



KØBENHAVNS DRENGEKOR DET KONGELIGE KANTORI

UNDER PROTEKTION AF HANS KONGELIGE HØJHED 
KRONPRINS FREDERIK AF DANMARK

COPENHAGEN ROYAL CHAPEL CHOIR KØBENHAVNS DRENGEKOR

UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS
THE CROWN PRINCE OF DENMARK

About the classical boys' choir schools as initiator of European choir music

An initial sketch

Polyphonic music as we know it in the European musical tradition began more than 900 years ago.

And it began as choral music!

Even before choir music became polyphonic boys joined the male singers in the Vatican - back to around 500 ac thus starting a centuries long development of classical choir music.

Another early centre for polyphonic music was Notre Dame in Paris – evolving from around 1100. Soon polyphonic music spread rapidly all over Europe around the larger cathedrals and their appurtenant choir schools. As a unique feature in the history of European music these schools made it possible for vocally talented boys to be trained to an extremely high standard simultaneously with their participation in the performance of the cathedral music as choristers together with the adult male singers.

Generation after generation of young singers have been led into the tradition of choir music through their daily encounter with the experienced musician – just taking in both style, techniques and musical knowledge. From the beginning even without any written down music.

The high standard of training made sublime choral singing possible at a high artistic level. To an increasing extent composers were able to create whatever their imagination demanded. For several hundred years choral singing was closely associated with the sound of boys' and men's voices, and the initial culmination was the vocal polyphony of the renaissance as it found expression in the music of composers including Palestrina and Victoria.

Instrumental music developed out of this practice with explosive rapidity in the 17th century, but at the same time there was an equally strong renewal in the sphere of choral music. It was a case of mutual inspiration with the cathedrals, their choir schools and their boys' choirs carrying on old traditions alongside with new styles and timbres. Irrespective of denominational affiliation the sound of boys' choirs dominated the cathedrals, but also musical life as such – in towns and at the European courts.

In Copenhagen in the beginning of the 17th century King Christian IV therefore had his *Kongelige Kantori* (now *Copenhagen Royal Chapel Choir/Københavns Drengeskole*) associated with himself and based at the Church of our Lady and its choir school – and the slightly older singers were connected to the neighbouring *Metropolitan School* quite recently celebrating its 800th anniversary. Even Christian II of Denmark, was a choir boy himself at the Church of Our Lady in the 1500's!

It is fascinating to realize that all the masterpieces of choral music which can still fill churches and concert halls all over the world were composed for these “classical” boys’ choirs: Bach, Handel, Buxtehude, Vivaldi, Monteverdi, Purcell, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Fauré, Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Duruflé, Stravinsky, Britten, Bernstein - an unending series and an inexhaustible treasury of European choral music!

During the past 20 years people all over the world have become interested in performing older European music as it was originally conceived. A remarkable expertise has developed with special ensembles in by and large all countries which have a tradition of classical music. The boys’ and men’s choirs which have today retained and further developed their choir schools will be capable of participating in this interest in authentic performances. And they will still be able to perform completely new music, even though of course throughout the 20th century there has been a strong development and professionalizing of mixed choirs of all sizes and types.

I am inclined to doubt whether there is anything in the European musical world that has had greater historical significance than the 900-year-old life and practice of boys’ choirs. The symbiosis of advanced education, boys and men, composers’ confidence in being able to create regardless of limits imposed by what can be performed, is a quite unique part of the European cultural heritage, but this is also nurtured in other parts of the world, so by rights it should be called an immaterial world cultural heritage.

All over the world people are talking about boys’ declining interest in and commitment to knowledge, art and education. It will become evident that at those places which today still maintain the diversity of the classical choir schools, this is not the case. Just think of places like New College (Oxford), King’s College (Cambridge), Thomasschule in Leipzig, St. Thomas Fifth Avenue in New York, Escolanía de Montserrat in Spain, La Maitrise de Colmar, the Vienna Boys’ Choir - and our own Copenhagen Royal Chapel Choir at Sankt Annae Gymnasium (Copenhagen Municipal Choir School) – so closely associated with Copenhagen Cathedral, the Royal Family and with the city of Copenhagen.

With their choirs of boys and men these specific schools would beyond all doubt benefit from UNESCO’s attention to their efforts to maintain an incontrovertible cultural heritage and to involve talented young people when music is created to a high standard in our own time.

There are not very many of these schools left. It should not only be ensured that they can be maintained, but support should be created so that far more of them can once again leave their mark on the European cultural and educational pattern. The choirs of boys and men can only hold public interest if they are given the possibility to work to the highest possible artistic standards.

International attention ought to be drawn to this practice.
Not only on a national level, but on a global level.

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