does it matter anyway? The risk imagined by the Manchester director was that of a shortage of lay clerks (adult singers), but there is here a need for research to demonstrate that such a risk is real. Indeed, a contrary argument might be proposed that a view in which the only possible source of lay clerks is ex-boy choristers is insular and counterproductive. Critically if elsewhere there exists a healthy and thriving pedagogical sector that interests young boys in music, there is every chance that some might go on to consider lay-clerkship without ever having been choristers. Far from suffering a shortage of adult singers, the cathedral world might be enriched, more diverse and more socially representative.

The National Youth Choir of Scotland (NYCOS) is perhaps representative of the apex of youth singing. The youth choir itself (mixed gender for ages 16 – 25) would probably be classified as a performance choir, but within the organisation itself there exist supporting pedagogical choirs. Perhaps most significant of these for the present discourse are the National Boys Choir (NBC) and the National Girls Choir (NGC). The NBC is itself divided into three sections. The NBC proper is for voices that are experienced but largely unchanged (identified by their blue shirts). These singers then progress through the Changed Voices Section (wearing black shirts) before becoming eligible for the leap into “big NYCOS”. A junior corps (in white shirts) exists for the less experienced unchanged voices. The performances of all these choirs are of a high and inspirational standard. It is simply a question of the ultimate priority of pedagogy through which experience dictates the necessity of providing some gender segregated experience for voices at the beginning of adolescence. The National Youth Choirs of Great Britain provides similar segregation

and progression, treating boys as either “trebles” or *cambiata* and the practice is often found amongst the more successful school and youth choirs.

Pedagogical reasons for gender segregation during early adolescence fall into two broad categories, the socio-cultural and the bio-physical. Socio-cultural reasons are largely related to the critical and complex issue of vocal identity. Much research has been undertaken on this topic by the present author and several others globally. The broad conclusion has been that if a boy’s perception of his voice is disjoint with his perception (idealised or otherwise) of his physical body and social position, he will feel uncomfortable about singing. This difficulty can be exacerbated when boys’ speaking voices begin to deepen and other signs of puberty start to appear, yet choir singing continues in the soprano range. Again, the problem is more acute in the case of performance choirs where the issue can be that the experience, musical maturity and repertoire knowledge of the young adolescent may be critical to the success of a boys’ treble line performing with capable lower parts. To this must now be added the consideration that non-binary gender voices increasingly need to be understood and accommodated. It is difficult at the present time to predict where this may lead, but the commonly heard insult amongst boys “you sing like a girl” will come under renewed pressure as vocal identity becomes more complex and the unspoken assumption of patriarchy that there is something wrong with being a girl is more boldly challenged.

Problems of vocal identity are manageable where children sing only with others of the gender with which they identify (as in the NYCOS NBC, NGC and other similar choirs). The disruption to vocal identity inevitably enforced by puberty can create new difficulties. The introduction of girls to English cathedral choirs over the last three decades has perhaps highlighted and hastened a particular difficulty that was coming anyway. English cathedrals that maintain voices of both genders face less of a performance challenge than do the similar European choirs that have hitherto resisted the introduction of girls. The problem has been keenly felt in Bach’s very own institution, the Thomanerchor of Leipzig. The Thomaners have been under the scrutiny for some years of Michael Fuchs, an alumnus, phoniatician, voice researcher, and consultant to the choir. Fuchs’ work is less well-known in the UK than John Cooksey’s, though it probably describes more accurately the conditions and events associated with the high vocal loading of choristers with heavy schedules (Fuchs et al. 2008).³ English choirs which audition and select adult singers according to their needs do not have to worry about how growing numbers of adolescent tenors and basses might be accommodated.

It might be thought that “growing numbers of adolescent tenors and basses” is a good problem to have, and so it is for pedagogical youth choirs. However, where it is insisted that only boys can be soprano and alto, and that the staple repertoire must consist of difficult Bach motets, we find a different kind of problem. Previously less of an issue, the Thomanerchor choir has reported growing difficulties in maintaining the balance between soprano/alto and tenor/bass sections. Boys as young as thirteen can now be found as tenors, and this after perhaps a year’s break from singing in the choir. As well as

³ Cooksey’s work was undertaken in junior high schools where vocal loading conditions, even for boys in choirs, were significantly lower than those for boys in the professional choirs of Europe and the UK.

making balance a potential difficulty, this is an important statement about identity. Fuchs put it this way “We can have an adult voice without an adult personality. He sounds like his father when he’s still a boy.” (Fuchs quoted by Weil, 2013).

