

Choral Singing in Catalonia

Summary prepared by the Federació Catalana d'Entitats Corals (FCEC)

Choral singing in Catalonia has existed for centuries. There are references to choir schools in churches around Catalonia from the 12th Century. One of these has survived to the present day: l'Escolania de Montserrat, which can be considered the oldest music school in Europe. Its extraordinary significance has provided us with important music, composers and compositions, especially "El Llibre Vermell de Montserrat" dating from the 14th century.



The 'Escolania de Montserrat' singing in the Montserrat Monastery Church

It was not until the end of the 19th century that choral singing took place not only in churches, in harmony with what was already happening in the rest of Europe. From 1845, Josep Anselm Clavé created Choral Societies, working-class male choirs, who represented an important humanistic focus within the revolutionary environment that dominated this period. Josep Anselm Clavé himself composed an extensive repertoire dedicated to these choirs.

The Universal Exhibition in 1888 in Barcelona caused a cultural "upheaval", where it was possible to listen to choirs from other countries, who had a totally different way of

singing together that was completely unknown to Catalonia: the fine-tuning, the natural, clear sound, the balance and fusion of voices; a fact that made the misalignment between Catalan groups evident when compared to the art that was being developed in other countries. This gave some people the desire to create something similar here. In 1891, Lluís Millet and Amadeu Vives created the Orfeó Català to achieve a common dream to extol Catalan music using a model Choir that sang Clavé in a new way, revealing the true beauty of the music, a choir that sublimated our traditional songs with the exuberant ways of cultured art and that became a mixed choir capable of singing the great choral music composed by geniuses.

The trajectory of the Orfeó Català, as a group and from a musical point of view, became widely renowned in other countries where they performed at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1908, the home of the Orfeó Català opened, the Palau de la Música Catalana, which was built thanks to the contributions of citizens. What is lesser known is the dynamism driven by Millet's energy, which motivated the rapid growth and spread of the choral movement around Catalonia, giving rise to the birth of similar groups: 88 groups between 1891 and 1917, with a notable geographical dispersion.

The Orfeó Català celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1916, and on this occasion the Choral Societies paid them homage the following year. In 1917 in Barcelona, some 5,000 singers from 52 groups around Catalonia celebrated the Catalan Choral Festival with different events and concerts. The day finished with a concert by the Orfeó Català and a meeting. This event was a point of first contact for all the then existing Choral Societies, and revealed the need to develop an association to work together regarding choral singing in Catalonia; the "Germanor d'Orfeons de Catalunya" was born and is the predecessor of the Catalan Federation for Choral Entities (FCEC). In 1918 the first Assembly was held, establishing its constitution and structure with 52 member groups at this

initial stage. In 1920, the second Assembly took place: there the Statues were approved and, after the lapse caused by the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera the third, and unfortunately last, Assembly took place in October 1931, because of the Spanish Civil War. At these Assemblies, renowned musicians and conductors from the entities provided us with powers, which in some way are still in force today.



The 'Orfeo Català' with Albert Schweitzer after the concert of the Mass in B minor by J. S. Bach (1911)

The structure of this movement gave rise to the birth of 57 new groups between 1918 and 1934 where, for the first time, it made it possible to realise the common problems the groups had, the way they worked musically, the repertoire they performed, their economic situation, and the professional reality of the conductors. Between assemblies, the Association worked with a permanent committee, and was funded by membership quotas, public subsidies and from the profits proceeding from various festivals. Among the events organised we can highlight the meetings where common song commenced; working to renew, create, make people aware of, improve and teach an extensive repertoire: harmonising traditional songs, original repertoire and great choral symphonic works. Additionally, great events were organised: the Clavé Centenary (1924), and the Choral Society Festival at Montjuic stadium (1930) with 51 choral societies and more than 6,000 singers.

