

When (and where) should choral education begin?

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Introduction

This short paper is an updated and abbreviated version of some thinking I undertook as a member of the University of Lund based *Choir in Focus* network in the years leading up to my retirement from fulltime university work. A chapter entitled '1000 years and 1000 Boys' Voices: the crisis and radical challenge for choral singing' appeared in the book *Choral Singing: Histories and Practices* (Geisler and Johansson, eds, 2014) and a paper in the *Choir in Focus* conference collection. The topic is as relevant as ever and perhaps of interest to *abcd* members who may not have seen these publications.

Why is it necessary to ask?

Historical accounts not uncommonly credit the process through which the art of choral singing is passed on from generation to generation with significant antiquity. For example, the year 597 CE has been claimed for the origins of the most ancient of the English choral foundations. Practices associated with such foundations have been framed traditionally by such criteria as institutionalization, gendering, nationalism/regionalism

and social stratification. It is possible to study how relatively stable practices have evolved over centuries, at various times through small increments or through radical upheavals.

The present time is one of radical upheaval, to the extent that the author has previously identified a 'crisis' – that is to say, a turning point beyond which significant reconstructions of practice are necessitated. Before the crisis point, much learning of the choral art could be likened to an institutionalized apprenticeship system. Most absorbing of choral singing took place within the Christian church where participation, by both boys and girls, equated to an apprenticeship for holy orders. Over centuries, this evolved into the now much loved and peculiarly English system of children singing the top line in choirs otherwise comprised of professional adult men. Arguably still an apprenticeship system, certainly. One open to all regardless of social background, possibly not. One entirely healthy at grass roots level, almost certainly not.

At a personal level, I feel a combination of admiration and sorrow

for those servants of the Church who have not given up on the struggle of interesting young boys and girls in high quality choral singing, and who perhaps offer those children a musical education somewhat superior to anything they will get in school under the government regimes of recent years. However, I also wonder how anybody born much after 1960 can really appreciate the extent of the decline of the Church's patronage of choral music, to say nothing of the bleak prospects faced by many parish churches (Hill, 2011). This is not the place for an analysis of the situation. I simply draw attention to the need for the Church's patronage to be replaced by something else if opportunities that were available without cost to boys during the 1950s are to be equally available to all children during the 2020s and beyond.

There is a related question, though, that interests me greatly and that I think deserves debate. Does choral singing actually *need* children? We take it for granted that boys or girls sing the top line in cathedral choirs. Outside that rarefied atmosphere, there are thousands of choirs of every shape, form and tradition that function admirably well without a child in

sight. For those of us that love high art sacred music, there are choirs such as The Sixteen and plenty more adult chamber choirs that can rival or exceed the standards of cathedral choirs with children.

A common-sense answer is that if children do not receive a choral education, the supply of adults needed by these choirs will eventually dry up. Is an assumption such as this justified? People might discover an interest in choral singing as adults. A fruitful and certainly interesting line of enquiry concerns the receptivity of the children themselves. This is dependent upon cognitive maturity and greatly influenced by social conditions and the growing concern with what's 'cool'. Here are the thoughts I researched and wrote about in 2014.

What answers might be given?

Theoretical consideration of the question 'when to begin' reveals a number of possible answers.

- Early infancy prior to the dropping of the larynx
- The early years of education, prior to ligament development
- The years before the commencement of voice change
- The time of voice change
- Mid to late adolescence after voice change

1. Early infancy prior to the dropping of the larynx

The larynx of the newborn infant occupies a high position, level with the jaw, that allows the epiglottis to overlap the soft palate. This enables the infant to suckle and breathe at the same time – an essential survival technique. What is not possible is any form of speech or singing. The infant, like adult monkeys and apes, lacks the length of pharynx necessary. Some time between nine and eighteen months, the larynx drops down and begins a gradual descent down the neck. This descent, and the consequent lengthening of the pharynx, continues throughout childhood and into adolescence. Speech then becomes a physical possibility and the timbre of the singing voice develops in step with

the growth of the vocal tract.

