

THE BOYCHOIR TRADITION in Europe and further afield

When we take the long view of history, it is clear that the choir schools of Europe were the conservatoires of the past. Here, and only here, were children trained to a level of musical proficiency that allowed many of them to become their nations' next great composers (eg. Byrd, Tallis, etc., etc.).

This phenomenon still exists. And despite the proliferation of other types music school from the early 19th century, the European choir school retains its unique character: that of being the most effective of any educative and musical environment for the young musician.

It is not simply that a child has some musical training at this age, it is that within the context of choral singing he (or she) is able to engage in music-making of the highest standard and sophistication – something that is much less attainable in an orchestral or instrumental setting, where technical expertise takes longer to build. Another advantage of choral training that it introduces the young musician to a repertory spanning all of six centuries, from 15-century motets to contemporary part-song, via Bach's cantatas and Mozart's masses. Instrumental idioms are relatively restricted in this regard.

And so choir schools for the young musician still have a vital role to play, affording an experience and training unparalleled elsewhere in the educational and cultural world.

Nowadays, and significantly, girls also participate in this once male-only tradition. There are many choir school opportunities for girls of all ages, singing the soprano and alto lines. In some the girls predominate, in others, the top lines may be mixed (boys and girls).

As this important evolution takes hold, those of us who work in the boychoir tradition have become conscious of some cultural and educational factors which now challenge this tradition. There are three points to be made here:

1. Young boys when occupying a role more ordinarily associated with female voices, feel more secure and comfortable *when in the company of boys*. This aspect of the modern boys' attitude to singing high parts is well documented in the work of social scientists.

2. The proposition that there is no difference between the timbre of boys' and girls' voices, and no difference to their approach to their work, is unfounded.

3. The proposition that choirs, each and every one of them, should singly as well as severally reflect the society from which they spring, i.e. be mixed, is flawed. Ecologists tell us that monocultures are unsustainable. Variety of type, and variety of acclimatization, are essential. Accordingly, it is essential to retain a rich variety of choir dispositions, including the boychoir, *the latter as a specific and identifiable cultural and musical entity*.

A special place for the boychoir within the world's cultural heritage is what is at issue here. Much could be said of the *effort* required in the twenty-first century to maintain this tradition. Much could be said of the *importance* of maintaining the tradition to give boys of a young age an equal standing with girls. However, as an intangible global cultural heritage we may look to the boychoir for its *unique* place in history, and its importance for the future. An intangible heritage is perhaps more difficult to appreciate than a heritage represented by a picture or a building. It easily gets mixed up with the manners and ways of modern society, because it is assuredly part of it. But the remarkable role of the boychoir in the history of music merits acknowledgement of the highest order. These are the choirs for which Tallis, Byrd, Bach, Handel, Mozart and Schubert – to name but a few of the great composers associated with this tradition - wrote their most sublime music. Thus, it seems wholly appropriate to seek for the remaining boychoirs of the world, and their choir schools, a UNESCO heritage status: to celebrate their historical status, and to defend their ongoing role in today's musical landscape.

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