From 1939, the Choral Societies had a difficult time; the repression of the winning side of the Civil War caused silence and limitations imposed in various ways: prohibitions, embargoes, and the obligation to participate in determined events.

However, this also created a new impetus; it prompted a modernisation of choral singing enacted by the young conductors who continued to create new groups. Enric Ribó created the Capella Clàssica Polifònica (1940); Antoni Pérez Moya created the Schola Cantorum Universitària (1941), and Àngel Colomer the Orfeó Laudate (1942), but above all, 1947 was important with the creation of the Coral Sant Jordi by Oriol Martorell.



Oriol Martorell Catalunya
Cantat Concert (January
1992)

They were also able to perform some collective choral events, even though this was against the government's prohibitions at the time. During this period, a Catalan Choirs and Choral Society Technical Office started to work with people linked to the Catalan Choral Society Association, whose task was to find information regarding existing choirs, composers and works, provide scores and a copying service for materials.

Little by little, the choirs were able to start public performances with large symphonic-choral, and collective concerts. The activities of many choirs were an example of

resistance and working in silence towards civil and cultural recovery. Fortunately, a new period, on a stylistic and aesthetic level, was under way.

Fèlix Millet i Maristany, as President of the Orfeó Català, revived the spirit of the old Germanor d'Orfeons. After an event celebrated in 1956 at Monastery of Montserrat (45 choirs), and thanks to the intervention of the illustrious Father Abbot Aureli M. Escarré, the process would finally lead to the constitution of the Secretariat d'Orfeons de Catalunya (SOC) in 1960.

In the first few years, he mostly integrated permanent groups founded before the war into the commission, but progressively, the younger representatives of the newer groups played an increasingly important role. At the end of the Seventies there were already 126 choirs that formed part of the SOC, and worked in many environments, including collective events, training, the distribution of new repertoire, the introduction of a common repertoire every year, and above all, the international projection of Catalan Choral singing. The contact and participation in the "A Coeur Joie" activities gave a new impetus to Catalan Choral singing.

Awareness of working towards quality, political changes at the end of the Seventies, a different view regarding culture, the support offered by the new democratic institutions and the birth of new groups, caused the SOC to approve its transformation and founded the Federació Catalana d'Entitats Corals (FCEC) in 1982, with 150 entities founding members.

From the initial creation of Europa Cantat the Federation has been present, and with Oriol Martorell as leader, many of the Choirs that were members of the Federation in that period saw the need to leave our country's borders and started to participate in the European events and to become Europa Cantat members.

Moreover, since the beginning, the Federation has participated in the International Federation for Choral Music. From the start, the presence of Catalan Choirs in international activities around Europe has always been constant; it has propagated awareness of our culture worldwide. There are many Choirs that come to visit our country to perform. Barcelona already hosts various choral events organised by other organisations.

The FCEC has basically worked with training, publishing scores, the diffusion of choral singing and collective activities; all destined to improve the choirs, singers and conductors. We can highlight among the organised collective events that of "Catalonia Sings" in 1992, with the participation of more than 7,000 singers, and the annual organisation of the International Festival that celebrated its 50th edition this year. Presently, there are more than 520 member choirs, with around 30,000 singers, distributed mainly around Catalonia. The origin and background of the choirs is also very diverse. The majority are amateur choirs but there are those that have been conceived as professional projects.

In 1967 the children's federation, the Secretariat de Corals Infantils de Catalunya (SCIC), was created, and developed important work, organised collective events and commanded new repertoire. Now there are three other federations besides SCIC: Corals Joves de Catalunya (the youth choirs), Pueri Cantores Federation, Federació de Cors de Clavé, and the Confederation –Moviment Coral Català (MCC) – that brings these four federations together. There are many choirs in different environments that are not part of any Federation.

Additionally, in Catalonia throughout the 20th century, choral singing evolved, played an important role in, and has always been a pillar for Catalan culture and music. Presently, choral singing continues to be the cultural activity with the highest number of members in Catalonia.

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