Speaking and singing, however, are preceded by listening. Although the young infant can neither speak nor sing, listening is intense (Gordon, 1998). Neural networks associated with the perception of pitch contour develop rapidly, permitting the internalization and recognition of sounds. Though further research is required, it is likely that a young infant subjected to a tuneful or lyrical auditory environment may be at a considerable advantage in the development of pitch discrimination and a singing voice. In other words, what we might creatively call 'choral education' might begin in early infancy through the exaggerated prosodic speech of carers (the sing-song voice of 'infant directed speech'). The singing of nursery rhymes is likely also to be important. It does not matter that the infant cannot sing, but it matters greatly that the infant is sung to.

2. The early years of education, prior to ligament development

The adult vocal folds comprise a three-layer laminate structure (Phillips, 2013). This is not present at birth. The new-born infant has only

one layer and the vocal ligament is thought to be absent. The differential composition of elastin and collagen fibre that characterizes the adult voice is not present, on average before the age of 13 in boys or slightly earlier in girls. The age of 7 is considered by most authorities to be a half-way stage, all children in one study exhibiting a transition between middle and deeper levels of the folds according to density of cell population that was not found in younger children. Prior to this stage of development, the ability to produce a full range of formants is curtailed. There are thus physical limitations on children's participation as choral singers below the age of seven.

There are also limitations with regard to the ability to process language and pitch simultaneously. Children will be more likely to reproduce a melody with some accuracy if it is sung without words to a neutral vowel (Williams, 2012). Children deprived of this experience will experience significantly greater difficulty in differentiating between the speaking and singing voice. They are more likely to remain fixed at the lowest levels of singing development in which word texts are merely chanted



without pitch discrimination or the reproduction of melodic contour (Rutkowski, 1990). The cutting edge of research in this field concerns the point at which the discrete pitch steps of melody as opposed to the continuously variable pitch of prosody is reached. Neuro-scientific studies appear to suggest that stepped pitch is discretely located in a specific area of the right brain, whilst the processing of melodic contour is distributed (Hall & Plack, 2008).

Thus, although children physically cannot produce a choral sound below the age of seven, deprivation of a rich and frequent experience of playing with melodic contour may have quite seriously deleterious consequences. Working cumulatively from early infancy, specifically choral education might not begin until at least the age of seven. However, without the preceding experiences of intense listening in infancy followed by experimentation and play with melodic vocalization in early childhood, choral education when it is attempted might be frustrated by inability to recognize and reproduce discrete pitch steps or to differentiate the speaking voice from the singing voice, particularly in boys.

3. The years before the commencement of voice change

Voice change is a much-misunderstood concept, often confused with so-called voice 'break' in boys and perhaps not even recognized at all in girls. Many choirs of standing recruit children at around the age of eight. In so doing, they are in step with the research on physical and cognitive development described above. It is more likely, though, that cultural tradition as much as anything dictates the age of eight. It is certainly common experience that there are many fine choirs with children of eight or nine singing alongside twelve and thirteen-year-olds. Quite what the younger children might be contributing is a matter I am addressing in a forthcoming paper, though received wisdom would in any case more likely stress what the youngest children are learning through copying the older ones. This, of course, is one answer to the question posed by the present paper. There is, however, another answer important in

Gordon's work.

Whilst the age of twelve is an important watershed in terms of puberty, the age of nine is said to be possibly even more important in terms of the development of musical aptitude. Gordon (1999) has claimed that musical aptitude is largely fixed by the age of nine and it will be fixed at a level perhaps too low for choral singing if the child has not experienced intense listening in infancy and melodic experimentation in early childhood. This is a controversial claim that now requires re-examination in the light of developments in neuro-imaging and genetics. I personally find it hard to accept, but it is to the reading of further research I look rather than any 'common-sense' feelings.

Another point to be considered is that the age of nine to ten is also a watershed in terms of attitude. There is plenty of evidence that children whose choral education begins at age eight or nine will become enculturated. They will, by the age of eleven or twelve, quite happily accept repertoire that age peers unfamiliar with the repertoire would decry as 'uncool' or 'weird'. Musical tastes may well become more eclectic during the teenage years, but the early love for choral music may remain throughout life if enculturation has occurred. If the commencement of choral education is left until the ages of ten or eleven, increasing resistance to what are perceived as the tastes of the 'posh' and the 'elderly' may be felt (Ashley, 2009). This is an area, though, for fruitful future research. It is by no means unknown for children to discover an interest and ability in choral singing when introduced to it by an enthusiastic teacher at the age of eleven.