If Leipzig’s Thomasschule is taken as the example, progress with recognition that discrimination through the music of confessional religious foundations is unacceptable has proceeded more slowly than in England. The response in Leipzig over the last decade has been to invest heavily in kindergarten provision (Leistner, 2021). As a response to poor quality music education in primary schools, such investment would be very welcome in the UK. However, it appears to come in Leipzig with the price tag of a hope that the age of boys capable of performing demanding music as sopranos or altos can somehow reduce in proportion to the advances in puberty. The rhetoric of the Thomaner nursery begins with music as a priority.

The daycare as a place of musical education is interspersed with music all day long. Regular music lessons take place with the educators . . . making music accompanies the everyday life of the children.

This music making is, apparently, offered equally to girls and boys.

This allows the staff to promote the musical skills and talents of all girls and boys, to arouse their enthusiasm for music and thus to support the development of an open mind.

Religion is then introduced in the next paragraph, by implication, the second priority after music. “In addition” and “also”.

In addition the Kita forum thomanum also want to make the Christian faith tangible for all children. Religious education is a central building block.

The issue of auditioning for the Thomanerchor is then raised. At this point, girls quietly disappear.

Since we cannot, as in previous years, allow taster lessons and auditions to take place at the school due to the coronavirus factors, we would ask you to send us a video of your son by 29/01/21 if you are interested in a Thomaneron.

Perhaps there are other plans or opportunities not mentioned here, but at face value this seems at best naïve in relation to possible challenges that might be brought by the parents of young girls who had enjoyed their kindergarten singing alongside the boys and harboured ambitions. There are also questions to ask about whether this is a just and considerate way to treat children at the end of kindergarten.

Other detailed research has taken place at the Copenhagen Municipal Choir School which also has a well-established relationship with expertise in male puberty. Anders Juul and colleagues at the University of Copenhagen were greatly assisted in their epidemiological studies of male pubertal development through careful records kept by the choir school. Key data included the age at which the choir director decides soprano is no longer appropriate because of “unintentional falsetto notes and changes of singing tone” (Juul et al. 2006). 463 boys were studied over a ten-year period. It was found that the median timing of this event was four months earlier for boys joining the choir between 1997 and 1999 and those joining between 1990 and 1992, a continuing and statistically significant

trend. The school began moving boys into the choir six months sooner in an attempt to compensate for the increasing losses at age 13 but, like Fuchs, its director noted that

. . .the older the boys are in the choir, the more they can relate to the music in a way like grown-ups. . . if we take them in earlier, of course, they will be more childish, and maybe they cannot relate to the music in the same way. (Halcken quoted by Birnbaum, 2020).

Confronted by problems such as this, it is unsurprising to read reports that the Wiener Sängerknaben (Vienna Boys Choir) may “no longer be able to do without female voices”. This is another world-class performing choir that cannot allow its reputation to diminish through using children lacking the maturity and musicianship traditionally associated with young adolescents. The statement came from another professor of phoniatrics, Friedrich Franke, former consultant phoniatrician to the choir. Like Jenevora Williams in England and Michael Fuchs in Germany, Franke was concerned about the potential for harm to boys that arises from choirs retaining them too long as soprano. He also recognised the potentially losing battle with reducing the entry age, noting that “Children don't grow up as musically today as they used to . . .Children don't grow up with Bach and Handel anymore.”

The Vienna choir here faces a potentially great crisis of identity. On the one hand it is associated with fine performances. On the other, it is almost uniquely associated with boys. Currently, it seems to be ahead of both the Leipzig and Berlin choirs in that it founded in 2004 “Der Mädchenchor der Wiener Sängerknaben” (The girls' choir of the Vienna Boys' Choir). By all accounts, the Mädchenchor has begun to achieve an impressive record of international performances in its own right, but the “girls' choir of the Vienna Boys' Choir”, aside from being perhaps an inelegant nomenclature, raises issues for any familiar with the literature on gender equity. The status and global reputation of the Vienna institution has been achieved by the boys. By implication, it must rely on boys to maintain it. A similar issue confronted Salisbury Cathedral in the early days of its girls' choir where analysis of music lists and service patterns of the 1990s demonstrated that the boys retained much of their traditional status. There was also a tendency in the early days for the boys' choirs to be trained and conducted by the established director of music, whilst the girls were rehearsed by a young and less experienced assistant. Such biases may not have been readily apparent to those unfamiliar with the literature on gender equity.