4. The time of voice change

The levels of disruption that occur to both boys' and girls' singing voices during the years of puberty suggest that this is hardly likely to be a time to commence choral education. Asking boys and girls to do what their voices physically simply won't do is unlikely to be a recipe for success. A more plausible scenario is that effective choral education does indeed begin in the late childhood years, before it is

too late to experience the fulfilment of the 'climax of beauty and fullness' (Cooksey, 1992). The problem here is that puberty is such a protracted process at population level. It begins on average earlier for girls than boys, but for both sexes a class of eleven and twelve-year-olds will contain children at every stage of puberty. The fruitful age of 'late childhood' is subject to considerable variation and not all choral conductors have the necessary understanding of the topic.

There have been some improvements in the management of voices that are in puberty, particularly in the leading youth choirs. NYCOS and NYCGB both make effective provision in different ways. At least some traditional ecclesiastical choirs have begun to act on the realisation that the old 'rest it after it breaks' approach is unsupportable. The evidence of what is going on in schools from sources such as OFSTED, however, makes dire reading. On the one hand, children are coming into contact with a specialist music department equipped with a grand piano, rehearsal space, practice rooms, music technology and perhaps a concert room or multi-purpose performing arts theatre offering the same opportunity to begin 'proper music' as does a suite of laboratories to begin 'proper science'. On the other, OFSTED (2012, 2013) report that disappointingly few English secondary schools launch any kind of systematic choral or vocal work for Key Stage 3 (11-14). Promising initiatives begun in primary schools often stall on transfer to secondary schools where 'nothing happens' (Ashley, 2014). Is this simply because the time of voice change is simply not a good time to *begin* choral education?

5. Mid to late adolescence after voice change

If the age of eleven is an important divide in the UK between primary and secondary education, another important divide exists at age 14. At this age young people make choices about the subjects they will study for their first serious public examinations at age 16. For all but a few, puberty is complete or nearing completion and the potentially traumatic upheavals of 'cracking' voices (boys) or huskiness



London Youth Choir

and inconsistent ranges (girls) are over. Young people who have chosen to study music and perhaps possess a maturity lacking in eleven and twelve-year-olds may find a mixed gender chamber choir a congenial place for new musical interests. Information on how many tend to join such choirs without previously having sung with an unchanged voice is far from complete. Another useful research project is waiting to be undertaken.

Discussion

The question posed in this paper is deceptively simple. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there is no straightforward answer such as ‘eleven years of age’ or ‘when a child joins a choir’ or even, optimistically, ‘any time of life’. None of the five scenarios described can lay exclusive claim whilst at the same time, each contributes something. The claims about musical aptitude made by Gordon, however, are as compelling as they are controversial. For certain a premium is placed upon experiences during the early years of life, though one is wary of encouraging colonization of that time and space by certain classes of parent possessed of excessive zeal to play Mahler’s Eighth to the unborn.

It is also the case that, traditionally, the ecclesiastical choirs mentioned at the outset have recruited children aged just below Gordon’s suggested cut-off point. Might it be the case that there has been free-riding on the backs of those who have worked with younger children here? Faced with a paucity of capable eight-year-old applicants some choirs at least are

turning their attention to sponsoring kindergarten work. It may be foolish, though to ignore the size of the gap left by the disappearance of the church choirs that once offered a good choral education. We might set aside considerations of religious confession to consider another dimension, that of expectations. It has been the present writer’s consistent experience that high expectations are invariably a quality of the enthusiastic, committed conductors and teachers who challenge and overcome the ‘boys won’t sing’ myth. It would be fair to say that one thing that is readily demonstrated by the remaining choirs that expect children to perform an

adult’s work in an adult’s world is high expectations. We might reasonably conclude that children’s choral education begins when high expectations are held at all stages of a cumulative process.

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