As girls' choirs have grown in stature, achievement and acceptance, tendencies for bias over the allocation of duties and personnel have perhaps diminished. Nevertheless, current work by Liberatore appears to suggest that a new generation of young women have discovered for themselves that such bias is still present. This seventeen-year-old, for example, had clearly become aware of it.

This is slightly off-topic, but this is something that really annoys me; it's when the boys' cathedral choirs are referred to as “the Cathedral Choir” and girls' Cathedral choirs are referred to as “the Girls Choir” . . .or if we're lucky, the Cathedral Girls' Choir.” Fortunately, that changed at [our cathedral] recently, but it [*some of the girls look skeptical*] Yeah, it did. But – it really just annoyed me. (Liberatore, 2021)

Who is doing the referring here is not clear. The unnamed cathedral may have developed in its understanding of the issue and the bias may be residual amongst traditionalists or

commentators who have not really thought things through. On the other hand, *Der Mädchenchor der Wiener Sängerknaben* could hardly be a clearer statement from officialdom – The Vienna Boys Choir and the Girls of the Vienna Boys Choir.

Discussion and conclusion: Knabenchor or Jugendchor?

It is ironic that some European choirs face being overwhelmed by too many young tenors and basses whilst in the UK, it was relatively easy to gain research council funding for a project with the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain to address a relative shortage of young tenors and basses (Ashley et al. 2008). Traditionalists opposed to admitting girls to choirs sometimes take the “no boys, no men” argument a step further, appealing to the emotive logic that whilst girls can sing for life, a boy can sing for only a small number of years. This is certainly a narrow, insular view. Males can sing for life at least as much as females can. It is just that most years of their singing career are spent as a tenor or bass⁴ rather than a “treble”. Boys and young men are seldom consulted about this. When they are, considerable confusion and existential angst can be revealed. The majority view the attainment of a deeper voice as a welcome step on the road to the adult masculinity they look towards. For a small minority, the loss of a fine treble voice can be viewed in such terms as a bereavement and in rare, extreme cases, the pathology of puberphonia can result. Longitudinal studies by the present author, however, have produced evidence that the bereavement phase soon passes. Once a boy has begun seriously to develop an adult voice, he can look back on his “treble” years with reactions ranging from incredulity to amusement⁵.

Much depends upon what boys are led to believe and how they are prepared for their futures. Traditionalists need to consider carefully quite what loss it is they mourn. The greatest loss would surely be a lifetime’s choral singing resulting from complete severance from choirs and the routine of daily performance. This severance, with its attendant risk, can be the potential fate of English boys in the very regimes the traditionalists have sought to perpetuate. It is difficult to avoid considering the possibility that the problem is largely tied up with the core purpose and identity of the choir. Most of the critical existential difficulties seem to be faced by ecclesiastical choirs, focussed upon performance more than pedagogy and tied to a deep rooted but now entirely unacceptable marginalisation of females in worship. In this paper, the English choir of Manchester Cathedral seems to have faced fewer difficulties of adaptation than the German choir of Leipzig St Thomas and similar patterns may be set to repeat with increasing frequency.

The second existential difficulty is one of terminology. “Knabenchor” creates difficulties where the gender-neutral term “Jugendchor” does not. Leading secular youth choirs in the UK such as NYCGB, NYCOS or London Youth, through prioritising the pedagogical and developmental needs of younger adolescents, have shown that it is both possible and desirable for a boys-only choir to exist as a step on the road to full and life-long

⁴ Or perhaps counter-tenor!

⁵ See filmed case studies at [Films | mra-archive \(wixsite.com\)](http://Films|mra-archive(wixsite.com))

participation of all genders. Ecclesiastical foundations that have, in effect, replicated this pedagogical practice through supporting both boys' and girls' treble lines have travelled part of the distance, but in England may still fall at the hurdle of insisting that the tenor and bass parts can only be sung by mature adults. It will indeed be some irony if English cathedral choirs come to rely increasingly upon the work of secular youth choirs for their future supplies of lay clerks – though perhaps a greater (and perhaps tongue-in-cheek) irony if the UK's exit from the European Union means that there are German choirs oversupplied with young tenors and basses who cannot be employed in England.

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